

 *Liquid Silver Books*



TERRAN REALM



REDEMPTION
KEIRA RAMSAY

Redemption
by Keira Ramsay

Atlantic Bridge

www.atlanticbridge.net

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This is a work of fiction. The characters, incidents and dialogues in this book are of the author's imagination and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to actual events or persons, living or dead, is completely coincidental.

Dedication

For Moni, who came up with the fabulous idea, Linda and Mike for believing in me enough to give the green light, and Chrissie, Jenn, Pat and Skully, who keep me on the right track. And always, to August, for being my hero each and every day and keeping me straight on the military stuff!

Author's Note

I've always listened to music while I'm writing, but especially so in this book, to take me back to 1989. Depeche Mode's *Personal Jesus*, The Cure's *Lovesong*, The Smithereens *A Girl Like You*, the Red Hot Chili Peppers' *Higher Ground*, Living Colour's *Cult of Personality*, Jane's Addiction's *Mountain Song* and *Jane Says*, The Violent Femmes' *Nightmares*, the Psychedelic Furs' *House*, R.E.M.'s *Stand*, and Concrete Blonde's *God is a Bullet* transported me back. And although Metallica's *Enter Sandman* wasn't released until 1991, it was such a perfect song for this book, I took the liberty of incorporating it in.

Series Foreword

Terran Realm ... a world where the Terrans—a species as old as time—coexist in harmony—and secrecy—with mere mortals. Their collective consciousness is what keeps the world whole, and their century and a half lifespan ensures corporate knowledge won't be lost ... or will it?

Keepers: Armed with the very power of Mother Earth, Keepers use their special skill set of Air, Earth, Fire, Spirit and Water to maintain world balance through manipulation of their element. They are one of the most precious resources our world has to offer.

Protectors: The "guardsmen" of Terrans, Protectors are the muscle with magic that ensure a Keeper is never compromised.

Destroyers: Destroyers seek to annihilate everything KOTE (Keepers of the Environment) fought to establish centuries ago ... and to a certain extent, they've succeeded.

Talisman: A special Terran, one who not only manipulates their signature element, but can control it. Born rarely, they are more myth than reality, and their importance and talents have been lost to the mists of time.

Dive into the Terran Realm and experience the lives of the lusty, the willful, the destructive.

Terran Realm books:

Redemption, Keira Ramsay

Measure of a Man, Bonnie Dee

Troubled Waters, Tiffany Aaron

Redemption
by Keira Ramsay

Fruits of Betrayal, Bonnie Dee

Prologue

Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, 1863

I am too young for this, have not witnessed enough, but what I see now, even without my gift, tells me the world is in serious peril. Even as I stand here amidst the shattered bodies scattered over this bloody field, I know this fight has been for a greater good which will be realized only as this young country matures.

Horrible, stupendous evil approaches. An evil that believes in the supernatural, and will attempt to seek out the Sorhineth and use it for impossible gain. And while the name of this madman is shrouded, his face and ultimate goals are as clear as if he were standing before me. The cunning lunacy gleaming from mud-brown eyes, his vision of the death of millions by starvation and worse, so much worse. The sigil of of his madness, the warped cross, fills me with an unfamiliar loathing, and my ears ring with the phantom sound of jackboots.

In this future, I see no sign of the Terrans who act as stewards of Mother Earth and mankind as a whole.

The Terrans no longer even attempt to right the balance, to seek out injustice and impropriety, and because of that—and the future I see so darkly beckoning—I have no recourse but to bury the identity of the Wardens who hold the Sorhineth, our most valued treasure. The Terran soul has become almost irreparably stained.

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Clan Kennedy shall emigrate here, to the new world, and begin their lives anew ... hidden from even the potential of danger. And should it arise, in the form of a Destroyer, then they will know intuitively, and keep the sacred book safe.

If I hide the Sorhineth, then a new future comes clear ... over a century from now, a Spirit Talisman will rise and put right the imbalance, beginning the arduous task of bringing the Terrans back to what they hold most closely, their love of Mother Earth. The final moment of atonement will take place within the great pyramid, on the western shore, and the fate of millions will rest in the hands of two.

* * * *

San Francisco, California, 1989

The Destroyer stood on the top floor of the Transamerica building, clenched the ancient paper in his fist and heard the brittle crunch as it disintegrated. At long last, the Sorhineth. There would be no Spirit Talisman, or any Talisman for that matter, interfering in the dynasty he'd spent decades building, what the Keepers Of The Environment—KOTE—with him at the helm, continued to build. Giving up the piece of his soul that tied him to humanity was of little consequence compared to the profit.

Talisman, he thought with a curl of his lip. They were a phantom of memory, supposedly tapping the true, uninhibited power of their signature element. Only called upon in the world's greatest moment of need; one hadn't been even whispered of in over a century. And if he had anything to do

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about it, their memory would molder with the Sorhineth and its Warden in a locked dungeon.

The Sorhineth was almost as much of a mystery as the Talisman ... even his oldest scribes and seers only knew it held their history, their spells, their prophecies, and was an immeasurable source of power. Until now, until this missive from the past, he had never known its location, and he'd spent a large portion of his long life and considerable resources in the attempt. But now, it might very well finally be within his grasp.

Clan Kennedy couldn't be very difficult to find, not with his vast assets. When he tracked them down, he'd send a nice, clean non-Destroyer to pick the book up. And as soon as it was in his hands, safe in the City, he would dispose of everyone who'd dared cross him over these many years.

Victory would be his at long last, and as he gazed out over San Francisco Bay and the Golden Gate, he smiled.

Now all he had to find was a Terran with enough skill to convince the Warden of their need, but not one smart enough to realize he wasn't retrieving it for his own means.

Chapter One

San Francisco, 1989, 7:35 am

Donovan Callahan leaned back in the seat of flight 1245 and closed his eyes as the plane leveled off. It was 21 December and the aircraft was full of families on their way to holiday festivities around the country with a stopover in Boston. He wondered if he'd make it through six hours of spoiled, screaming kids and numb parents without completely losing it. How he could stomach artillery shells and bullet ricochets, but still be annoyed by silly little things, was a mystery.

It wasn't that he disliked flying specifically, since he'd seen the evolution of flight first-hand. The difference between the Kitty Hawk and the 747 he was on was nothing short of amazing. What he was about to do fell into that category as well. Protectors like him had become almost obsolete in the last fifty years, not really giving a shit what happened around them, as long as their piece of the pie was safe ... and lucrative. For him to be heading out on his own was probably nuts, but it was something he knew, down in his bones, he had to do. He hadn't felt this much conviction since World War Two, and it gnawed at him, pushing him toward acts of selflessness he'd given up long before Tunisia and Cambodia.

He'd spent the last fifteen years in private security, bodyguarding whiny, spoiled celebrities, and he was tired of it. So tired he'd left the business in the hands of his second-in-command, Mark, for the duration.

He reached into his coat pocket and ran a thumb over the smooth triangular jewels on his key fob. It had been a gift from a client just three weeks ago—a quirky old Terran who'd required only that they drive him around the City. It had been too expensive to accept, but as soon as his fingers closed over it, something deep resonated within him. Even now a feeling of peace, of purpose, settled over him. If nothing else, the key chain could serve as a personal reminder of exactly who and what he was. He would do what needed to be done.

He shut out the input, noise by noise, just as he'd learned to do in Tunisia, and felt himself beginning to drift, knowing what he would see in his dream, even as the vision came.

Jenalee's stunningly beautiful voice beseeched him through the telephone lines, brought his father's Protector nature to the fore as his mother's Earth Elemental genes surged to tamp it down. As always, Protector won, even in the safety of his own home, with no visible threat.

"You need to snap out of this. This 'noble cause' is going to get us both in trouble. I want my old Donovan back."

"You didn't have any complaints when I was buried balls-deep in you last month." His words and tone were cruel. More cruel than Jenalee deserved.

She let out a short, bawdy laugh which totally contrasted with her usually melodic voice. "Oh, don't get me wrong, I've got no objections when it comes to that, lover. I miss you, miss talking to you, miss all of the things we used to do together as friends."

Donovan just sat in silence and waited. He and Jenalee had been many things over the last eighty-five years, but

lately, friends wasn't it. Occasional fuck buddies, yeah, but he was through taking care of Jenalee when her flavor of the week didn't turn out to be exotic enough. No woman was worth this kind of drama, and their shared childhood was the only thing that kept him coming back, even if he hadn't seen her in over three weeks.

"That damned earthquake. It changed everything."
Bitterness tinged her words.

"Loma Prieta should never have happened, at least not to that extent. Never mind the other shit that went down this year which didn't directly affect us. As Terrans, we know what we're supposed to be doing, and it isn't shopping Union Square or having lunch at the Yacht Club. I've just started acknowledging it, unlike everyone else."

"KOTE feeds us shit and we're happy to eat it because they take care of everything. They hide up there in their ivory tower making pronouncements from on high. It's wrong ... they're wrong!" All the anger, the disgust he'd been feeling since the 17th of October poured out, vitriolic and piercing in the close air.

"Hush, Donovan. You don't know who's listening."

"Don't you understand? I don't give a shit. I've had it."

Jenalee was quiet for a long moment, then spoke quietly. "You're not the only one Donovan, but you're definitely the loudest." Her tone went almost sad, as if she was imparting something painful. "I heard something the other day ... Promise me you'll come see me first when you return."

Her voice was close to tears now. She wasn't above using hysterics to make a point, but this was extreme even for her. And, as always with Jenalee, he caved in.

"I promise."

"Boston. You'll find the Sorhineth—and Warden Brenna Kennedy—in Boston."

Donovan awoke with a start, heart pumping furiously as Jenalee's words echoed in his mind. The Sorhineth. The Book of the Terrans. The collected *true* works of his people. Just the tool he needed to put shit back on the right track.

* * * *

Boston, 4:30 pm

Brenna Kennedy pulled the can of Mace out of her purse, and *then* took the time to fully survey her living room from the front door. The place had been utterly trashed, stuffing torn from the couch cushions, pictures ripped off the walls, broken glassware from the wet bar glittering on the Berber carpet. The big-screen TV was still in place, as was the state-of-the-art VCR. Her Pioneer sound system sat intact in its rack, and her Nikon hung on the hall tree, undisturbed.

She started to shake—not with fear, but rage. This was no ordinary break-in. She only hoped she was dead wrong about why her privacy had been violated. And if she wasn't, then at least the Sorhineth was safe and sound, hidden in the most likely place someone could look, and therefore wouldn't.

Ears attuned for the slightest of sounds, she backed out of the doorway slowly, looking warily down the long hallway where the baddie might still be lurking. When her pumps

crunched on the scree of snow bordering the sidewalk, she sidled toward the safety of her Bronco, ignoring the snow falling around her in heavy sheets.

Brenna swung into the truck, jammed the keys in the ignition and sank down in the seat until she could just see over the dashboard, then fumbled for the massive "mobile" phone nestled in its travel case on the floor next to the gearshift. She didn't give a damn if it was expensive as hell, she was using it, and dialed her brother with trembling fingers.

She pushed the fury out of her voice when he picked up, because if there was one thing she didn't want, it was Tommy and half the freakin' engine company hitting her house like the Patriots' offensive line.

"I need you over at my place ... now."

To give her older brother credit, he didn't ask questions, just hung up the phone.

Her heartbeat bumped back down and she began to doubt herself, doubt the reality of what she'd seen. R.E.M.'s *Stand* mocked her from the tinny speakers. What if she'd called Tommy away from the 'house for no good reason? What if the rigs had to roll on a blaze and someone *died* because she was acting like a frightened little girl? When was she going to start acting like the Warden she was, rather than falling back on her brothers?

She straightened in the seat. According to family lore, it had been almost two hundred years since a Destroyer had "visited" Clan Kennedy, and that had been an ocean away. What made her think she, of all the Wardens, would be the

one called upon? Especially when she was so woefully unprepared?

She tapped her fingers on the steering wheel, considering and rejecting going back inside her home. This would be the last time she leaned on Tommy, but right now she needed his strength behind her.

The legacy of the Wardens went back so far their origins had been lost in the mists of time. If her grandmother hadn't been so resolute about the reality of Terrans and Destroyers in the stories she'd told, and the information passed to Brenna's mom on Gram's deathbed, Brenna would have written the whole thing off as a family fancy, and to be honest, had, to a certain extent. Until today. The reason her home had been violated wasn't as simple as a break-in ... it just didn't feel like one. No, this was about her ... about the Sorhineth. She could feel it in her all-too-human bones. And if it was a Destroyer who had left that feeling, she had a lot of catching up to do ... as of yesterday.

The indescribable value of the Sorhineth, even if she couldn't read more than a few words of it, demanded she keep it out of the wrong hands at all costs ... even at the risk of losing her life. The tome had its own protection built in—it faded from sight, and any Terran's enhanced perception—the moment she was more than three yards from it. Apparently the Terran who'd just ransacked her house wasn't aware of that little tidbit.

It was always the youngest of the Clan who held the title of Warden, the baby. And for the last two incarnations, they had been female. Women in families dominated by hulking

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men who delighted in protecting what they considered theirs. And until today, no one had ever challenged such an ancient right, because there'd been no need to. Gram had died suddenly before Brenna was old enough to walk, making her the de facto Warden without ever really knowing what it meant, and leaving her with almost absolutely nothing to go on but the Sorhineth ... which none of them had been taught to read. They'd figured out a tiny bit on their own, but not enough to really understand what the book held. She often wondered if Gram had seen her own death at the hands of a drunk driver, and had begun passing information on to Mom, but it wasn't nearly enough, especially not today.

Yeah, her brothers had taught her the skills to protect the precious book—deadly combat techniques, defensive driving and the like—but she sure as hell had never taken it seriously. It had been more like a game, humoring an old woman's hasty commands. It wasn't as if she, as a librarian, would ever kill anyone ... she would never ever do such a thing. Lose her own life protecting her heritage, yes. Kill someone ... hell no.

One thing was certain. The destruction inside hadn't been caused by a Terran. They were too cultured, too well-mannered for that kind of behavior. If and when a Terran ever showed up, they'd be up front and possessive as hell, at least from what Gram had told Mom. She'd been quite adamant on the difference between Terrans and Destroyers, one of the few things she'd been fierce about. She'd also made it clear Brenna would know, instinctively, who and what one was. One of the "gifts" of being a Warden.

From what her family had imparted over the years, Gram's idealized conception of Terrans was little more than a fantasy. The modern-day Terrans had no respect for human life, and had turned their backs on everything right and good. In short, they were no better than the Destroyers Gram had claimed they fought against. They were just as much to blame for the human lives lost in natural disasters as a common murderer on the street. And Brenna despised everything they were.

But her legacy, her heritage, demanded she safeguard the Sorhineth for the moment one of them came calling, and lend them her presence should they want to view the Sorhineth. It grated that the Terrans were destined for such access, even as she recognized the Sorhineth could never fall into the hands of a Destroyer. Their magic, just like their name, was tainted by evil, and they were the reason the Sorhineth and Clan Kennedy had been hidden away for so very long. If the Sorhineth fell into their hands, it could very well mean the end of civilized life as the world knew it.

The first time she'd heard the ominous warning, she'd almost laughed aloud. She wasn't laughing now. She strained her mind to recall everything her mentor had passed down, but her inner vision kept flashing back to the living room, thwarting her efforts.

Tommy's massive truck pulled into her driveway, coasting to a soundless stop, engine muffled by the dense snowfall. She'd made the right decision, because of all four brothers, Tommy was the one who believed in her role as Warden the most. Unfortunately, he was also the most protective because of it.

She stepped out of the truck, lowering her voice to an urgent whisper. "Someone broke in and trashed the place. Didn't take anything fencible, though."

Tommy's face took on a grim cast. "The Sorhineth?"

"Yeah, that's all I can figure. But I didn't want to go in there alone."

"I would have kicked your ass if you had, little sister." He walked to the back of the truck and pulled out a hooked grappling bar. Brenna realized he'd pulled it off the rig on his way out the door and hoped to God—again—he or his crew wouldn't need it in the next few minutes. A gun wouldn't have made much difference unless it was a head or heart shot—the Destroyers were *that* tough—but the fireman's tool was something only used for good, for right, and therefore had karma beyond belief. Or at least that's what Gram had said ... "Always use karma." She hoped against hope her wise old grandmother had been right.

Gripping her useless can of Mace, they walked to the front door side by side and slipped in.

Brenna grimaced again at the mayhem done to her living room. Stilling, she did what she should have done the moment she'd stepped foot into her home, but had been too scared to try alone. Some Warden she was. She closed her eyes and *felt* the interior of the house.

Nothing here right this moment, but she could scent a faint trail of energy, viscous and putrid green, painted on the air. Only a being of evil would leave such signature. She'd been right ... it had been a Destroyer ... she felt it deep in her bones.

"He's long gone, but let's be careful."

"Damn straight." Tommy advanced into the house, weapon extended, and cleared each room with Brenna a step behind. Every single one of those rooms had been trashed. Whoever had done it left their nastiest surprise in her bedroom.

"Fuck, Brenna. What the hell?"

"You can say that, bro," she breathed, staring at the writing scrawled on the wall above her bed in scarlet.

WARDEN—I'LL BE BACK.

"Shades of *The Terminator*, eh?" Brenna joked, though her voice wavered.

"This is serious." Tommy's voice sounded—dare she even think it—scared.

"Yeah, no shit." She swiped a shaky hand through her hair, pushing sweaty blonde bangs off her forehead. "I wish Gram was still alive, 'cause this is seriously bad ju-ju."

* * * *

Donovan paid the cabbie, oblivious to the icy air and falling sheets of snow, and looked over the little turn-of-the-century house on the corner with a tactical eye. It was well-kept, suburban, and the very last place he would have expected to find a book of lore. A big-ass truck and a little Bronco were parked in the driveway, doors still open as if the occupants had left in a hurry—or been pulled from within. The innocent appearance of the building had already set his senses on alert—it was too innocent looking, too staid, too perfect as a hiding place. The two vehicles simply confirmed his unease.

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With a stealthiness born of too many years of combat, he sidled to the sidewalk leading to the house, breath pluming in front of him. The front door was wide open as well. Was he too late?

As he entered the interior his hackles rose. The place had been tossed, no doubt about it, but the untouched television and stereo screamed it wasn't a burglary, or at least not a normal one. What if the Warden had been harmed? What if the criminals were still in the house?

Scanning the room with his Protector senses, he detected something "off," but it was nothing he'd ever experienced before. His recent work in the earthquake relief efforts had given his Earth Elemental side a taste of despair, of fury, of sorrow, but not anything resembling this. Even his days as a soldier through three bloody wars hadn't felt like this.

Voices from the back of the house caught his ear.

Donovan tensed, then shrugged out of his jacket. He wasn't above using the skills he'd excelled at on the battlefield and his Protector power to snatch the Sorhineth and fly his ass right back to San Francisco, weather notwithstanding.

Drawing a well of energy from within, he walked silently down the hallway toward the voices. The key fob in his pocket grew strangely warm against his thigh, but he shook it off as a consequence of drawing power.

Two figures stood in the farthest bedroom—a man and a woman. They both exuded a quiet, competent energy, though it was tinged with anger and more than a little fear. But

nothing else ... these two were human as could be and therefore not the threat he'd sensed.

From behind, they were as different as night and day. The woman, Brenna Kennedy he assumed, was tall for a human female and of medium build, with hair the pure, untainted color of sunshine. The man was huge, heavily muscled, and dark as the night.

Donovan drew more power. If it came down to a fight with this man, he would need all the help he could get. Then he saw the words written on the wall and felt a wash of certainty—the woman was indeed the Warden he sought. Behind the surety came a bit of wonder stained with a faint curl of apprehension. What he had sensed before could only be one thing ... a Destroyer. Until this second he'd thought them nothing more than a myth meant to scare Terran children into being good little preternaturals.

All the evil he'd seen in his life, the experiences which had irreparably marred his soul, had been human, not Terran. Why something different had occurred now was ... worrisome.

"Brenna Kennedy?"

Both humans whirled, and the behemoth brought a wicked-looking weapon to bear.

Donovan made a show of not flinching, of not even turning his gaze to his opponent. "I mean you no harm. Are you Brenna Kennedy?"

"Who in the hell are you?" the man growled as he shifted the hooked staff up just beneath Donovan's chin.

Donovan ignored him, focusing on the woman in front of him instead. She looked at him with a startled expression.

Eyes which had been widened in fright now dawned with a kind of resigned awe. Aye, she understood what he was. Knew it because it had been bred into her, carried down in genes centuries old.

"It's all right, Tommy." Her smoky voice slid over him, setting his body jumping in a way he hadn't felt in a very long time. Over forty years, as a matter of fact. Since Angeline.

"You know this guy?"

Donovan answered for her. "I am Donovan Callahan, of the Protector and Earth Element clans. I am Terran."

Tommy backed up two steps and sat down on the bed hard, suddenly deflated. Interesting. So the male knew the history as well. Good. It would save them all unnecessary explanations.

Brenna Kennedy still stared at him, breath hitching in her throat. He swept her body in one assessing glance. Nice, very nice. Rounded in all the right places, but not something he would usually notice, not after being around Jenalee and her groupies for as long as he had. But notice he did.

He berated himself. He wasn't here to scope out the local hot chick, but to take back his heritage. With any luck, he'd be on the nine oh five flight back to San Francisco tonight. Then his self-imposed mission of restoring order could begin in earnest. He hadn't decided yet if it was a fool's errand, but some part of him, one that hadn't been burned away by death and destruction demanded he try. His dedication to humans—not Terrans—drove his actions now. The Terrans, with the exception of Jenalee and a few select others, didn't deserve a fragment of his attention. Their dereliction of duty—and his—

left a sour taste in his mouth he wasn't sure he'd ever be able to get rid of.

"You're here for it." Her tone was resigned now, but underneath it he sensed a hint of ... disgust?

"Yes." He gestured to the words above her bed. "And given what I see behind you, I've come just in time."

She sighed and sat on the bed next to Tommy. Donovan noticed the similarity in their faces for the first time, now that he wasn't being threatened with bodily harm. Siblings. It was the facial structure, he decided. Unusually shaded blue eyes above high cheekbones and strong mouths. What should have looked masculine on Brenna instead made her appear strong-willed and sexy as hell. Yeah, her mouth was definitely something that caught his attention.

She cast a look at her brother, then her eyes met Donovan's. Her stormy gaze brought to mind rumpled silk sheets and long, sultry nights. Tangled, sweat-slicked bodies and moans of completion.

"You know I can't just hand it over, right? I need to meet with my family, and then I'll have to accompany it."

Donovan shook his head, both to deny her words and banish the image of her spread out like a feast. "No need, Warden."

"Uh-uh." She stood, crossed the space between them in one long step and poked him in the chest. In pumps, she only came to his nose. Donovan bit back an unexpected smile. Feisty, wasn't she? Apparently her earlier discomfiture didn't extend to fear of who and what he was, even when he

towered over her by a good six inches. When was the last time someone had stood toe-to-toe with him, unafraid?

Her scent, light, airy, with a hint of jasmine, curled around him, teasing his senses before settling deep in his lungs. His cock jumped in response, and it took an effort not to lean in and find out if she tasted as good as she smelled. Somehow he didn't think she or her brother would appreciate the action.

"The Sorhineth doesn't leave my sight, ever, unless I'm dead. My Gram was exceptionally clear on that point." Now her voice was flat, brooking no argument.

Donovan tamped down his temper and his body's rapidly rising response to her. Now was not the time. He'd never heard such a thing, but it wasn't surprising, since the Sorhineth and the Wardens had become little more than myth over the last century. Hell, as far as he knew, no one had even tried to contact a Warden in well over a hundred years, and what had happened this year could only be a direct result of that. Perhaps the direct approach was best.

"You have seen the destruction wrought this last year."

"Yes I have," she replied, anger snapping suddenly in her eyes. "And if the Terrans would get off their asses and do their jobs, I'm sure Loma Prieta and Hurricane Hugo wouldn't have been as bad."

Donovan dipped his head in acknowledgement and did what he'd always found the hardest. "And that is the reason I am here. Will you help me, Warden Kennedy?"

* * * *

Holy shit, a Terran. And what a Terran he was. Big, well-muscled, and tall in a holy-crap-this-guy's-a-Sequoia way which spoke of outdoor exercise rather than hours spent in a gym. Wearing tailored dark slacks, an immaculate dress shirt and a hideously expensive silk tie, he looked every image the successful businessman ... until he moved. Then you saw the feline grace beneath the suit. The hint of danger. The curl of sensuous lips that could easily be cruel if the situation warranted it. He reminded her a bit of Tommy actually, all dark and brooding and dangerous, but without the massive upper body strength.

And even as she appreciated Callahan as a fine physical specimen, her conscious mind told her that he was scum. Just like the others, letting the world go to Hell in a handbasket and not giving a shit, as long as it made a profit.

She cast a quick glance at her brother. He looked as shell-shocked as she felt. Even with the lore her Gram had passed down, she'd never expected to actually meet one of them in the flesh. It was so much easier to believe in the evil of the Destroyers and the—at best—ineptitude of the Terrans after the awful things she'd seen year after year. And that brought her back to her original accusation.

"That's all well and good, but where in the hell were you during hurricane season, or in October?"

Callahan exhaled heavily, and she could hear frustration in the sound. He obviously wasn't someone used to being questioned. She didn't give a damn. While she might have written off the Sorhineth as a joke before, it sure as hell wasn't now.

"It's complicated, and more than I'm willing to go into when *that*," he gestured to the blood-red letters on the wall, "is staring me in the face. Is there somewhere we can go to talk this through? Somewhere safe?"

Tommy rose, having regained his composure. Now he bulled up to Callahan in a *mano-a-mano* display.

Brenna sighed. They didn't have the luxury of time for this macho crap, even if she agreed with Tommy for standing up to him. Someone needed to, and it looked like it was going to be her distasteful duty. She raised a hand, stopping her brother before he began to speak. Blown away though she might be, the threat was very real. Only the Terrans, the Destroyers and her family knew of her status as a Warden, and by extension, what the Sorhineth was, according to lore. No one else could have trashed her place and not taken a damned thing.

"Tommy, he's right, and I don't want to endanger the rest of the family by showing up at Mama and Papa's. We can use one of the rooms at work. It's neutral—and where we need to be. Get the rest of the family together in an hour. We'll meet you there."

"I don't want to leave you alone with this joker. We don't know enough about him yet."

"Don't be ridiculous. He's Terran, and it's his right. You know it as well as I do, can feel it as much as I. I need to do this, Tommy. By myself. It's my heritage. He's not dangerous to us, just an obligation."

Tommy looked hard at her, obviously considering her argument, then shrugged, but the motion was forced. "You're

the Warden." He stooped, giving her a quick, fierce hug. "Be careful, little sister." Then he turned to Callahan. "I'm holding you personally responsible for her safety. Understand?"

Callahan nodded, one swift movement of his head. Sure, strong, invincible. Too bad that didn't extend to doing his damned job. "Protecting is what I do best. Have no fear, Tommy Kennedy, we'll be at the rendezvous site."

Tommy hefted the grappling hook, propped it over one shoulder and walked down the hall, his shoulders tense, back ramrod straight, as if he was abandoning his duty by leaving her behind. Brenna shook her head. She appreciated the sentiment, more than Tommy would ever know, but it was time for her to stand on her own two feet. Time for her to learn exactly what her legacy meant.

"C'mon, Callahan, let's boogie before *he* comes back." She motioned to the ruined wall above her bed with a quick flick of her hand.

He moved quickly enough, and was good to his word. He ranged in front of her, blocking the hallway with his body, a picture of coiled, ready ferocity. If a Destroyer showed up now, she had no doubt Callahan would take care of it, just as he'd promised Tommy.

He retrieved his suit coat, and when they reached the front door, she felt the weight of a protection spell settling over her. It wasn't something she'd ever experienced before, but recognized nonetheless on almost a cellular level. It felt ... funky. Strange and tingly, as if insects were crawling over her. It wasn't unpleasant, just ... weird.

"Do you really think that's necessary?" *Since you haven't given a shit about any human's safety ... ever?* She tried to keep the sarcasm out of her voice—if not her thoughts—and must have succeeded, because he just shot her a glance over his shoulder.

"It certainly can't hurt."

Good point, that. "How'd you get here?"

"Cab from Logan." He shouldered through the door, then stopped, blocking the doorway. "Shouldn't you be retrieving the Sorhineth right about now?"

"It's not here, otherwise you'd probably sense it."

"Then where is it?" There was a thin thread of desperation in his voice. Interesting. The Sorhineth meant more to him than he was letting on.

"Safe. No worries, Terran, it's secure."

He assessed her with a long look and stepped out into the twilight. She locked the door behind her and hefted her purse on one shoulder, then slid in behind him as they moved toward her Bronco. When she was safely ensconced inside, he slammed the door and moved quickly around the front of the truck, folding himself into the passenger seat and buckling in.

They backed out of the driveway and scooted down the residential street. Brenna looked in the rearview mirror, wondering if it would be the last time she ever saw her house again.

Panic clutched at her chest. She'd never asked for this ... privilege. Why couldn't her mother have held the position? Then it would be passed on to one of her grandchildren.

Instead, the situation was hers to handle. She would succeed or fail on her own.

"How did you find me?"

"KOTE has probably always known the location of the Warden; they just chose not to share it with me, and obviously didn't feel the need to call upon you. I found you through my best friend, who's pretty well connected. I'm not sure how she found out."

"What is this KOTE, and why would they keep me a secret? Heck, why would they even know who I am? We've been buried deep for a long, long time."

Callahan shifted in his seat, stretching his long legs and getting comfortable in the tight confines of the truck.

"Keepers of the Environment. Though they obviously haven't been doing much of that lately. They're basically the ruling body of Terrans, and have been incorporated as a nonprofit environmental organization since the turn of the century. An Air Keeper by the name of Carlyle Winthrop heads it up now. You've probably seen him on television."

Brenna heard more than a trace of bitterness in his tone, and it surprised her a little. He was right about one thing; she had seen Winthrop on the tube, usually with the starlet of the month draped on his arm. She opened her mouth to ask what in the heck an Air Keeper was, when he continued.

"As for you, they're perfectly happy in leaving things as they are. We've been living with our heads in the damned sand for decades, maybe even centuries. After Loma Prieta I thought they'd *do* something. But no, they just keep on keepin' on. I couldn't—won't—stand by anymore and watch

them destroy the earth and humans through sheer apathy. And even though no one really knows what the Sorhineth is anymore, a friend suggested I start with tracking it down."

Well, that was one hell of a speech. Brenna studied him discreetly, a bit discomfited by his words. Although his tone had remained even, color flagged his cheekbones. He was obviously upset, and while she could certainly understand why, something didn't jibe.

"Well, I've certainly never even heard of KOTE, even though Carlyle Winthrop is a news hog. I wanted to ask you about something you said earlier. What's an Air Keeper?"

"Air Keepers are Terrans whose signature element is Air; they own their environment and can control it at their disposal."

Brenna hummed noncommittally and turned his words over in her head. They were so in deep shit. She knew next to nothing, and his little rant had thrown her for a loop. He wasn't what her family had led her to believe. "You'll have to fill me in on all this 'Keeper' stuff as we drive, so I know who and what I'm dealing with."

She was tempted to let it go, but something still struck her...

"If KOTE's inaction bugs you so much, why didn't you do something before?"

He waited a long moment before answering, as if pondering her shift back to their original subject, and when he did, his voice was tired. "Because until a few months ago I was just like them."

* * * *

Donovan realized he had to be up front with Brenna if he was going to convince her to return to San Francisco with him willingly, but saying the words aloud pained him more than he'd imagined. It was hard to admit you hadn't given a damn until devastation unfolded in your own backyard.

He'd hardened his heart to everything after World War Two, having seen too much, experienced too much, for anything to faze him anymore. But Loma Prieta had changed that, given him back a measure of humanity he thought he'd lost in France.

For her to understand what she was getting into, he had to tell her the rest. But first...

"How did the Destroyer know to find you?"

"I don't know, but it's weird they'd be searching for the Sorhineth within hours of your arrival, isn't it?"

Donovan cocked his head and looked at her. She was beautiful in an understated way, with classic features artfully emphasized by careful make-up. Highlighted blonde hair was held back in a chignon, leaving her face open to his inspection. His first glance back at her house hadn't done her justice. Her overall "look" was accentuated by casual yet elegant clothes ... form-fitting tan slacks and blazer and a tailored eggplant blouse. He smirked. If it weren't for Jenalee, he wouldn't know eggplant from fuchsia, but spending almost ninety years, off and on, with a singer who reveled in the finer things had definitely broadened his palette.

Regardless of how Brenna looked, she exuded a quiet strength and competence he recognized in male and female

warriors the world over. And her question deserved an answer, even if he didn't have one.

He rubbed a hand over his face tiredly, the adrenaline leaking out of his system like a balloon. He shouldn't be this fatigued. He'd seen and done things that would make most men wet their damned pants, but this trip, and the concept behind it, had taken more out of him than he'd imagined possible.

"Weird ... the Destroyer and I arrived almost of the heels of each other? Yes, definitely. I wish I had an answer for you, but I don't. While I know, instinctively, that a Destroyer was in your house, I've never dealt with them personally, at least not to my knowledge."

Brenna merged onto the freeway seamlessly, windshield wipers pushing away fat flakes of snow as they plopped on the glass. He wasn't so wasted that he couldn't appreciate her driving skills.

"Then it appears we've got a lot to figure out from each other, because it sounds like we're in the same boat. Gram passed some of her knowledge down to me through my Mom before she died, but I can't even read the Sorhineth. Trust me, I've tried."

"Then let's hope I can."

* * * *

Brenna punched the accelerator and wove between the thickening Friday afternoon traffic slowed by the storm, her attention flickering between the traffic ahead of her and the side mirror. As much as she disliked everything Donovan

Callahan stood for, his protestations notwithstanding, she still had a job to do. "Sedan following us, two cars back. You can look, windows are smoked."

Callahan twisted in his seat, glanced out the rear window, then faced forward again.

"Any chance you can you lose him?"

"Hell, yeah."

"Even in this weather and traffic?"

They were approaching a traditional Boston bottleneck ... the approach to the Central Artery and the stop-and-go construction that always seemed to be in mid-phase. If she was going to do something, now was the time.

"*Especially* in this traffic. If he ain't local, there's no way he can tail me, and even if he is, this snow will make it much harder." It sounded like bragging, but she'd been driving these streets for almost ten years. It didn't hurt that her oldest brother Terry was a cop and had taught her more than most defensive driving courses ever could. Of all the training she'd struggled through, driving was what she'd been best at, the thing she felt most comfortable with.

Zippering in between smaller cars, she waited until the sedan was in the middle lane, then flipped the truck into four-wheel drive, rumbled over the freeway shoulder, and gunned down the median past gaping construction workers before thunking back onto the freeway ahead of the pack. Thank God for Ford's new on-the-fly drive train. There was no way in hell a sedan would be able to get into the median with its low clearance, and as she'd said, the snow made it an even bigger deterrent.

Redemption
by Keira Ramsay

Disengaging the four-wheel drive, she floored the accelerator, flying down the sparsely populated lanes and onto the elevated freeway, leaving their pursuer far behind.

"Damn, woman, that was slick." Callahan grinned at her unabashedly. It was the first time she'd seen anything but consternation or a carefully blank expression on his face, and it made her heart beat faster than their little expedition into the grass.

"Aim to please." She smiled back without thinking, adrenaline spiking through her body.

"So, where exactly are we going?"

"Where do you go when you want a book?"

He looked at her blankly.

"The library, of course!"

Chapter Two

Donovan breathed in the scent of books and knowledge, truly comfortable for the first time since he'd boarded his flight. He might have spent his formative years on the battlefields with Patton, in the trenches with the Legion, and as a mercenary in Cambodia, but he hadn't totally ignored his brain. His checkered past had led to a degree in International Affairs quite nicely. Not that he'd used it, but it had come in handy once or twice when he was guarding some of his more high-profile clients.

Brenna walked beside him, heels clicking on the parquet floor. She surprised him, this Warden. She'd shown no hesitation in losing their pursuer, using offensive driving moves which rivaled his men's—in the middle of a snowstorm, no less—and now strode through the library as if she owned it.

When they reached the checkout desk he understood why.

"Dr. Kennedy, you're back." The teenaged male clerk greeted her with an infatuated grin.

"Hey, Art. My family will be rolling through in a few minutes. Shoot them back to the reference room, all right?"

"You got it." Art eyeballed Donovan in a decidedly unfriendly fashion, undoubtedly seeing him as competition. After this afternoon, Donovan wondered if he wasn't right, at least a little bit. Where Brenna had been pretty in an arresting way before, now she was downright commanding, and her surety was a total turn-on.

If it weren't for the circumstances, he'd consider pursuing her. He and Jenalee had never had a binding relationship, especially not lately, and each dabbled as they wished. Never mind the fact she played the field far more often than he these days. It hadn't bothered him then and didn't now. Neither of them had ever wanted more, and it sustained their friendship. Hell, Jenalee was his best friend, even if they'd diverged more often than agreed lately. She always had been, probably always would be.

Many thought it strange that someone with his past had formed such an attachment to someone as gloriously feminine as Jenalee, but when you spent as much time with men as he had, seen the downright ugly shit he'd lived through, reveling in the sweet scents, soft bodies and totally different minds of the female of the species made perfect sense. It was also an amazingly good way to forget, and he'd excelled in it for the last fifteen years.

They entered a cavernous room centered by a long oak conference table. Books crowded every conceivable space. They weren't the bestsellers lining the shelves out in the main room, but rather tomes which showed their age and importance in every wrinkle of the leather, every crease in the spine. There was so much mortal knowledge here it sent a shiver up Donovan's spine. *This* was power.

"All this is yours?"

She turned and smiled, and it was the first genuine emotion he'd seen from her. It lit the room. "In a way. I've been the head librarian here for two years, but worked the stacks through high school and college."

"Let me guess, Harvard?"

"Naw, too snooty. Boston College."

Donovan laughed, and it echoed, picking up energy as his life force melded with the ancient authority of the words in the room. Ah yes, this was power at its finest and it coursed through his body, centering on his talisman of choice, the key fob. He could stay here twenty-four hours a day and never tire of the rush.

"How did you do that?" Brenna whispered.

"Not sure, but damned if it didn't feel good."

Another voice interrupted them. "Brenna, you in here?"

"Hey, Terry, c'mon in."

Donovan turned and saw a hulking cop, blue uniform bulging at the shoulders and arms. He felt an instant kinship with the man, recognizing a fellow warrior in his stance and bearing. After meeting Tommy, it made him wonder if Brenna was the only human-sized person in her family.

His question was answered as Tommy, construction worker Troy and cardiovascular surgeon Tim entered, just moments apart, all equally large. Since all were still in uniform, it was easy to identify them even without Brenna's introduction. When her parents entered the room and took their seats, their odd little circle was complete. The men favored their father, Brenna her stylish but simply dressed mother, and the love between the whole unit was obvious. It reminded Donovan of his own family, but without all the siblings.

And in that moment, he missed his mother and father so much it was almost a physical ache. He would have gone to them for counsel on this whole situation, his recent change of

heart, everything. But they were in the Amazon on their latest crusade to save the rain forests, and completely out of touch. They probably had no idea Hurricane Hugo or Loma Prieta had even happened ... they would have been home in a flash if they had.

"So, Brenna girl." Kennedy senior—Michael—took control of the meeting and scattered Donovan's morose thoughts into the wind. "What's this all about?" He threw a pointed look at Donovan.

"Allow me to introduce you to Donovan Callahan. He's come from..." She paused and looked at him quizzically. "I don't rightly know."

"San Francisco," he supplied with a tight smile.

"San Francisco. He's here for the Sorhineth."

Total silence met her statement, and Donovan felt six pairs of eyes boring into him, measuring him. None of those gazes were overly friendly.

He looked at each face in turn, making eye contact, making no pains to hide the aura of power he usually subdued so as not to frighten humans.

"Ah, at long last, a Terran." The declaration came from Maggie, the matriarch. Her voice was pleased, but wary, as if she'd been waiting for—and dreading—this moment.

Donovan cleared his throat. He hadn't dealt with many humans who understood who and what he was. "Do all of you have the sight?"

Michael answered, his tone bland. "All but me."

"Not quite," Maggie cut in. "The boys and I can tell what you are, but Brenna is the only one with full Warden

perception. It was passed down from my mother, as was the family name."

"Enough niceties," Tommy cut in. "We all know he's Terran. Brenna, tell them about your house. About the Destroyer."

Maggie's admonition on his manners was overlaid by four male voices demanding an explanation.

Donovan quieted the melee by casting a silence spell. It wasn't his forte, but it worked. When he was certain they got his point, he lifted the enchantment.

They all stared at him, mouths agape. Brenna recovered first, and with admirable aplomb.

"A Destroyer 'visited' my house, obviously looking for the Sorhineth. Trashed it pretty good, and then Callahan showed up."

"Are you all right?" asked Tim, his doctor's instincts obviously kicking in.

"Yeah. He was long gone by the time I got home, but someone followed us from the house."

"What?" Tommy bolted upright, fury and fear slamming off him in waves.

The man was definitely protective of his sister, even more so than the others. While Donovan could appreciate the emotion, he didn't have the time or inclination to deal with it right now.

"It's cool, I lost him back at the Central Artery."

Tommy settled back into his seat, but still glowered.

"So it's begun," Maggie said quietly.

"Mom?" Brenna asked.

"You'll need more than the Sorhineth for this journey, for this trial. You'll need this." Maggie pulled a slim book out of her handbag and slid it across the table.

Donovan felt a curious sensation against his hip, and dipped his hand into his slacks pocket. The key fob gifted to him by the old Terran buzzed against his palm, sensual, warm, and curiously comforting. Even though he could recognize, in his conscious mind, that the journal Maggie had handed over was important, his talisman reinforced it, acknowledged it. He wondered what in the hell the old Terran had given him.

Brenna picked the book up and ran her fingertips over the cloth cover. "Is this what I think it is?"

"Aye," Michael replied. "Your mother found it earlier today, in a box pushed into a corner of the attic. A box all of us mysteriously overlooked for years."

Donovan's thoughts raced as he withdrew his hand and ran it through his hair. A time capsule spell? He vaguely remembered one of his friends in the City mentioning something about it, but that's where his recollection stopped. At the time, it hadn't seemed important. Now, given the timing and the curious reaction of an inanimate object? He didn't believe in coincidences. "What is it?"

"A diary of sorts, something even my mother had never seen. But she knew about it, told us stories," answered Maggie. "I felt it pulling at me the second I went upstairs. To be honest, I have no idea what I even went up there for."

Donovan tried to picture the cultured woman sitting across from him crawling through a dusty attic of her own volition.

"It was bespelled, I'm sure," he offered, "for you to feel it calling to you today, of all days."

Michael grunted in agreement while Maggie simply looked at him with her daughter's clear blue eyes and a shrewd soul all her own.

"How is it you've come to us, Terran?" The question was from the cop, Terry, and given the human's occupation, was something he could understand being asked.

"Something needs to be done to restore balance. It's not just the environment, but the geopolitical undertones, as well. Tiananmen Square should have never happened and don't even get me started on the Valdez. That was one of the biggest fuck-ups I've ever seen. Loma Prieta was it for me. I need the Sorhineth to figure out what to do, and have a trusted source in the City that'll help us decipher it."

"So it's San Francisco, then?" Brenna asked, her voice all business.

Donovan shifted his attention back to her, and was struck once again by not only her beauty, but by the air of confidence she wore like a crown. "Yeah, at least for starters. I've got a nine o'clock flight out of Logan. Point me to a phone and I'll get you on it."

"Ah, small problem. I don't fly." Her voice was one tone shy of being embarrassed, but her gaze was straightforward, unflinching.

"Pardon?"

"She's afraid to fly, numbnuts."

Donovan held his patience in check. Barely. Tommy obviously didn't like him much. The feeling was definitely becoming mutual.

"It doesn't matter anyway," Terry broke in. "All flights out of Logan are cancelled due to the weather."

"Fine. I'll get a rental car." At this point, Donovan would hire a damned rickshaw to shut Tommy up.

"We can take my truck," Brenna offered, extending an olive branch while she shot a dirty look at her brother.

"No, he knows what it looks like, or at least someone does. Actually," he mused, "road travel is probably better. It'll give us time to figure out how to read the Sorhineth and your book." He waved a hand at the slim tome sitting in front of Brenna. "If this Destroyer knows I was coming here, we'll probably need that knowledge when we get to San Francisco."

"I guess that rules out me going back to my place for my stuff." Brenna's tone was rueful.

Donovan thought fast. "Unfortunately, yes. We'll pick up some things for both of us on the road."

"Tonight? I was hoping you could at least stay for dinner." Maggie's voice was plaintive, and Donovan guessed she wanted another night with her daughter.

"They can't." Terry's words rung with conviction.

"Why the fuck not?"

Yeah, Tommy was definitely the hothead of the family.

"Tommy, watch your language."

"Because they know who she is, and by extension, us as well. They need to leave now, and so do we. Brenna was

headed this way, and if they could find her at home, the library isn't much of a stretch, nor our homes."

Shit. Donovan hadn't thought of that. It had been enough to get away, to set his plan in motion. It had felt so good to do something that mattered again, he hadn't taken the time to plan. Instead, he'd simply acted, and in doing so, could very well have led a Destroyer straight to the Sorhineth. The lack of attention to detail galled him; he'd spent too many years pampering celebrities who didn't really need security, but felt they deserved it as a perk.

"Damn, boy, you're right. Call your families and have them pack a few things. We'll head up the coast to the cabin. No one's going to find us unless they plan on skiing in." Michael Kennedy wasn't one to waste action either, apparently. "There's no need to rent a car, you can take the Jag. It's registered to the firm, so tracing it would be more trouble than our Destroyer is likely to make. Plus, it's more than heavy enough to make it through the snow." He dug in a pocket and tossed the keys on the table.

"Sir, while I appreciate the gesture, I can afford to rent a car." Donovan forced his voice to remain respectful, even as he resented the control being wrested from him.

Michael pushed away from the table and stood, followed by the rest of his family. "But you can't afford the time, son, none of us can. You'll have your mobile phone, Brenna?"

Donovan rose to his feet as well, a bit bemused by the quick turn of events. In retrospect, this meeting would probably be amusing, given the fact he'd totally lost control of it, but right now his own sloppiness was pissing him off.

"Yeah, Dad, I'll transfer it over from my truck." Brenna walked around the table and gave her parents, then her brothers a hug. The family began to file out of the room. All except for Tommy. He stood in the doorway, filling it.

"I meant what I said before, Callahan. You fuck this up and I'm coming after you. Then I'll let the rest of the boys have a turn." His voice with rough with possession and something else, maybe a hint of jealousy because Donovan was taking care of something he couldn't.

So Donovan answered in kind, letting Brenna's brother know exactly where they stood. "Not that it'll happen, but I might just enjoy that."

"I don't give a shit what you are, Terran. You bleed just as easily as the rest of us." He turned and left, leaving Donovan and Brenna alone.

"Sorry. He gets overprotective." Brenna turned to the wall of books and pulled out a small, unremarkable tome. Setting it on the table, she rooted behind where it had been placed and removed a much larger book, its cover worn smooth by the passage of time and loving hands. The red leather cover almost glowed under the institutional lighting, giving the impression it lived and breathed. Power seethed for a moment, expanding throughout the room before flashing back into the book as if it never was.

"Holy crap. It's never done anything like that before." Brenna's voice was awestruck—and something else Donovan couldn't put his finger on.

She gathered it to her chest as if protecting it and turned to face him. Tears winked briefly in her eyes, then were blinked back.

"Brenna..." Her expression cut something loose inside him, had him stepping forward to comfort, to offer reassurances ... about what he had no idea. Protection was about physically securing the client, not seeing to their emotional needs.

She swung out of reach, giving him her back as she scooped up her enormous purse. "No worries, Callahan. It just snuck up on me for a sec. C'mon, let's hit the road."

* * * *

And so they did just that. Brenna dumped the mobile phone case in the back seat and slid behind the wheel of the Jag, inhaling the rich smell of leather and old money. That entitlement had been her legacy, her normalcy, since she was born, as much as the title of Warden. The engine turned over noiselessly and she pulled out of the parking garage.

Fast. This was all happening so freakin' fast it made her head spin. She wasn't remotely prepared for this, but knew what she was doing was right. It felt right. Even if Donovan Callahan made her body do a quick rumba.

The man in question shifted in the seat, and the clean, spicy scent of him wafted through the close air of the car. It set her senses on fire as her mind rebelled. "Can I borrow your mobile? I need to let my people know of the change in plans."

She gulped, then answered quickly. "Sure. The bag's on the back seat."

She watched him gingerly root around in the big bag and grinned, though the action was a complete contradiction to what was going on around them. What was it about men and purses? While the carryall wasn't a purse, he was sure acting like it was.

He finally found it and punched in a number, then held it to his ear. The enormous phone looked almost small in his huge hand.

For all his dark coloring, his eyes were amazingly light, almost topaz. And that voice, holy cow. Gravelly and tough, even when he was being polite, as he had with her parents. With Tommy, though, he'd been totally in control, and more than a match for her hotheaded bro.

The tone of his voice now brought her out of her musings.

"Where's Jenalee, dammit!" She could hear a tinny reply, but couldn't make out the words.

"Don't give me that shit, Mark. Tell me and tell me now." A pause, then, "Oh, Jesus." He dropped his forehead into his palm. "No, I'm driving back. Long story. I'll be there within the week, depending on road conditions. Listen, I know you weren't a hundred percent behind this whole search, but it's obviously put a bug up someone's ass. Jenalee was the only Terran who knew exactly where I was going, and the Warden's place here got turned upside down as well. There's no doubt it's a Destroyer; he left a message on the wall above her bed. Watch your step, and don't tell anyone what Julian found at Jenalee's, all right? Just tell everyone she's sick and went down to her place in Mexico to recoup. Tell

them I'm with her. And call me at this number if you hear anything."

He gave the number, disconnected, then swore as he raised his head, a long colorful string of Gaelic curse words Brenna had heard coming from her father, but never dared ask the meaning of.

"What's wrong?" He didn't look good. Not good at all. Coming from a man as decidedly alpha as Donovan Callahan, it was more than a little unsettling. It also blew her preconceived notions about them not giving a shit completely to hell.

"I think I know how the Destroyer found you."

"Come again?" That was certainly not the response she'd expected.

"My best friend, the one who sent me to you, disappeared, and it sounds like her place was just as trashed as yours."

"And they have no idea where she is?" While Brenna found it odd a man as virile as Callahan would have a woman as a "best friend," something else in his conversation had caught her ear.

"No." His reply was curt.

Then it jelled in her mind. San Francisco. Jenalee.

"Not *the* Jenalee? She's Terran?" Brenna pictured the woman's face, beautiful and ethereal, remembered her as she'd seen her on TV earlier this year, belting out an award-winning song at the Grammy's.

"Yeah. And now *the* Jenalee is missing. Not that we'll get any help from KOTE—they don't care about anything but the bottom line."

"It sounds like this KOTE of yours needs to be kicked in the ass. They should be out looking for her." As soon as the words were out she wished them back. She didn't know enough about KOTE or Donovan Callahan to make such brash statements.

"But they won't. They never do anything." His anger was palpable, and easier to take than his well-hidden concern had been.

"How did Jenalee know where I was?"

"I told you earlier. Jenalee travels in higher social circles than I do, with Winthrop and the mucky-mucks. I don't screw around with politics."

His voice was flat, deadly calm, and she knew with utter certainty he was telling the truth. Donovan Callahan didn't play well with others, at least when they had an agenda he thought was bullshit. That heartened her, if nothing else, because she could understand it. And when he continued, it was in the same tone.

"She's probably always known where you were, but didn't give it to me until she thought I couldn't take any more. She was right."

Interesting, but even more so was this sudden insight into his personality. This guy was exactly the opposite of what she'd been led to believe would appear on her doorstep someday. She wondered if he was as accomplished an actor as his "best friend." "So who did you talk to just now?"

"Mark Winbolt, my second-in-command. He's the primary while I'm gone."

"So that's something, right? I'm assuming you only hire the best."

"Yeah, but I should be there."

"And instead you're stuck here with me because I'm afraid to fly and Logan is snowed in."

He twisted in the seat, his face stark in the greenish lights of the dashboard. "Don't even think that. You certainly can't control the weather, and your fear of flying wouldn't have mattered, considering Mother Nature."

Brenna took a moment to consider the dichotomy of his statement. Donovan Callahan was alpha as hell, but didn't hesitate to say when he didn't know something and exhibited a concern for his friend she found ... reassuring. Yeah, he rang all her bells all right, and in more than a physical way as each word dropped from his mouth.

They were on the interstate now, and Brenna gunned the accelerator. Full winter darkness had fallen and the roads were mostly clear on this side of town.

Donovan leaned back against the headrest, and Brenna could see the lines of fatigue bracketing his mouth and eyes. He probably thought they were hidden by the darkness.

"I know this is probably late to ask, but do you know the fastest way to San Francisco? You heard what I told Mark about our timeline, but I'd like to be there as soon as possible."

Brenna's lips curved into a smile. "No, but there's an atlas in the glove box. We'll figure it out after we get out of Boston. How long have you been up, anyway?"

"Since about four this morning, Pacific time."

"Rest for a bit. I'll wake you up when I need a break."

"I couldn't sleep. Too much going on in my head."

"Try. If we're going to make a speed run to California, you'll need to be rested to take over the driving. Go ahead, just close your eyes."

He did, and within five minutes was fast asleep.

Brenna glanced at him, and suppressed a wince. How could her body so totally react to this Terran when her conscious mind found his kind so abhorrent? Even if his words and actions had redeemed his people marginally, he was still Terran, still part of a race that had turned self-interest into a badge of pride. His own words confirmed that.

So why could she so easily picture herself twined in his arms, fucking in positions she'd only read about? Just the thought of it quickened her breathing, made her pussy clench with sudden, flaming desire. Callahan's scent curled around her, and suddenly she wasn't just thinking about his embrace, she felt it, even though he was still slumped against the seat, asleep.

Brenna shook her head to clear the image. She needed to concentrate on the road, not the disturbingly sexy man lying almost comatose beside her.

But as much as she tried to ignore it, her skin tingled and burned as if his fingers were inscribing playful, passionate circles. She barely fought off a groan of pure ecstasy when that warmth moved to her breasts, bringing her nipples to hard, aching peaks, then moved leisurely to her clit and then her pussy. What was happening to her? This was much more vivid than her usually imaginative fantasies ... disturbingly so.

Redemption
by Keira Ramsay

She pulled the car to the side of the turnpike and rolled down the window, letting the frigid air and the occasional snowflake cool her overheated body and mind.

And when she felt almost normal again, she pulled back onto the road while Callahan slept, completely oblivious to what he'd done to her.

Chapter Three

Donovan ran his hand down Brenna's gloriously smooth bare back, fingers coasting over the delicate curve of her spine, cupping the smooth, perfect weight of her ass. She moaned and pressed high, proud breasts against his chest, nipples peaked, chafing him in the most delicious way...

"Donovan, wake up."

He looked up into her face, those strong, sensual lips forming incomprehensible words.

Wake up?

"Callahan, dammit, I'm tired." Now she was shaking his shoulder, but strangely the arm doing the shaking was clothed. He fully woke as his head bounced against the leather headrest.

"Right. Up, I'm up." He levered in the seat, blinking against the faint glow of the rising sun on the horizon. "You drove all night?"

She rubbed her eyes, leaned back in the seat and stretched. "Yeah. Couldn't sleep, and you looked like you needed it."

"Where are we?" Donovan tried not to look at the swell of her breasts against her shirt, really, he did. Never mind the fact he'd just dreamt them naked and fabulous against him. A tiny bit of chivalry still ran through his veins, but the basic, animistic male threatened to beat the microscopic spark to smithereens.

"Just outside of Columbus."

Her weary statement yanked his attention right back where it needed to be. "Ohio? Shit, Brenna, what time is it?"

"Around six, Eastern time. Not sure what time zone we're in now, though. I pulled out the map a few hours ago. From what I know of California, we have to go south, through the Tehachapis, right? I remember seeing something on TV saying the northern passes were nasty this time of year."

"Uh, yeah. That'd probably be our best bet."

"So we can make St. Louis by this afternoon, Oklahoma City by late tonight, and then we probably need to grab a room for at least a few hours."

"You've got this all figured out." Even with his brain still fuzzy from sleep, Donovan didn't quite know how to feel about his little admission. He was the Protector, the guardian, the muscle. He did the strategizing, the planning, the fighting. While he'd never subscribed to the "keep the little woman barefoot and pregnant" school, it bothered him that he didn't feel more uptight about her taking control. Hell, he'd even slept the night through, something he'd never have done in the past with an unknown factor behind the wheel. Granted, she was a Warden, but she was also a frail human woman. And trusting his security to her had come all too easily. It was strange and more than a little unnerving.

He had no problem relating to her femininity, though, he thought as he surreptitiously shifted his morning erection to a more comfortable spot.

To get back to San Francisco—with the Sorhineth *and* his Warden intact—he needed to slug down some coffee and get back on the road.

He looked out the window and saw they were parked in a convenience store lot. "Let me get some coffee, gas this beast up, and we're St. Louis bound."

"I'll gas it up if you'll grab me one of those scary nuked breakfast sandwiches."

"No, I can do it." He could, at least, be a gentleman. Chivalry and all that. "Tell you what, get me the biggest cup of coffee you can find and grab something for yourself more nutritious than a glowing sandwich." He rooted around in his suit jacket and pulled a wad of bills out of his wallet. "I want to use green as much as possible. How did you gas up before?"

"Cash, but I'm tapped now. Why bother? The Destroyer has to know we're headed west."

"Yeah, maybe. But no one except Mark and your family know exactly where we are, and I'd like to keep it that way for now, at least until we get a better idea of what the Sorhineth says and can put together some kind of plan. A day or two of downtime in San Francisco would be nice."

"All right." Brenna opened the door and slid out of the driver's seat. Donovan followed, and began fueling the Jag before stretching. And as he did, he watched the sway of her ass in the morning light and wondered what in the hell he'd gotten himself into.

* * * *

Donovan Callahan and Brenna Kennedy will die. There's no other way around it, even if I wanted there to be.

Goddamn him. He's got the job I should have, has fucked the woman who should be mine. The bastard's had all the luck, and now he has the Sorhineth. It should have been ours, to use as we please.

Why he couldn't have been taken care of back in Boston? Now he's on his way back to our home turf, and with a Warden at his back, no less.

Everything we've planned will be for naught if we can't get the damned book.

The best we can hope for is that he and Kennedy don't have enough time to unlock the secrets of the Sorhineth, and bring its awesome power to bear.

And if KOTE gets to them first, it'll be almost as bad.

* * * *

It was late and very dark by the time they reached Oklahoma City. Brenna was behind the wheel again, and had been since St. Louis nine hours earlier. The woman was a driving machine. Donovan thought part of it was guilt over the fact they had to drive at all.

"So, where do you want to stay?" he asked. She looked as tired as he felt.

"Let's just head to the city center. There's sure to be a reasonably nice hotel there."

They pulled off the freeway and into the entryway of the Renaissance Hotel. The valet hurried forward at the sight of the road-weary car. After all, a Jag is a Jag.

Bone tired, they dragged ass into the spacious lobby and stood at the registration desk.

"Sorry, sir, you're out of luck." The clerk was painfully professional in a heartland sort of way.

"Only one room with a king? What about the Westin across the street?" Donovan asked, not particularly caring what anyone thought at this point. He was sure he could get a rollaway, but damn it, he wanted a real bed tonight, even if it was only for a few hours.

"No can do. There's a convention in town. Everything is booked downtown. The only reason we have this room is because someone cancelled."

Brenna laid a hand on his arm. "Callahan, we'll be fine. Let's just take the room."

"All right." He turned back to the clerk. "I'll give you my credit card, but I want to pay cash in the morning. Give us a wakeup call at seven."

"That's fine, sir." The clerk didn't bat an eyelash. He handed over the key, ignoring their conspicuous lack of luggage and the obvious contradiction versus the fact they'd wanted two rooms.

* * * *

The room was opulent, the bed the centerpiece. On the top floor, it was obviously the best in the hotel.

Donovan wavered for a moment. He needed to make it clear to Brenna that he didn't expect anything from her, even though his morning wood had taken much longer than usual to subside, thanks to the little snuffling noises she'd made as she slept.

He had more to think about than getting into her pants, as much as he'd like to, especially after being in her company for the day, beginning to understand her core of strength. They'd discussed the Sorhineth briefly in between her catching up on sleep, but mostly they'd gotten to know each other. Tentatively at first, in the way of two strangers stuck together.

He got the impression she didn't like Terrans much, but was putting up with him because of the Sorhineth. Her low opinion of him bothered him more than it should.

Over the course of the drive he'd given her a brief tutorial on the workings of the Terrans—how each Keeper controlled their own element, but mixed breeds like him were pretty much limited to the basic stuff. Silence, protection, that sort of thing.

She'd talked about the legend of the journal she now had possession of and how she'd believed the whole Warden legend to be a family joke until he'd shown up. She'd also surprised him by explaining the Sorhineth's novel camouflage properties. His ancestors had been clever indeed, to bespell it to fade from sight when she was no more than a few yards away. While there were certainly ways around it—such as binding her and then standing nearby to read—it guaranteed the Warden would have a long life.

And at the end of the day, he was still attracted to her ... probably even more so. It wasn't as if he hadn't bedded his share of partners over the years, but he hadn't felt a connection this deeply forged since Angeline, and it made him twitchy, plain and simple.

He put off his dilemma of how to handle the whole situation by heading for the bathroom. After all, he really *did* need to take a leak.

Brenna solved the predicament of what to say about the sleeping arrangements quite nicely by slipping out of her slacks and blouse, leaving him with a glimpse of toned ivory skin clothed only by jewel-blue panties and a bra before he closed the door.

The quick look was enough to send his tired body into overdrive. Jesus, what her business suit had been hiding! What he'd dreamed of this morning was *nothing* compared to the real goods.

How in the hell had this spiraled out of control so quickly? Yesterday he'd been focused on the mission—nebulous though it might be—of making San Francisco a better place. Now he and a smart, voluptuous, totally feminine Warden were bunking together, sharing the same damned bed, and Jenalee was missing. Oh, and he couldn't forget the Destroyer who'd defaced Brenna's bedroom and was quite possibly behind Jenalee's disappearance. He hadn't been in battle for over fifteen years, and could feel it telling on him. His comfortable, self-created world had imploded, and he knew his hunt for the Sorhineth was the cause of it all.

He took stock of where his thoughts had taken him and berated himself for being so melodramatic. Even if it were true, he was a Protector, and more than willing and able to meet whatever faced him head on. He needed to embrace his father's side and bury the empathy his mother had instilled in him. It would do him no good in this situation.

Redemption
by Keira Ramsay

He took care of business and walked back into the main room, not so surprised to find Brenna already underneath the covers, body relaxed in sleep.

He stripped down to his boxers and slid beneath the sheets himself, asleep as soon as his head hit the pillow.

* * * *

Brenna woke slowly, cocooned in warmth and comfort, her head cushioned by a pillow, her body pinned against the hard male body at her back by a strong arm. The clock on her side of the bed read five a.m. Only six hours of sleep.

It took a minute before she remembered exactly who she shared her bed with, and when she did, she started, wondering if it was intentional on Donovan's part, or simply the instincts and comfort of a male. Either way, her body was reacting to him in a way it hadn't responded to a man in a very long time.

For a moment she just lay there, relishing the heat coursing through her body, the tickle of the hair on his arm against her abdomen, the undeniably hardened length of his cock against her ass.

Donovan shifted behind her, pulling her closer, burying his face in her hair as his hand splayed between her satin-covered breasts.

Brenna tensed and her breath caught as her nipples pebbled. What in the hell was she supposed to do? She could wiggle out of his embrace, and probably wake him in the process and embarrass them both or she could lie here and soak up the warmth. It really wasn't much of a choice.

Even as she luxuriated in the sensation of his body against hers, her mind whirled.

She hadn't had time to think of much of anything since entering her house a day and a half ago. Now she had the time—and the brainpower—to think about what might happen in the coming days and to consider the long-term aspects of what bringing the Sorhineth home to the Terrans meant.

She'd never really considered how her life would change if the Sorhineth was claimed, but now her future was in flux. As a Warden, she had to be where the book was. If that meant Donovan wanted to stay in San Francisco, then she was bound by tradition and her family's word to comply.

The basic fundamentals of who and what the Terrans were had been passed down, but Brenna wasn't quite ready to change years of family impressions on less than twenty-four hours of acquaintance with this one. What she did know was the Terrans had been around since the beginning of mankind, keeping Nature in balance through the use of extra-human powers. Sometimes it meant helping out mere humans, sometimes not. But from what Callahan had said, and what she'd seen with her own eyes, something had gone terribly wrong. It remained to be seen if he was as good as his promises.

When it came right down to it, Callahan's appearance meant leaving her family, her friends, her career, behind. It meant taking on a task she couldn't even begin to comprehend. She was a librarian, for God's sake, not a commando. Was she ready, at twenty-five, to start all over again? And even if she did, what was she supposed to do

about the man in her bed right now? Under "normal" circumstances, a Terran wanting the Sorhineth was a non-event, it was her job. But with a Destroyer in the picture, all bets were off.

She could easily envision having a sexual relationship with him, but was she really interested in that? On a physical level, hell yeah. On an intellectual one, no. The Terrans were completely different beings, with rules and a culture all their own, at least from what Gram had said. The fact she'd seen little to change her opinion only cemented what her mind told her.

She knew she'd be neck-deep in their intrigue and self-serving culture simply by being around them, but she didn't relish drowning in it by engaging in the mattress mambo with Callahan.

So for right now, she'd enjoy the fact she was in his arms with no strings attached.

She relaxed her body against his big, indisputably male one, and closed her eyes, sighing as his breath stirred her hair. This Terran was undoubtedly sexy, all honed lines and muscle, but she had another reason for keeping herself at a distance, of a sort. She'd figured out his relationship with Jenalee last night during the long hours of driving. His reaction to her probable abduction had been that of a best friend, yes, but there'd been more to it. What he'd expressed had been the concern of a lover.

Because she was a woman who appreciated boundaries, she'd respect his feelings for the singer, even if his body was reacting in an entirely different way right this second. It didn't

mean she couldn't look, and take great pleasure in it. It didn't mean she couldn't imagine, because it was safe, and oh-so satisfying.

* * * *

The shrill ring of the telephone brought Brenna around for the second time that morning. She swam up through layers of deep sleep, wondering why Callahan didn't pick up the damned thing. As she came fully awake, she realized she could hear the drum of the shower in the bathroom.

She snagged the phone. "Hullo."

"This is your wake-up call," an obscenely cheerful voice chirped in her ear. "Would you like me to connect you to room service?"

"Yes, please," Brenna mumbled.

"Room service, can I help you?" Damn, it almost sounded like the same voice. It was way too early in the morning to be this friggin' happy.

"Coffee, two pots. Continental breakfast for two. To-go cups for the extra coffee."

"It'll be about fifteen minutes."

Brenna grunted in reply, replaced the handset and rolled over, throwing an arm over her eyes. How could she have been so alert two hours ago, and feel like crap now?

The shower cut off and a few moments later Callahan walked out of the bathroom. Brenna slitted an eye and simply took pleasure in the sight of him, one towel tied around his narrow waist, another draped over his shoulders. His chest was lightly sculpted and decorated with battle scars ranging

from razor-thin to vicious and painful looking. A sparse smattering of hair arrowed down beneath the towel to the conspicuous bulge tenting the terrycloth.

Growing up around four brothers and being involved in relationships here and there told her it was a morning condition, but it still made her flush uncharacteristically. It didn't take much of a leap to picture him standing in the shower, water sluicing over his powerful body, a strong hand wrapped around his morning hard-on. It was an image that imprinted itself in her brain, and she had the feeling she wouldn't be shaking it anytime soon. Her body certainly responded to it, as a familiar warmth bloomed deep in her stomach and her nipples hardened against the satin of her bra.

"Good morning," he said quietly, his voice pure velvet in the pre-dawn air.

"Coffee's on the way." She sat up in bed, pulling the sheet up to cover her. Sexy or not, Callahan was taken, and off-limits because of it.

He averted his eyes and turned away, giving her a modicum of privacy. She crawled out of bed, grabbed her clothes and walked into the bathroom.

After standing under the steaming showerhead for at least ten minutes, she felt invigorated, as if the marathon drive never was. She was tempted to take care of the ache the image of him created, but was afraid he would hear, or know, somehow, that she'd been masturbating, thinking of him. Things were complicated enough right now, and she could deal with a little discomfort which would fade as the day wore

on. It didn't stop her from directing the shower spray against her nipples, of picturing his warm, wet mouth caressing her. A tiny orgasm surged through her, brought on by imagination and the warm pulse of the water alone. Her imagination had definitely taken flight, but now she was frustrated—wanting—even more.

She stepped from the shower, thankful he'd left the bathrobe for her use. The last thing she wanted to do was stroll into the room wearing nothing but a towel, not with the all-too-pleasant throbbing in her pussy.

After finger-combing her hair, she used an extra washcloth and the complimentary toothpaste to scrape the morning scum from her teeth.

She slid into her slacks and blouse with a grimace. A real toothbrush, comfortable clothes and clean underwear were definitely the first order of business—right after a caffeine fix.

The oh-so-welcome scent of coffee teased her nose as she walked out of the bathroom. A mug appeared magically under her nose, and she took the cup gratefully.

"Thanks," she managed before she took a swig. Ah. Bliss. Nirvana. Java.

When she looked up, Callahan was clothed in his shirt and slacks from yesterday. The rolled-up sleeves showcased muscular forearms covered with a light dusting of ebony hair. The memory of his arm banded around her, his hand between her breasts, sent another flush through her, making her pussy throb and clench in response. Damn, maybe not taking care of herself was going to be more uncomfortable than she'd thought.

She was a woman who enjoyed sex, enjoyed the dance of flirtation. So why was she so uncomfortable with how she reacted to Donovan Callahan? It wasn't as if anything would come of it.

"If you don't mind, I'd like to drive, at least to Albuquerque, so you can tell me what you know of the Sorhineth."

Brenna shook her head, jiggling some sense into it. "Sounds like a plan. But before we head anywhere, I need some more clothes, and definitely a toothbrush."

"We can ask the clerk when we leave and pick something up on the way out of town."

Brenna nodded and grabbed a Danish before settling into a plush armchair. She bit into the pastry with a grateful sigh, then reached down and rooted around in her purse, pulling out a comb. When she lifted her head, Callahan watched her with a brooding expression.

"I'm sorry."

"Pardon?"

"I put you and your family in jeopardy. It wasn't something I considered when I started this. I'm used to dealing with real danger on my own." The tone of his voice suggested he wasn't used to apologizing often ... for anything.

She took a moment to wonder why, exactly, he was being so nice to her. As a Terran, he certainly could have taken her and the Sorhineth with no apologies, it was his right, and she wouldn't have fought him. It was an interesting dichotomy, and one she wasn't sure she could put her finger on.

"What exactly is it you do ... really?" Maybe getting to know him a little would help her understand better. They hadn't covered this yesterday during the brief times both had been awake.

"Now? I own a bodyguard service. We provide security for people like Jenalee and corporate types."

"And what about before?"

"Military."

She could tell from his response that he wasn't going to give her anything else, so she let it go ... for now. With a gaggle of brothers as manly-man as hers, she understood his reticence. She didn't like it much, but she understood it. So she gave him something back.

"The claiming of the Sorhineth is something we've been anticipating for generations. I just never thought it would happen on my watch, you know? The Kennedys have always understood what being Wardens means, though to be quite honest, even though we put plans in place, none of us expected it." Yeah, none of them had predicted *this*.

If her whiplash change in subject surprised him, it didn't show. "Your brothers, your parents, how is it they can just pick up and hide? They all have jobs, responsibilities. Just like you do."

Brenna dropped the comb back in her purse and shifted in her chair, cradling the mug between her palms. "Maybe it's time I explained exactly what being a Warden means. We're your typical Irish-American family, but with a twist. From what little Gram passed down, when the Clan agreed to become Wardens, we were 'gifted' by the Terrans. Gram was

the first female Warden, and the family decided to keep the name Kennedy, to make it easier for the Terrans to find us. We can sense a Destroyer, can recognize a Terran, making it pretty easy to know who to hand the Sorhineth to. But we are also innately good at business, if it's the road we choose. Unfortunately," she grinned, "the primary Warden doesn't have any of those gifts. He or she gets to rely on the rest of the family. Generations of sound decisions have allowed our family to build a considerable fortune, even by today's standards. You may look at Tommy and see a hotheaded smoke eater, but he majored in business law at Harvard, graduated *Summa cum Laude*, and passed the bar on his first try before he decided he wanted to do something else with his life. Same with Terry. He was an engineering major at Cambridge. Tim went to Johns Hopkins for his residency. Dad, even though he's not a Warden by blood, is smart as hell, and continued our family's prosperity. So while we've all settled into professions that make us happy, dropping off the face of the earth for a while isn't going to impact us financially. Each of my brothers has had an exit plan in place since they began their jobs." She sat back and watched him digest her little speech.

He rubbed a hand over his face and rose from his seat on the bed. "Seems as though your family is better prepared than I am. I just hope it doesn't come back to bite us in the ass."

* * * *

They picked up essentials from a K-Mart situated next to the freeway and continued the unconventional road trip. Brenna pored over the Sorhineth, relaying what little she could decipher as they sped down the interstate. Donovan absorbed her words and tried to keep his mind on what she was saying, rather than how he'd awoken this morning. Hand cupped around a perfect breast, morning hard-on snuggled all-too-willingly against her ass. It had felt good, right. Too right, considering he was now on a twofold mission, and his first priority had to be finding Jenalee before figuring out what he was going to do with the Sorhineth now that he actually had it.

Jenalee. Gods, he hoped she was safe, and being her usual flighty self. That the gruesome images he kept imagining were pure fabrication and he hadn't lost his only touchstone to normality.

The fact he was enjoying Brenna's company—too much—made him feel like a prick. He'd deserved such a title many times over the last seventy years or so, but today was the first time he'd really felt it. He'd become a callous bastard, even reveled in it a bit, but for some reason he found himself tempering the tendency while he was around Brenna. He had no freakin' idea why, but knew it to be so. It was an ... interesting ... development.

"Maybe we should be looking at the book your mother found instead," he suggested, forcing his mind to something he could do *now*. "Any idea why it was hidden, and not stored with the Sorhineth?"

Brenna looked thoughtful for a moment, pondering, then answered. "Probably because putting them together would be dangerous, in case one or the other were captured by a Destroyer. Maybe you simply being here was the trigger that led Mom to it." She leaned forward and turned off the saccharine-sweet pop spouting from the radio. "I can't listen to this crap; it's turning my brain to pudding." She pulled the slim journal out of her purse, flipped it open and started skimming, humming a tune under her breath.

It took Donovan a minute to place it, and when he did, it chased out an infrequent smile. The Red Hot Chili Pepper's *Higher Ground*. Somehow he hadn't pegged her as being an alternative music type, especially since he tended toward that music himself. She surprised him at every turn.

"Oh damn. This is *not* good news."

Donovan pulled into the fast lane and moved around a big rig carrying milk. While he was unnerved by her words, her tone had been matter-of-fact. "What's that?"

"The Destroyers are just as Terran as you but they use their power for evil rather than good. Everything Gram surmised about Destroyers is shit." She ran a hand through her hair. "She said I'd know a Terran from a Destroyer, and while I certainly do after what I felt in my place, what it says in here contradicts it. We always assumed the Destroyers were a different species entirely."

"Say again?" He was shocked by her theory. How was that possible? Then he considered the ennui he'd not only witnessed, but been a part of since Cambodia, and wondered if she wasn't very far off the mark. Yeah, he'd heard the scary

"Destroyer" stories since childhood, but he'd never thought them to be true, never even considered that he might share the same blood, the same preternatural bond.

"The Destroyers are Terran, and as Warden I may very well be the only human who can tell the difference."

Well, didn't *that* just fucking make his day.

* * * *

The rest of the afternoon passed in much the same way. Brenna read from the journal, attempting to decode the Sorhineth while he drove down the long, straight freeway. Shit. He probably could have tied the steering wheel in place, set the cruise control and napped. It might have made for a more productive day.

When Brenna's mobile rang, it sounded like salvation. She picked it up, listened for a moment, then handed it to him.

"Callahan here."

"She's back." Mark's voice was jubilant.

"Is she all right?"

"Oh yeah, back to her usual Queen of Sheba self. She's pissed as hell about her place. She wasn't home."

Pure, sweet relief and a hint of anger chased through Donovan.

"So where in the hell has she been the last two days?"

"Ah..." His second-in-command's voice took on a decidedly uncomfortable tone.

"Never mind. From your pregnant pause, I get your drift. Put her on."

"Donovan, darling!"

He could tell from her voice she was coming down now, but had probably been high on a mix of drugs and sex for the past few days.

"Jenalee. Don't ever disappear like that again." Donovan knew his voice was hard, but really didn't care. She'd scared years off his life, and that was saying something. Protecting her was his job, maybe one of the few things he'd taken seriously these past few years, even if it was a pain in the ass. He didn't need her making it harder. If it had been anyone else but his childhood friend on the line, he would have reamed them a new one.

Her pout was clear, even over the static-ridden airwaves.

"Don't sulk. Did Mark tell you what happened to your place?"

"Julian said something about a burglary, but nothing is missing."

"It wasn't a burglar. It was a Destroyer." Her gasp sounded in his ear. "Now do you understand? You can't go anywhere without protection. He found you somehow, and it led him to the Warden."

"Oh, Donovan! I never meant..." Her distress and chagrin was obvious.

He gentled his tone. "I know you didn't, love, but whoever you talked to about my trip is obviously dirty, or just said something to the wrong person. I need you to think hard about who you talked to over the past few days. Is there anyone you can think of?"

She paused so long Donovan was afraid they'd been disconnected, then came back on the line. "Just the usual.

Mark, my hairdresser Carrie, those people. I haven't even seen another Terran for days."

"Okay, but think about it more, and we'll discuss it when I get into town."

"All right." Her voice was subdued now, and Donovan knew she wouldn't be going anywhere without Mark. She was a capricious little thing sometimes, but she'd take him seriously. She had since they were children.

"I'll see you soon."

"Okay."

Donovan disconnected and handed the phone back to Brenna, truly at ease for the first time in twenty-four hours. Well, that wasn't entirely true. He'd felt anything but easy this morning, his good judgment and an erection for the ages engaged in a vicious war. But Brenna didn't need to know.

"Jenalee's fine. She was out *playing*."

"Huh?" Brenna's confusion was almost comical.

"She found herself a sweet young thing and was entertaining for the last two days. Didn't even know anything had happened. One of my employees, a Protector named Julian, was the one who discovered her missing when she didn't return his calls."

"Oh." Her voice had an odd little kick to it that made him look at her in concern. She smiled brilliantly, and for just a moment he was caught in her sunburst, everything fading until it was just the two of them, in their own little world. Then Brenna spoke and her tone was back to business. "So that's good. Did she have any idea how they found me?"

"Ah ... she's thinking about it." He paused, searching for the right words as he struggled to regain his equilibrium. What the hell had *that* been? The more he was around Brenna Kennedy, the more he realized there was something special about her—and it wasn't her Warden status.

He recovered, but not very well. "Jenalee can be a bit ... exuberant, when it comes to her extracurricular activities."

"Oh for God's sake, just say it." Brenna was frustrated now, and it had Donovan biting back another grin. Since Jenalee was safe, a huge burden had been lifted.

"She goes through stages where she parties ... hard. People like Jenalee do everything in excess, she more than most."

"So she does drugs."

Well, it didn't get much balder than that.

"She's been known to, and I know she saw my trip to Boston as a kind of defection, so she went out, hooked up and tried to forget about it."

"And that doesn't bother you?"

"Why would it? It's Jenalee. It just pisses me off because I was concerned about her safety." Concerned was a mild way to put it. He'd been about two steps away from blind rage. It would have been amusing he'd invested so much in their quasi-relationship if he hadn't realized how much she meant to him as a friend in that time.

"I, uh, got the impression the two of you were a couple."

Donovan laughed, the first real laugh he'd had since October 17th.

"No. Sure, we get together if the mood strikes, but we've been friends too long to screw it up by being exclusive. Not only that, we're complete opposites."

"I see." But Donovan could tell she really didn't.

He knew he didn't have to justify his relationship with Jenalee to Brenna, but they were going to be together for quite some time ... *Whoa*. He hadn't really considered that. Sure, she'd told him all of her familial ducks were in a row, and she was obviously committed to her calling as Warden, but from what she'd told him, unless he decided to give up the Sorhineth, she was basically shackled to him for as long as he chose.

He shook his head. *Hell of a choice to make*. At least he could take care of her financially, whether she needed it or not. If nothing else, it would put a burr under Tommy's saddle, and he liked the notion, in a perverse sort of way.

He looked at her out of the corner of his eye, a new thought taking hold which had nothing to do with her over-the-top brother. With the Jenalee situation under control, what was to stop him from taking what had happened this morning further? If she was willing, of course. If they were going to be together, why not be *together*? They were attracted to each other, that much was obvious, so why not combine their mission with the Sorhineth and some guiltless pleasure? But he'd have to explain Jenalee first.

"Jenalee and I have known each other since we were children. We played and grew into adulthood together. Yeah, we've been lovers on occasion, but we're better friends than that. And now, well, our paths have definitely diverged. She'll

never want anything more than what she's got, and I'm not satisfied with that anymore."

"Okay, but you really don't need to tell me all this. It's none of my business." Brenna's voice was controlled, clipped.

"But it is. We're going to be together until we figure out how to use the Sorhineith for what it was meant. You'll need a crash course on the Terrans, and understanding Jenalee is probably the best way to begin. I love her dearly, but she's exactly the kind of person I haven't wanted to be for the last two months."

* * * *

Together. Brenna processed Donovan's statement although she understood exactly what he was saying. This changed everything, and made her earlier thoughts of leaving him to his Terran lover almost moot. And he was right about one thing ... she was going to need to understand the Terrans, and understand them well, if for nothing else than to pass the knowledge down to the grandchild who would become Warden.

What she needed to decide now was if she wanted to get involved with Donovan Callahan. Why she was even considering it, given her feelings about the Terrans, was a mystery. Then she remembered the feel of him against her back this morning, and knew there wasn't all that much to think about. Why shouldn't she take a taste of the images he had haunted her with for the last two nights? No harm could come from it ... so why not enjoy a little business with pleasure?

Chapter Four

They found a reasonable hotel on the outskirts of Flagstaff, and got just one room without a word being spoken between them. Donovan walked in front of Brenna, carrying the single bag containing their toiletries and a few changes of clothes. She admired his ass from behind, knowing through their unspoken agreement that tonight they'd become lovers. A thrill ran through her body. It had been a good six months since she'd been with a man, and while the interlude had been nice, she had the feeling it wouldn't begin to compare to the pleasures this Terran could give her.

She'd spent the last few hours of their drive seriously contemplating having sex with him, and in the end decided she didn't have anything to lose. He was hot, she was willing ... what more did they need?

He opened the door and set the bag in the small closet area and flicked on the light, just standing there for a moment as Brenna closed it behind her. She leaned against the cool wood and watched him think. "Does it really take so much thought?"

"I want to do what's right, but damn it if I don't absolutely need to have my hands on you right now."

"Then what are you waiting for? We're safe, I'm on the pill." There, she'd done it, thrown down the gauntlet and left no question as to what her intentions were.

When he turned, a dangerous light burned in his eyes, one making her hyper-aware of every nerve in her body. His big

body was framed by the light, and if she hadn't been raised around four hulking brothers, she might have felt threatened. Instead she was titillated ... and hot.

"Be sure of this, Brenna Kennedy. Be very sure, because once I start, we won't be finished until the morning light."

Brenna stepped forward and reached up to trace a finger over the lines bracketing his mouth.

"Shut up already and kiss me."

He lowered his head slowly, breath wafting across her lips, amber eyes locked on hers.

When his lips finally slanted over hers, Brenna closed her eyes and held on for the ride. His mouth was tender, hot, full of wicked promise, and at that moment Brenna wondered if she really had understood what she was getting into.

Then his tongue swept into her mouth and she didn't give a damn, concentrating instead on the wonderful, wondrous loop of pure sensation whirling through her, from her lips to her breasts to her pussy. On the carnality of his cruelly sensual mouth as it softened against hers.

Donovan alternated between long, slow sweeps of his tongue and little nibbles, maintaining the distance between them so only their lips touched, only their breath mingled. It was tortuous and incredibly sweet.

Her body screamed for contact, wanting to feel the long, hard lines of him pressed against her, needing to feel the thick, long imprint of his cock against her stomach. She whimpered in her throat, not caring if she sounded needy, and forced his hand. Threading her fingers through his belt loops, she yanked him forward, branding him with the

softness of her breasts, the scratch of her fingernails against his sides.

He groaned and wound his hand through her hair, pulling her head back and deepening their kiss.

Mmmm, she thought as the length of his cock prodded her through his jeans, that was more like it.

She abandoned her hold on his pants and squeezed his oh-so-fine ass, pulling him even more firmly against her. This is what she wanted, hot, mindless sex. Hell, she'd wanted it since she'd first laid eyes on him, her mind had just been too overwhelmed by the whole Terran history and Destroyer menace to acknowledge it.

Decadent carnality hummed in the air around them, almost a living thing that thickened and strengthened with each second. Giving in to it, Brenna arched up, nipping at his lip, dragging one hand around to trace his erection.

He stiffened, then growled, low and dangerously, before pushing her against the door, sandwiching her body between his own and the smooth wood. Her hands crept up of their own volition, tangling in his midnight-dark hair as he plundered her mouth. He was relentless, taking and taking and taking until Brenna let her head fall against the door in surrender, totally overwhelmed by his mouth, the press of his body, the heat streaking through her.

He broke away and braced his hands on the doorframe, breathing heavily, ruffling her unbound hair. When he pushed from the wall, the expression on his face stole her breath. Pure, raw, untamed and male, his face was chiseled in lines of want, eyes blazing whiskey-gold with Terran power.

Brenna swallowed and allowed her gaze to drop to the prominent bulge in his jeans. Did she want this? Oh yeah, she wanted it more than she'd wanted anything in a long, long time.

Donovan seemed to be waiting for her to break from his embrace, to run, so she did exactly the opposite and reached down, running a questing finger along the outline of his cock before dipping lower and cupping his balls. God he was big, pulsing ... and all hers for the time being. She allowed herself a small, very feminine smile before leaning in and swiping her tongue across his lips.

That was all it took. He bent down and threw her over his shoulder as if she weighed nothing. She squealed ... actually squealed! Not something she'd ever done before, but then again she'd never set out to seduce a Terran before either.

His hand slapped her ass, drawing a giggle ... a giggle! ... and then he tossed her down on the bed. She bounced, and before she even began to settle he was pulling at her jeans, fingers sure on the button tabs. She toed off her new sneakers and fumbled with the chunky sweater, finally pulling it over her head.

He stood between her legs, eyes feasting on the lacy bra and panties she'd bought this morning.

"My, my, aren't you full of surprises?" His voice was rough with arousal, and just the sound of it brought her nipples to peak and had pure heat boiling in her core. "You got those when I wasn't looking, didn't you?"

She nodded, beyond words as his heated gaze traveled her body, leaving behind a wash of goosebumps, followed by

liquid fire. Who was she to tell him she had a weakness for slutty lingerie?

She swallowed and willed herself to speak. "You, naked, now." That was it, all she could manage.

He smiled, a crafty, hungry wolf's smile. "Hmmm. Not quite yet." He knelt between her legs, and removed her socks slowly, as if he had all the time in the world and she wasn't burning up inside. Then he ran a finger up her instep, dipping down to place an openmouthed kiss on each arch before moving to her ankles, then her calves, peppering kisses and caresses that had her arching off the bed, breath frozen in her lungs.

Her thighs trembled as he slid his palms up to the elastic band of her panties, paused, and then continued their northern trek. His still-clothed body pressed against hers, pushing her into the mattress as his hands and mouth closed in on her breasts.

He traced her nipples with broad fingers, breath coasting across the tips and inflaming her even more.

"Look at me, Brenna." It was a command, not a request.

She lifted her head, met his eyes and was immediately entrapped. He held her gaze as his head dropped, as his mouth covered her nipple, suckling her through the thin material. The sensation of his hot tongue and the scratchy lace sent quivers through her. Oh God, she couldn't come from having her nipples sucked, could she? Then he expertly applied his teeth, nipping with enough force to send her into a mini-climax, her pussy pulsing in time with each tiny bite. And still she couldn't break the thrall his eyes held her in.

He switched to her other breast, building her tension to a fine point again until she shook against him.

Pulling away, sliding down, he murmured against her stomach, still keeping eye contact, "I've wanted to do that since yesterday morning." Then he was skimming her panties off and his fingers parted the lips of her pussy. "Now I want to taste this more than anything." His gaze left hers as he lowered his face. She heard him breathe deeply, inhaling her essence, felt the exhalation against her exposed clit, and clutched the bedspread as if it would support her against his explicit exploration.

His tongue slid against her with unerring, feathery delicacy, eliciting another shudder of pleasure. Gods, she could die from this. Then his blunt finger slid into her pussy, stroking, questing, until he found her G-spot. When she lunged against him he slowed to a torturous pace, flicking her clit with his tongue as he thrust into her with the one finger, then two, stretching her before he rubbed against her sweet spot again.

She arched off the bed, consumed by the frissons of pleasure arcing across every nerve in her body. He took advantage of her position, latching onto her clit as he drove into her with his fingers, shooting her into an orgasm which made the first one feel like a warm-up. She dropped to the bed, spent, body singing with pleasure and satisfaction.

Brenna heard the rustle of clothing but was too damned sated to even lift her head. Then Donovan was lying naked beside her, skin burning hers, his hand coasting down the front of her body from her collarbone to the top of her pelvic

bone, then back again. He was gentling her, she realized, bringing her down. She supposed she should be grateful he hadn't just pushed into her and taken what he so rightly deserved. Honestly, she was too damn happy to care.

"Hmmm, let's take care of that, shall we?" His hands deftly unclasped the front hook of her bra. She allowed him to manipulate her arms, too lost in the blissful lassitude of a great orgasm to protest ... or even help.

Then his mouth was on her bare breasts and she was arching into him, pure lust raging again. When his lips slanted over hers, his tongue thrusting against hers, giving her back a taste of herself as his cock brushed against her pussy, she lost it, plain and simple.

In a purely instinctual move, she aligned her body with his, wrapped her legs around him and pulled him deep inside.

"Brenna!" he shouted against her mouth, then dropped to her neck, feasting as he drove into her, one commanding thrust after another. She held on for the ride, fingernails digging into his back, scoring it as her pants, his groans peppered the air.

He angled his body so his cock speared into her at a different angle, sending entirely new sensations through her. She gasped and dug her heels into his ass, forcing him harder, deeper, until she was mindless against him, clawing and tearing, her body slicked with sweat, pulse thundering in her ears.

Then her heart stopped, literally stopped, as he dug his teeth into the sinew between neck and shoulder and pumped into her ferociously, tipping her over the edge once again.

Redemption
by Keira Ramsay

As she climaxed, she screamed his name, and he answered by shouting "*Ihiannan*."

Chapter Five

"Gods, Brenna, that was fucking amazing."

Donovan knew it wasn't "cool" to be so in awe, but there was no way in hell he was going to let what they'd just shared pass without comment. If she chose to blow it off, he'd find a different, more subtle way to pursue her. And pursue her he would. He recognized what he'd shouted in the heat of passion, what his subconscious demanded.

Brenna Kennedy was his mate.

He hadn't thought he'd find another woman to love after Angeline, and never anyone to mate with, not after so many years. Her death at the hands of the Nazis had wrenched the heart right out of him and even though it had been a heated if brief interlude, it left room for only his family and Jenalee. And now, now his world had expanded to include Brenna.

He didn't question the gift fate had handed him, just accepted it with wholehearted gratitude and more than a bit of wonder.

She exhaled happily against his neck, breath tantalizing his still-sensitive nerves. "Yeah, it was."

And with her simple statement, he knew she was his. She was too strong a woman to simply accept being mated, but he didn't mind wooing. In fact, he looked forward to it, and their enforced togetherness over the Sorhineth would only make it easier.

"Wanna do it again?" he teased, nuzzling her ear. He was serious, but would understand if she chose sleep instead.

"Ummm," she hummed, snuggling in deeper against his chest.

Well, that answered his question. He smiled against her neck and slid off the bed, bringing her with him.

"Huh?" her voice was muzzy with sleep and fulfillment.

"Need to get under the covers, *lhiannan*."

She curled into his embrace, totally limp as he pulled away the bedspread and sheets, and then tucked her in. Sliding beside her, he spooned her, pulling her lush ass against his semi-erect cock and cupping a breast in his palm. Yeah. He could definitely get used to this.

* * * *

Freakin' phone, Brenna thought grouchily as it rang in her ear for the second time in two mornings. A strong, hairy male arm snaked over her body to grasp the receiver.

"Thank you," a husky voice, warm and devastating, cruised along her nerve endings.

She realized two things in a split second. Donovan Callahan was naked at her back, and she'd spent an unforgettable night in his arms. What she was going to do about it was the hardest question she'd ever had to answer.

His morning hard-on prodded her ass as he returned the phone to the nightstand, sending a thrill through her that peaked her nipples and had pure heat pooling in her core.

What was she going to do? She'd heard how easily he dismissed his sexual relationship with Jenalee. Who was she to think she'd be any different? And why did she care? She should accept this gift, take advantage of it for as long as it

lasted, and then move on with her life. So she turned in his arms and did just that.

Donovan's face was sleepy, but his eyes were eagle-sharp as he looked down at her, one eyebrow lifted in question.

She smiled, reached beneath the sheets and grasped his cock. It was smooth, hard, living steel beneath her fingertips. A moan broke from his lips as she palmed his length.

Oh, this was going to be *fun*.

Tossing off the covers, she slithered down his body, loving the way her own softened and quickened by the just the feel of him. She could definitely get used to this.

She took him in her mouth, the width of him stretching her lips. All this had been inside her?

His groan of pure male fulfillment sent ripples of pleasure over her. She'd always enjoyed giving a man head, tasting his essence, but somehow this was more, bigger, better. It was the control, the absolute power you held over the person thrashing beneath you.

She slipped her mouth down his cock and tickled his balls with her fingers, then sucked back up.

His hands fisted in her hair. He let her set the pace, but his fingers against her scalp, the knowledge he could take over at any moment, titillated her, made her hotter than she'd ever been in this position.

"More, *Ihiannan*," he rasped, hands clenching as she took him deep, deeper until his cockhead pressed against the soft flesh of her palate.

"Jesus." His agonized whisper coasted over her skin as if it were a living thing, caressing her voluptuously.

She swooped in faster, feeling the sweat forming on his thighs, the fine shudder rolling through his body, and reveled in the power she held.

He thrust into her mouth. "I'm sorry," he panted, hands tightening until she was unable to move her head. "Sorry..."

She knew what he meant and sucked hard with each withdrawal, tonguing the head of his cock as he dove back in. That she could drive a man like Donovan past the breaking point excited her, pushed her higher until she was on the verge of climaxing herself.

Then he was coming, salty semen spurting into her mouth, overwhelming her senses as she reached for her own peak ... and found it. She licked the length of him as her pussy muscles spasmed, as her clit pulsed. He reached down, pulling her up his body with pure masculine strength until she lay atop him, quivering. She'd never felt anything like this. Never.

His tongue laved her lips, licking the last of his cum from the corner of her mouth, then curled deep, loving her mouth until she thought she'd come all over again. When his hands cupped her ass and lifted her, she wondered dazedly if he was ready to go again. But he had other things on his mind as he continued pulling her up his body until her thighs straddled his shoulders and her pussy was poised at his decadent mouth.

"Grab the headboard, Brenna." His voice was sultry, hot, everything she'd always wanted to hear. And when his lips closed over her clit, she grasped the wooden headrail and held on for dear life.

His talented tongue teased her as his fingers drifted over her pussy lips, parting them before plunging inside. Her juices lubricated his fingers, and he stopped toying with her clit long enough to say, "Gods, woman, you're so sweet, so hot, so right." And then his mouth was back on her, suckling her deep.

His other hand burrowed between her cheeks, one finger dipping to collect her wetness before lubricating her ass and then slipping inside. Her fingers dug into the wood as she threw her head back, nerves screaming. He lapped at her clit, fingers plunging into her dripping channel and ass in tortuous tandem. Pure, raw sensation tore through her, and she clenched down on him, grinding her pussy against his face, driving his fingers deeper. She thrust against him again and again until her climax surged through her and she came, screaming his name.

* * * *

"We're behind on time," Brenna reminded him as he nuzzled her neck from behind. They'd showered together, both too sated to do much more than wash the other's back and play.

"Suddenly I don't feel the burning need to get to the City." His voice rumbled over her, exciting her all over again. She hated to be the voice of reason, but...

"I know," he said, nipping her nape, almost as if he'd heard her thoughts. "But it doesn't stop me from wanting you, Brenna Kennedy."

His tone said he knew something she didn't. It wasn't something she cared much for, especially now when she was relaxed, warm and satisfied.

She stepped away from him, piqued for no good reason.

"Let's hit the road, *Ihiannan*."

"What does that word mean?"

He paused, as if measuring his words. "Nothing. A Gaelic endearment."

She knew he was lying. Something told her she should push it, but what would it gain her? She was happy having a sexual relationship with him for as long as it lasted. And did she really expect more from a Terran? But oh, what a ride it was going to be.

"All right. Let's drive." And as they drove, she could think.

* * * *

And think she did. She worried she'd become so immersed in the adventure she'd left part of herself, her identity, back in Boston. It didn't help that she seemed to be hit with stray emotions she couldn't account for at every turn—angst, anger, even a warm funny feeling in the pit of her stomach. It was weird, and more than a little unsettling.

Since last night was obviously foremost on her mind, she addressed it first. The sex was great, but she was beginning to like Donovan as a person. Discounting the fact he was a Terran, liking him was a bennie if she was simply acting as the Warden, but when you tossed orgasms into the mix, things got muddy real fast.

She only had to look at her own past to see that.

Kevin—a big, hulking, thoroughly sexy computer programmer—had been a lot of fun to date, and even more to sleep with. He got along great with her family—a small miracle—and was smart and funny. Until he'd gone all squirrely on her.

She didn't want a partner who wanted to take care of her. Hell, even her brothers understood that would never happen.

Yeah, she was a librarian, but she was also a woman who wanted her relationships to be fifty-fifty, both in and out of the bedroom. That, in her book, meant experimentation and a never-ending search for the new, the fun.

In Kevin's case, it had been missionary-style one hundred percent of the time, and when she suggested a video or letting her be on top—gasp—he'd promptly wigged. Hell, it was the eighties. Letting your hair down was the watchword. Apparently Kevin hadn't heard it.

And the give-and-take of control—or lack thereof—hadn't been limited to the bedroom after that. Everything from dinner to what they watched on television became a confrontation.

The relationship had been sunk from then on, no matter how hard both tried to pretend nothing untoward had happened. And she had tried, because he was one of the first men she'd taken home her family actually seemed to like. In the end, the pretending had stifled her to the point she had to get out.

She'd wanted excitement, spice, and now she had it in spades with Donovan Callahan. What, if anything, she was going to do about it was the question of the day. What she

wanted from Donovan was wild, hot, monkey sex. She didn't want to like him in the bargain, because even though he definitely had the potential to be a heartless bastard, she'd seen glimpses of more last night. Quick peeks that made her traitorous heart feel things it shouldn't, even when her brain insisted it was sex. Just fantastic, blow-the-top-of-your-head-off, go-down-in-flames-screaming sex.

Donovan Callahan was a player—he'd said as much about his on-again, off-again fuckfests with Jenalee—and a Terran ... and she'd better remember it.

* * * *

They hit San Francisco as the sun began to set. As cold as Boston had been, San Francisco was the exact opposite, almost balmy on this Christmas Eve.

Brenna stared at the famous skyline, enchanted.

Donovan drove with quiet surety, and as she looked at the traffic flowing around them, she was glad he'd offered to take the wheel. Boston was well known for crazed drivers, but she thought San Francisco ran a close second.

"If you don't mind, I'd like to swing by Jenalee's before we head to my place. I need to know if she remembers who she talked to."

It wasn't all right, not after what they'd shared last night and this morning, but she'd deal with it. "Sure." She made her voice completely neutral.

He shot her a quick glance she ignored. He wasn't an idiot, so she gave him a few moments to figure it out.

It didn't take too long. "Ah, we'll only be there for a minute, all right?"

She sent him a sweet smile that was, nevertheless, all teeth. "Fine."

He swallowed audibly and turned his attention to the road. Brenna stifled a grin. While she was perfectly content with playing with Donovan for the time being, she didn't share ... something he'd better realize right up front.

* * * *

The atmosphere of Jenalee's apartment was thick with Destroyer menace. Brenna held her hand over her mouth and nose and tried not to gag.

"What in the hell?" Donovan's voice was sick, and in that moment, Brenna knew she wasn't the only one who could feel a Destroyer. "Jenalee? Mark?"

She cast her senses forward and found the dwelling empty, of Terrans, at least. "No one here." The room looked fine, with no sign of the damage she'd seen in her own home.

The spike in Donovan's concern was palpable as he ranged through the living room, the bedrooms, and finally the kitchen.

"Son of a..."

"What?" Brenna joined him beside the refrigerator, eyeing the note beneath a magnet.

"She and Mark took my advice, sort of. They're laying low in Mexico, at her place there. Dammit," he grated, "I needed to talk to her about this."

"I need some fresh air. Can we talk about this outside?"

She must have looked green, because he quickly agreed and herded her out the front door into the night. She breathed the salt-tinged air in deep, expelling the rank air from her lungs.

"Much better. He must have been in there a long time to leave such a signature."

"Mark?" Donovan's voice was disbelieving.

"No, the Destroyer." Though having never met this Mark, she had to wonder. But if Donovan had complete trust in him, who was she to argue? "Such malevolence has to take a while to build for it to be so pervasive. It's probably a good thing Jenalee was *entertaining*."

He nodded curtly and placed his hand on the small of her back as they descended the stairs. The gesture warmed her in a way no words could have.

They hit the street and stood beside the Jag.

"So now what?"

"My house, I guess. Given what's happened so far, it's a good thing I've been living at an apartment down on the waterfront for the last few months because we were so busy. No one will think to look for us at my 'real' house, at least not for a day or two. Our speed run accomplished that much, at least. I'm looking forward to sleeping in my own bed again." He smiled, and it was a slow, smoldering thing that made her tingle from head to toe. "With you."

"Hmmm," she answered noncommittally, despite the hum riding through her, and slid into the passenger seat. She'd been easy last night because it was what she'd wanted at the

time. Predictable wasn't something she wanted to add to her repertoire.

Donovan reclaimed the driver's seat and sent her a bemused look, but said nothing. It was probably just as well. She could think of nothing better than spending the night in his arms, but having him wonder about it would make the sex all the sweeter.

They slid through the gloaming, leaving the lights of the city behind. Brenna gaped as they crossed the Golden Gate, her eyes drawn to Alcatraz, to the stubby Coit Tower, to the soaring signature of the Transamerica Building. The sun lowered into the Pacific, setting the cloud-streaked horizon on fire. How different this was from Boston and the Atlantic, with its storming fury and wintry nights.

She was so lost in the beauty of the skyline she barely noticed as they drove into the seaside town of Sausalito, then into the driveway of an unremarkable cottage.

"Yours?" she asked, pulling her attention from the seascape to the absolute last place she would have ever imagined a superficial, money-loving Terran living. They got out of the car and she looked around the lot with interest.

"Yeah. Surprised?"

"A little. I don't know, when you told me you were a corporate bodyguard I guess I expected something a little ritzier. Like maybe the apartment you were describing."

"Huh," he grunted, giving nothing away as he unlocked and opened the front door.

"I like it," she murmured, her gaze skipping over the wall of framed family photos, the comfortable living room, the

entrance to what looked like a homey kitchen. "This is *your* place, not some pre-fabricated designer's dream."

He looked at her, one eyebrow raised in question.

"What? Just because it's not what I expected doesn't mean I appreciate it any less."

He shifted on his feet, and the uneasiness of the movement was endearing. Yeah, she was beginning to like Donovan Callahan a whole lot.

"I need to call my family, let them know we made it."

"Oh, yeah. Phone's on the table over there. Are you hungry?"

"Ravenous. You've got food?"

"No," he grinned, at ease again, "but I have an extensive library of take-out menus. Chinese sound all right?"

"Damn straight. Tell you what, get the food first, then I'll check in."

"Deal."

Brenna followed him into the kitchen, appreciating the clean lines, but a bit surprised by the veritable forest of herbs thriving on the windowsill.

"So you don't cook, but you've got an herb garden?" she asked. The dichotomy was ... interesting.

"Earth Element genes. I'll show you the backyard tomorrow." He picked up the phone, rattled off an order, then broke the connection and handed the receiver to her.

A Terran Protector with a green thumb? Now she'd heard everything. It, for no other reason than curiosity, made her want to meet his family. If Donovan was any indication, it would be an interesting experience.

"Hi, Dad. We made it safe and sound to San Francisco. Is everything okay there?"

"We're eating lobster." His voice smiled. She could picture the family together and felt a pang. This would be the first Christmas she'd ever missed.

* * * *

"Happy Christmas Eve, Brenna." Donovan toasted her with a stein of Anchor Steam. At least he'd had beer in the fridge. After all, to him, it *was* a food group.

They sat on the floor of his living room, the ancient seaman's chest that acted as his coffee table between them.

"And to you," she clinked glasses with him and drank deep. When she pulled the mug away a fine mustache of foam covered her upper lip.

Gods, how he wanted to lean across and lick it away. But she'd kept a firm bit of distance between them since this morning, and he thought he knew why. Their coupling last night and this morning had been fast and furious, and a woman like Brenna wasn't something to be gulped in one sitting, but sampled and savored over the long haul. Experimented and played with until they were both too weak to breathe. Which is exactly what he planned on doing over the next seventy years or so.

He snagged a spicy shrimp from the take-out container with his chopsticks and thought about the vagaries of fate. How strange was it he'd be mated to a fiery Warden and not a biddable Terran like Jenalee? Bringing Brenna around to his frame of mind was exactly the kind of challenge he'd relish.

And if decoding the Sorhineth made the task easier, then who was he to argue? It was almost amusing ... the thing that had driven him to Boston in the first place was now a distant second to wooing the woman who would share the rest of his life. How bizarre was that?

"Penny for your thoughts." Brenna popped a piece of Kung Pao chicken into her mouth, then slid the chopsticks slowly out, catching the spicy sauce on her tongue.

Every bit of blood in his body shot straight to his dick.
"Huh?"

She smiled at him, a bit of witchery in the expression. "I said, penny for your thoughts."

"You really don't want to know." He angled his glance at the chopsticks, then at her mouth, and licked his lips. "Or maybe you do?" He made the statement a question.

She laughed and Donovan was shocked into silence. He'd never heard her laugh before, and it called every base urge to the forefront. He wanted her laugh wrapped around his cock, the way it had wrapped around his heart.

"Maybe later. We've got work to do tonight."

"Uh, yeah, work," he mumbled, gaze still locked on her mouth, brain fully engaged in his little head.

"I'm serious. We've skimmed enough of the Sorhineth, but after what we felt at Jenalee's, I'm worried."

She got his full attention. "You know I'll protect you."

"I have no doubt, but this Destroyer is stronger than the two of us combined."

"What?"

She shrugged, a graceful move of her shoulders that shifted her blonde hair around her like a cloud. "I'm not sure why I get that impression. It's not like I'm schooled in this whole lore thing either. It's just something I feel, especially after Jenalee's place. I don't suppose there's anyone here in San Francisco who can help us?"

Her statement was a cold dash of water on his ardor. He'd never really considered exactly what to do with the Sorhineth once he got his hands on it, but now he knew exactly who to go to. "Yeah, I have someone in mind."

"And who might this someone be?"

"Claire Galliardi." He saw the miffed expression that crossed Brenna's face at the mention of another woman and hastened to qualify his statement, even as it warmed him inside. She was jealous, maybe only just a little bit, but it was a start. The woman was going to be a handful—one he was looking forward to ... handling. "She takes care of our IDs now, took on the job from her father. If anyone knows about the history of the Terrans, she will, especially since she's a Keeper herself. She's also someone I trust implicitly. If you'll remember, I mentioned her briefly in Boston."

Brenna appeared mildly mollified. "That's right. So much has happened since then I forgot. But why do you need IDs? Can't you just get the usual?"

Donovan shifted. There were obviously many things they needed to learn about each other. "Do you have any idea how old I am?"

She frowned. "No. I assumed you were close to my age, maybe a bit older. I don't know, thirty?"

He laughed, but took care to make it gentle, not mocking. "Your grandmother never wrote about our aging qualities?"

"No."

Now her tone was short, and he wondered if she thought he'd been laughing at her. So he chose his words with care. "Terrans are longer-lived than humans, and because of that, have a need to recreate themselves every twenty or thirty years to blend into the population. While I may appear to be in my late twenties, I was, in fact, born in 1900."

"You're shitting me. You're eighty-nine?" She barely held onto her chopsticks.

"Yes. I was but a babe when the first big earthquake hit this city, and my parents were instrumental in bringing the city back to its original glory."

"So, ah, how long do you usually live? Do you ever show your age?" The questions came out rapid-fire now that he'd piqued her interest.

He smiled. "Most Terrans live to be a hundred and fifty or so, but we begin to age equally with humans in our sixties. Therefore, while I look twenty-nine now, I'll age just as you do for the rest of my lifetime."

She digested his statement slowly. "So your parents..."

"Look to be in their early sixties, though each are decades over one hundred."

"So that's why," Brenna mused.

"Why what?"

"Why no Terran has visited my family in over a century. They forgot about us."

Donovan dipped his head in acknowledgement. "And KOTE was perfectly happy in building a power and financial base after the 1906 earthquake. Now, they don't care for anything but the money and prestige anymore."

"And this Claire?"

"She was raised at her father's knee, and knows every Terran in the region, in addition to having a pretty significant library. There are more sects scattered across the world, but from what I've heard, when it comes to Terrans we're it in America. Why mess with success?"

* * * *

Brenna leaned back on her hands and considered him over the cardboard cartons and still-steaming food.

Who was this man, this Terran, who had lived through almost a century of American and world politics and news? Had he also lived a lifetime of love? Why did she care?

For the first time the chasm of their cultures really yawned before her. The Terran intrigue she'd worried about before was now so small as to be insignificant. She shook herself inwardly. She'd enjoy her time with Donovan Callahan and then return to her semi-normal family back in Boston, her semi-normal life as head librarian, and look for more with a man who was of the *same freakin' species*.

Chapter Six

Claire Galliardi was a gamine pixie, looking more like a sweet sixteen than the octogenarian she probably was. And any reservations Brenna might have had about "sharing" Donovan was quickly dispelled as the Terran scampered over to the man in question and gave him a wet kiss on the cheek, then drew Brenna into a hug.

"The Warden! This is so exciting!" She was a ray of sunshine in the dark, now foggy night. Brenna warmed to her instantly, for she sensed no malice, simply curiosity.

Claire's house was as plain as Donovan's, at least in the dark of night, and Brenna supposed it made sense, if she made a living at falsifying documents. Pounding rock music pulsed from the monster speakers towering in each corner, decorating the air in notes that were almost visible. Metallica's *Enter Sandman*. How appropriate.

They'd ditched the Jag, driving into the city in Donovan's simple Ford pickup instead. From his house to his truck to his actions, Donovan was exactly the opposite of everything she'd been led to believe by her family.

She'd discovered once Donovan's mind was engaged on a subject, he was damn near unstoppable. Right now his subject of choice was finding out more about Terrans, specifically the Destroyers. She should have expected it, with that marvelous brain, but he continued to surprise her at every turn.

"I'm more worried about the Destroyers than how cool it is we've found the Warden." Donovan answered Claire with a straight face, but his eyes sparked with humor.

"Of course." Claire whirled, heading to a conspicuously blank wall. With a few muttered words and a quick flash of her hands, the "wall" dissolved, revealing a passageway into a hidden room. "Come on in."

Brenna goggled at the display of power, and Donovan leaned in, whispering "Air Keeper" in her ear. Now that made sense, given what she'd discovered over the last few days from both Donovan and the journal. Regardless of what she'd learned, it was still freakin' cool.

Donovan had been right; Claire was true, even if she was connected to KOTE at a higher level. There was an air of rightness about her which made handing the Sorhineith to her seem perfect. So she did, careful to keep a wary eye on the precious tome, regardless of what her gut was telling her. In the tiny house, keeping her within nine feet wasn't a problem.

They followed her into a room crowded by books and bustling with high-tech equipment. Brenna's mouth watered as she coveted the books, all obviously old beyond imagining. This made her reference library in Boston look like a bookmobile. When she reached out a hand to touch, Claire stopped her in mid-motion. "Hold on a sec, they're all bespelled."

Brenna snatched her hand back, moving only after the Terran mouthed a few indecipherable words and then gestured her forward.

"Normally I don't let anyone touch my books, but since you brought me this," Claire ran loving fingers over the Sorhineth, "I figure it's tit for tat."

Brenna laughed and pulled out a slim tome entitled, *A Compendium of Species, 1600 to Present*. Intrigued, she flipped open the fragile cover and stifled a gasp. Surely this couldn't be true...

Donovan had settled into an armchair and was watching her with an inscrutable expression.

"Is this right?" she asked, running a finger carefully down the index, calling out the names she recognized. "Banshees, changelings, demons, dragons, fairies, incubi, djinni, vampires, werewolves, witches ... so many more."

"Oh yeah," Claire chirped, "but we don't see too many of them. We've left each other alone for a long time, and since KOTE became insular back in the thirties, after Black Monday, I doubt they've even contacted us."

"But ... dragons?" This was almost too bizarre to fathom.

"Last I heard there was a clutch in northern Montana and southern Canada, but they keep to themselves for obvious reasons." Claire's voice was distracted now as she began to pore over the Sorhineth. "I'm pretty sure there's a sect of demons down in L.A., though, if you're interested."

"Ah, no. I think I'll pass on that one." Brenna glanced at Donovan, who'd stood and stepped forward.

"Get comfortable, *Ihiannan*. We're likely to be here for a bit."

Claire's head came up sharply at his use of the Gaelic word, and she shot Donovan a questioning glance. He shrugged and pushed Brenna down into the chair.

Brenna eyed him mutinously. He'd tell her what the word meant ... tonight.

Their host dropped her head back to the Sorhineth, mumbling something that sounded suspiciously like, "Dad would have *loved* this," before immersing herself once again.

* * * *

An hour later, Donovan covered a sleeping Brenna with a blanket, carefully tucking it in around her body. When he straightened, Claire regarded him with a measuring gaze.

"Your mate?"

His chest swelled with pride and ownership. "Yeah." As if something this monumental could be summed up in one word.

"What about Jenalee?"

"What about her? It's never been more than friendship with a little sex on the side."

Claire hummed. "Let's just hope she thinks the same. You know how she gets when she's pissy."

"Please, she's down in Mexico with Mark right now, probably screwing his brains out. Jenalee is what she is, and the whole crew has always known it."

"Maybe, but just be careful."

Donovan narrowed his eyes. "Why?"

"Because she's powerful as shit, that's why. She hides it behind a ditzy 'star' front, but it's there. You need to

remember she's one hell of an actress, she always has been. She's recreated herself several times since television became a staple and still pulled it off." She paused, tapping a finger on her chin. "So ... your Warden doesn't know yet?"

"Like you're one to talk about the airhead act. As for Brenna, I'm trying to figure out how to break it to her. She's not a woman who'd just blindly accept something like being mated, especially to me. I get the impression she's not all that thrilled with Terrans as a whole, and I can't say as I blame her."

"Based on what I've seen and sensed, you're right. Tread carefully, Donovan, otherwise you might lose both of them. Are you ready for a full-scale bonding?"

Donovan nodded, even as he wondered if she wasn't right about both. "I intend to keep what's mine." He dropped into the armchair. "So what have you learned? And don't tell me about the Destroyers being Terran, we already figured it out. It was not a bright spot in my day."

She sighed. "I'm not surprised you didn't know ... it's not something we brag up. Heck, I've never even met one that I know of, and you'd figure I would, considering my job. Just be very careful with any Terran right now, since we can't tell the difference."

"But we can, or at least Brenna and I can. When I went into her place I felt something 'off', but I really recognized it at Jenalee's."

Claire ran a hand through her short, spiky hair. "Now that's interesting. Maybe it's a Protector and Warden thing, or maybe Destroyers can shield themselves. It's nice to know

you can sense them. It'll be a help, if nothing else. And perhaps the Sorhineth and Brenna's journal will give us insight we've lost over the last hundred years or so."

Donovan grunted. "We can only hope. So what does the Sorhineth say?"

"I wish I could hang onto this forever, but I understand why our ancestors bespelled it as they did. It's quite simply *everything*. Their use of a fading spell was ingenious, and tying it to the Warden bloodline even more so."

"Explain."

"Everything you ever wanted to know about the Terran race is in here. Our history, spells and incantations for all the Elementals, the Protectors, hell, even the schism that led to the Destroyer uprising. And I've barely scratched the surface. I could spend the rest of my life studying it and still never come close to figuring it out." She met his eyes. "The reappearance of the Sorhineth is dangerous, Donovan. Maybe the most dangerous thing to hit us in centuries."

Donovan steepled his fingers beneath his chin and considered his friend. "You're the smartest Terran I've ever known, Claire, so I'll take your word for it. I started this wanting to do something about our direction more than anything else, but with a Destroyer on the prowl, with Brenna and Jenalee in his sights, what do I do now?"

"Don't say a damn word. KOTE would have a shit fit if they knew you were back. You'd already have been 'detained' if they knew. You've been assuming all along Jenalee got her information from KOTE, but what if it's someone else entirely? Something else is going on here, but I'm not sure what. The

Destroyer who broke into Brenna's could have been a lone gunman, or maybe someone who's partnered up, but if it was more than that, KOTE would have heard about it, and I don't see them being meek about bringing the Sorhineth home. It's too big, benefits the organization too much. We're missing a major piece of the puzzle, and until Jenalee remembers who told her about Brenna, we're going to keep missing it. Your getting here so fast gives us a bit of breathing room, so we're safe for the time being. Or at least I think we are. Give me a few more hours and I'll dig out a protection spell we haven't used in ages, then we'll figure it out from there."

"And you're sure KOTE doesn't have anything to do with this?" He tried to disguise the concern in his voice, but knew he didn't do a very good job. This was Claire after all, and she'd always been able to read him like a book.

"I'm sure. I would have heard something. They trust me, Donovan, but that doesn't mean we don't watch our backs. Especially since a Warden and a Destroyer came into the picture at the same time. I don't like it. Even if there's no connection to KOTE, I don't like it at all."

* * * *

Claire was as good as her word, and at three a.m. had more than a protection spell. She'd uncovered a wham-bam binding incantation which would stop any Terran, good or bad, in their tracks and a deflection spell that would toss whatever his opponent threw right back at him. Or at least so the Sorhineth claimed.

Donovan practiced them time and again, since protection-based magic was his forte, not the binding type.

"Are you sure you don't want to move into my place for a while?" Donovan said, holding the book against his chest—the first time he'd really touched it—and tried to ignore the strange warmth surrounding him the moment he picked it up. It was a totally foreign sensation, and one he wasn't entirely comfortable with.

"Not yet. You and Brenna need at least tonight to bond, as well as get some sleep." She grinned a bit lasciviously. "You'll be safe until morning, especially with the spells. I'll swing by then, and you won't be able to get rid of me. Now go wake up your mate, get some sleep and I'll see you tomorrow morning."

* * * *

Brenna awoke groggy, out of place. Donovan's handsome face hovered above hers, and her lips tingled from his kiss.

"C'mon sleepyhead, time to go home."

She sat up slowly, curving into the crook of his arm. "How long was I out?"

"Only a few hours. Claire needs to get some sack time and her spare room isn't exactly fit for a sleepover."

"Mmmm, 'kay," she mumbled and allowed him to help her out of the house and into the truck. She must have dropped off, because when she awoke again they were parked in his driveway and she was cradled in his arms, head tucked against his shoulder.

"Lemme down, I can walk," she protested, but actually felt fine where she was.

"Hush, I've got you." And then they were inside and he was padding down the long hallway into his bedroom. He laid her down on the bed and took off her shoes, his fingers kneading her arches.

She lay there in dreamy lassitude until he straightened and stood beside her.

"Get comfortable, *Ihiannan* and I'll see you in the morning." He leaned down and pressed a lingering kiss to her lips, then left the room, closing the door quietly behind him.

Brenna lay there in stunned silence, wondering what the hell had just happened. Was she imagining it, or had he just blown her off? It didn't matter she hadn't been in the mood for a sexual encounter, she was pissed that Donovan hadn't adhered to what she'd considered a sexual bond. Had she misunderstood their unspoken pact of enjoying their time together? Or had her standoffishness earlier caused him to back off? And why, after watching him with Claire tonight, did she see him more as a man and less as a Terran?

She didn't question what drove her, but acceded to the magic they had created last night and rose from his bed, walking in bare feet into the living room.

Donovan sat on the couch, clad only in jeans, head in his hands.

She faltered a step as waves of emotion flowed off him, battering her. Love. Worry. Frustration.

She held up a hand as if to stave the turbulent sensation off. What had happened while she slept? This was a Donovan

Callahan she hadn't seen before, brooding, damaged, but hiding it well. How many more facets were there to the man?

"Donovan?" As soon as she uttered the word she realized it was the first time she'd called him by his given name, even though she'd been thinking of him that way since long before last night. When had she let him slip past her defenses?

He started and lifted his head. His hair was corkscrewed from where he'd run his hands through it.

"What's wrong?" his voice was rough with something...

"Nothing ... I..." She stopped, not sure what to say. Maybe he didn't want her anymore, now he was home. Maybe Jenalee was more his style, his protestations notwithstanding. Her fleeting thought was banished as quickly as it came, because she could feel him trying to shut his emotions away from her. And in that moment, she wanted to feel everything he did, know what was inside his head as he sat there looking grouchily vulnerable.

"Don't do that."

"What?"

"Shield yourself. What happened tonight?"

"Nothing. Go to bed, Brenna. We'll talk in the morning."

His voice sounded distant, almost vacant.

Oh no. He was *not* brushing her off. She propped a hand on her hip. "We'll talk *now*." She'd been feeling all kinds of weird shit since last night, and she'd be damned if he blew them off now.

He sighed and pushed up from the sofa, the muscles in his arms and chest rolling fluidly. The sight made her mouth go dry.

Focus, she reminded herself as he looked her over critically, obviously deciding how to play it. Then he nodded, his decision made.

"Fine. Do you want a drink? 'Cause I could sure use one."

"Whatever you're having." Brenna pushed aside a candle, a framed picture of two Terrans who were obviously his parents and a photo album and sat down on the coffee table.

"Here." A drink was pressed into her hand, and then Donovan was pacing behind the couch.

Brenna lifted the glass to her lips, not so surprised to find Scotch, and downed it with one swallow, watching as Donovan did the same.

"Spill, Terran."

"It's complicated."

She snorted. "Yeah, like my life has been simple the past few days. Try again."

"The Sorhineth is dangerous."

"Duh. I figured that one out on my own, thank you very much. Having my house trashed kinda gave me a clue." No way she'd let him go so easily. Something was bothering him, something other than the Sorhineth.

He whirled and strode to her, grasping her shoulders in a firm yet gentle grip. "More dangerous than that."

"What could possibly be scarier than a Destroyer?"

"KOTE, or whoever is on our asses."

"Riiiiight." If he wasn't so earnest in his warning, she would have laughed.

"I mean it, Brenna. The Sorhineth has more power than we ever conceived. And I can guarantee if KOTE knew about it,

they would do whatever it took to either retrieve it or make it go away forever."

Brenna looked up into his eyes, and they were so damned earnest it shook her a little. Maybe a lot. "Okay, say I'm buying this, and I'm not ... totally. Why does it have to be KOTE? Last time I looked, they were more interested in self-preservation. I haven't seen a Terran—besides you and Claire—willing to lift a finger as long as I can remember, let alone fly someone out to Boston to rough me up. Yeah, the Sorhineth is powerful as shit, but all they had to do was ask."

His fingers caressed her shoulders. "Claire seems to think it's a Terran faction of some kind, not the whole organization."

"See, so maybe I'm right. 'Cause if I'm not, an organization as big and well-connected as KOTE can pretty much do what they want with any of us."

Donovan nodded. "That's why I'm so worried. With Mark, Jenalee is fine. But us, with the Sorhineth ... If Claire hadn't given me a damn near impenetrable shielding spell, we wouldn't be here right now. We'd be on the road, heading to Mexico."

Brenna shuddered, then made the mental effort to reach up and run her hands along his forearms. "I don't much fancy running and hiding, Donovan, and I don't think you do either." The statement took more from her than she'd ever imagined, yet empowered her in a strange way. Set her free. She was accepting this responsibility, even if it killed her.

He sank down onto the couch, leaned forward and pressed his forehead against hers. "You're right, but there's so much

at stake now. I started something by contacting you that won't easily be stopped."

The brutal honesty of his response disarmed her. What could she possibly say to contradict or soothe him? Nothing. "What else did Claire say?"

"She's scared, and I don't blame her. It's going to take years, maybe decades of study before we begin to understand the Sorhineth again. I don't think we've got that kind of time."

"Why? Has something else happened with the Destroyer?"

He lifted his hands and cradled her face, thumbs brushing over her cheekbones. "No, but it's like I can hear a clock ticking, feel it winding down."

Brenna covered his hands with hers. "Will anything happen for the rest of the night?"

"Not that I can tell, but..."

"Then I suggest we make the most of it and get some sleep."

He smiled. The effect on her was devastating. How could he have come to matter this much after a few short days?

"Isn't that what I was trying to get you to do before?" His voice was low, rumbling through her.

"Yeah, but after what you just said, I want you next to me."

"Huh. I didn't think you were interested anymore."

Now that was the response of a wounded male, and one she could deal with.

She laughed. "Oh, I'm interested. Just not easy. Well, not most of the time," she qualified.

Redemption
by Keira Ramsay

Donovan feathered a kiss over her eyebrow. "Easy is never a word I'd ascribe to you, Brenna Kennedy. Now let's go to bed."

* * * *

What they did when they hit the sheets was the very last thing Brenna expected. Donovan spooned her from behind, draped an arm over her waist, and fell asleep with his breath tickling her ear.

What in the hell?

She was thinking the same thing when she awoke the next morning to a full-scale shouting match coming from the living room.

Chapter Seven

"How in the hell did she get past you, Mark?"

A human stood in front of Donovan, belligerent and defensive. Handsome, in a laid-back California surfer way, he was still a match for Donovan or her brothers, big, muscular and lithe as a cat.

"You know how she is, when she wants to go, she goes. She said not to worry about her, she'd see you soon."

"Hopefully it's not in a fucking body bag," Donovan snarled, the lines in his body tautening with rage. His hands fisted, then unclenched. For the first time Brenna saw the very real possibility of cruelty and outright fury she'd only guessed at before. It scared her a little, even as she moved into the living room for a better look.

"Jenalee said you'd be like this."

"What in the hell is that supposed to mean?"

"She said the Sorhineth would change you, and she's right. You were never this mad about her bailing before."

"Because we never had a fucking *Destroyer* on our asses before, you idiot."

"Am I interrupting something?" Brenna's purposefully amused, trying-to-calm-the-waters voice sliced the thick air between the two men.

Mark turned slowly, as if reluctant to put a face to the Warden title. When he finally saw her, he blanched and took an involuntary step back. He lowered his head, mumbling "Warden," in a humbled tone.

Donovan shot Brenna a surprised look and she could almost read his mind. Mark would go toe-to-toe with him and then play submissive for her?

"What in the hell is wrong with you?" Donovan's voice was rough. Mark kept his head down, and Donovan reached out and shook him. "Look at me."

When Mark met his eyes, even Brenna could see he was scared, bone deep. "What?" Donovan questioned quietly, shooing Brenna a few feet further away.

"How can you look at her?"

"What are you talking about?" Donovan locked eyes with Brenna, and he looked just as confused as she felt.

"She's brilliant."

Brenna laughed, attempting to defuse the situation again. "Hey, I like being as smart as the next gal, but brilliant?"

"Not that kind of bright," Mark replied, his gaze now fixed on the living room window. "You glow so much it hurts me, physically, to look at you."

"Huh? She was just fine last night with..."

"You, I was just fine with you," she broke in. Something was wrong with Mark, and she didn't even know the man yet. Something was fundamentally broken.

She pulled in a deep breath and detected the putrid scent buried deep beyond his innate masculinity. He was tainted by the Destroyer. But how tainted? And how to play this?

Really, there was only one way.

"You reek of Destroyer. Have you come here to kill us and take the Sorhineth?"

Both men turned shocked eyes to her, Mark immediately lowering his gaze with a grimace.

Brenna's heart thundered in her chest as she waited for his answer ... and Donovan's response.

"What's she talking about, Mark?"

"I have no idea." Now his friend sounded pissed.

"Brenna?"

"I'm telling you, he's got Destroyer all over him."

Mark turned toward her, but kept his head lowered. "Truly, Warden, I don't know what you're talking about."

"Could it be a residual from Jenalee's apartment?" Donovan asked.

"Hell, I don't know. Remember? I'm just as lost in this as you are. All I know is what I sense." Brenna tried to keep the frustration out of her voice, really she did, but she ended up sounding pissy and defensive. Not a combination she cared for.

"Don't doubt her, Donovan." They all swung toward the new voice coming from the doorway.

"Where have you been?" Mark's tone was accusatory, and in that instant Brenna knew he was speaking as a wounded lover, not a pissed bodyguard. In the same instant she tasted the evil coming off Jenalee. It coated the back of her throat like oil, making her gag.

Even Donovan took a step back as the force of Jenalee's malevolence pulsed into the room like a hurricane.

"Hand it over."

Brenna stared at the gorgeous woman framed by the morning light. She looked innocent, young, vibrant. Like

every picture Brenna'd ever seen. Voluminous robes swirled around her, failing to hide an ultra-feminine body. And beneath it all she oozed malice.

"What are you talking about?" Donovan stalled and sidled in front of Brenna, protecting her with his body, leaving Mark to stand alone.

"Don't think you can shield your Warden. I have more power than you can ever fathom. Mark, come here."

Mark looked at her as if she'd lost her mind. "I don't understand."

"*She's the Destroyer.*" Donovan spoke quietly, his voice stoic.

Brenna knew he had to be hurting, but she'd deal with his pain after they vanquished the bitch. She pushed past Donovan to stand next to him.

Jenalee's voice was terrifyingly matter-of-fact. "No, I'm Terran, but better, stronger than you because I've embraced what I truly am. Now give me the damn book."

"I don't think so," Donovan replied coldly.

Donovan stiffened next to her, readying himself for battle. Brenna frantically searched her mind for something, anything to prevent the impending bloodshed.

Jenalee sighed, real sorrow in her tone. "Why can't you make things easy, just once? We could have been something together, Donovan, if you'd given up these foolish dreams of 'fixing things.' If I'd known of your nature from the beginning ... It should have been me you gave your heart to. For that, your woman will suffer." She stepped forward over the threshold, her attention shifting to Brenna with a hate-filled

glance before her gaze swung back to Donovan. "You just had to go off to war and become a Protector, rather than the Earth Elemental you were fated to be. And I had to ally myself with someone who is second-best. We could have been something," she repeated, then began to chant, the words flowing off her tongue in the lilting voice which had made her famous.

But Donovan countered her, reciting a spell Brenna felt pricking across her skin, and their energy met, clashing in the middle of the room, filling the small space with a force so palpable it was almost visible.

Mark stood frozen off to the side, and Brenna knew there'd be no help from him.

As Donovan and Jenalee continued flinging words and energy at each other, Brenna did the only thing she could think of—something physical.

She sprinted forward, covering the power-charged living room in seconds and threw a roundhouse punch straight at Jenalee's perfect face. Her blow landed, and she felt the sickening crunch of cartilage under her fist as the Destroyer's nose crumpled.

Jenalee shrieked and grabbed Brenna by the throat, lifting her off her feet in an impossible show of strength. Brenna choked as the Destroyer's fingers dug into her neck, cutting off her breath. She kicked, punched, anything to lessen the Terran's hold, using everything her brothers had ever taught her. Her blows landed, but had no effect. Black spots danced before her eyes, and she felt herself fading.

She barely heard Donovan's roar of fury, and then she was flung down, collapsing into a boneless heap. She struggled to pull air into her lungs as Donovan roared in Gaelic ... something warm rained down on her ... coppery ... thick ... blood. Then she was being lifted, cradled in a pair of strong arms. She forced her eyes open to Donovan's frantic murmurs of "*Lhiannan*, don't leave me, *lhiannan*. Hang in there, baby. Please hang in there."

"Fine," she croaked, her throat raw with fledgling bruises. "Just need to get my breath. Put me down."

Donovan set her on her feet gently, concern and barely muted rage contorting his handsome face.

She turned in his arms, gasping at the ruined body sprawled gracelessly on the carpet.

A great, gaping hole cratered Jenalee's chest, revealing her weakly beating heart.

"What did you do?" Brenna's stomach clenched, heaved at the combined smell of death and evil, and it took what little spirit she had left to keep from barfing.

"Nothing. Something. Hell ... I used the deflection spell Claire taught me last night and it came back on her. She was trying to rip my heart out," Donovan replied, his voice low and tortured. "The binding spell wasn't working."

But now it was, holding the Destroyer and Mark in thrall.

"Release them; she's dying."

"I know, but..."

"No buts. Maybe she'll tell us something. Donovan, we need to know." Her voice was hoarse, and speaking hurt like hell, but it had to be said. She knew the pain lancing through

her body had to be miniscule to the agony of betrayal coursing through Donovan.

He wavered, so she poked him in the ribs with her elbow. Hard.

"All right." His agreement was grudgingly, almost angrily given. He lifted the enchantment with a wave of his hand.

Mark stumbled forward, then pulled himself back, terror and revulsion clear on his face.

Brenna's hand went to her throat as Jenalee began to speak.

"Fools," she hissed through her pain, her eyes bright with agony and pure hate. "You have vanquished the evil you know, but you remain blind to who and what we *really* are. Your true nature won't be enough, can never be enough. The Sorhineth will be ours, no matter what was Seen." With those ominous, veiled words she was dead.

* * * *

"Jesus, Donovan."

It was at least the fifth time Mark had uttered those particular words, and Donovan wanted to smack him. He was shocky as hell himself, and didn't need someone whose loyalty was seriously in question annoying the crap out of him. Brenna was his biggest concern, closely followed by what the hell he was going to do with Jenalee's body.

Her body. Pain knifed through him as he considered what he'd done to his best friend in order to save his woman. The fact Jenalee had tried to kill them both didn't lessen the shame or agony one little bit. He'd never harmed a woman

before, even in self-defense. Killing one was something he still couldn't quite comprehend. And her treachery wasn't just bitter, it gnawed at his confidence like a hungry rat. How could he have been so wrong? How could he not have seen through her deceit? Eighty-five years he'd spent with her, trusted her with his secrets, his insecurities, his victories, his nightmares. Over half a Terran lifetime of trust, of covering each other's asses, of shared family meals, of hot, passionate sex. The utter betrayal of his friendship, of his love, raked at his heart, his soul.

And worse than all of those things was the remembered sight of her fingers digging into Brenna's throat, the utter rage and bestiality it had brought out in him. The concept he could have lost his mate over something *he* had begun doused his feelings of betrayal like a cold dash of water. It was those emotions that had made him finally break.

"Enough already!" His voice snapped through the room. "I'm going to call Claire and get her over here now. She's more in touch with KOTE than any of us."

"And I need to talk to Terry." Brenna's voice was weary, cracked with emotion.

Donovan's gut clenched. He should be the one handling this, not a brother three thousand miles away. It was yet another blow in a day fraught with them. But knowing Brenna, she had a reason. "Are you sure it's wise?"

"We're a family of Wardens first. His being a cop is secondary. He'll know what to do."

Yeah, she'd had a reason all right, but it rankled that she had the connections to make something happen, and not him. Apparently she could see his pique.

"We've been waiting for this for a long, long time. Even if we didn't have the practical knowledge, did you think we hadn't thought of what to do physically?"

"Facing down a Destroyer in my living room? No."

That brought a strained smile. "No. Disposing of a body."

Mark was finally able to find his voice for something other than whining. "What do you mean, disposing of a body? This is Jenalee! It's not like she can just disappear and no one will notice."

"Does anyone know you came back from Mexico?"

Donovan made his voice dangerously low. He needed Mark with them on this, otherwise he'd have to ... The concept didn't bear finishing. He'd thought he was through with carnage and death when he'd left Cambodia. Thought he'd started a new life back in the City which wasn't as ugly. Loma Prieta had changed that, and now the effect was snowballing.

Brenna spoke to her brother over the phone, glancing back and forth between him and Mark.

"No, no one knows but us," Mark conceded, a glimmer of something resembling coherence starting to show.

"And Claire, in just a minute. Let's keep it that way."

Donovan pressed on. He wanted, needed, to do something, anything. "I need to know who Jenalee was in contact with before she disappeared on you."

Mark nodded, a short dip of his head. "No one in particular, just the usual folks, at least as far as I know." He gulped

reflexively, then mumbled, "Excuse me, I think I'm going to be..." He fled down the hallway into the bathroom, slamming the door behind him.

Donovan steeled himself and flicked a glance at Jenalee's ruined body. He didn't blame Mark one bit. He picked up Brenna's mobile phone and dialed Claire.

"I've got a small problem here. I need you."

"On my way."

He disconnected and walked to Brenna, studiously avoiding the sight of Jenalee's corpse again and the splatter of blood now decorating his living room.

His Warden looked at him through eyes much calmer than either his or Mark's. Maybe growing up with four hellraising brothers had equipped her for this, but even that was a stretch.

"Gotcha, Terry. Thanks, and I'll call you as soon as it's done." She cradled the phone. "I can't believe I didn't think of this, but..." she waved her hand in the direction of Jenalee, "I was, um, scattered. He says we need to check the Sorhineth for something addressing stasis of some kind."

"Terry said this? The cop." Donovan tried to hold his incredulity at bay, but didn't succeed. He could understand neither of them thinking of it, but Terry?

"Yeah, remember, engineering degree? Even if we couldn't read the Sorhineth, he figured something would be in there addressing this ... situation."

He nodded. "Claire's on her way. Now let me see your neck. Are you okay?"

She laughed, and it sounded brittle. Maybe she wasn't taking this as well as she appeared.

"As okay as I can be." Her hands crept to her throat, and he stepped forward, pulled them down and traced the deepening blue marks with his fingertips.

"Gods, Brenna, I'm so sorry." His fingers coasted over her neck, her jaw, up to trace her cheekbones. He needed the feel of her skin to ensure she really was in one piece, that she'd survived Jenalee's attack relatively unscathed.

She shuddered beneath his touch and stepped into his arms.

"Not your fault. She surprised us all."

"I should have known, should have sensed it. Jesus, Brenna, I grew up with her, made love to her. How could I have missed it? Especially when I felt it as soon as she walked through the door."

"Because she was damned good, that's why." Mark walked from the bathroom swiping a hand against his mouth. "She played us against each other for a long time, so when you decided to go haring off after the Sorhineth, I believed every word she said about it being a fool's errand, and that you were losing it. She liked to pretend she could slip away, but I always knew where she went. The warning flags should have gone up when I couldn't find her a few days ago, but they didn't."

"My biggest question is why Donovan didn't sense her ... I dunno ... Destroyerness, at her apartment before. She was obviously adept at hiding it most of the time, but her place was so thick with it..."

"We never went to her place. Always one of ours or whatever hotel we happened to be staying at. Julian was the one who told us about her apartment being trashed..." Mark answered, his words trailing off as their implication hit him.

"Julian," Donovan whispered, his voice gone icy with fury.
"Yeah."

Mark's tone was quiet, reflective, and downright deadly. If Donovan had any question before about his allegiance, it was gone now, and what a surge of relief it brought. Mark had been fooled just as completely as he had. He needed to have people, be they Terran or human, around him whom he trusted. And now he needed to extract from Julian what Donovan had been unable and unwilling to wrench from Jenalee.

"So it was her sanctuary, her safe place," Brenna reflected.

Donovan knew she was far too perceptive to have missed their unspoken condemnation of Julian as a Destroyer at most, a pawn, at the least, so she must be ignoring it. Her next words confirmed it, as she attempted to console her fellow human.

"She must have bespelled you, Mark. That's why looking at me hurts ... her Destroyer magic doesn't mesh well with the Sorhineth." She paused as a new idea formed. "The Sorhineth. That how and why Donovan can feel the Destroyers now. It's acting like a tuning fork, picking up vibrations of evil ... whether they're off Mark's enchantment or off a Destroyer's menace."

"Shit, Donovan." A new voice spoke, and they all spun to see Claire standing in the doorway, mouth open in shock. "What in the hell have you gotten yourself into?"

* * * *

Giving Claire the lowdown took less time than Donovan would have imagined. The young woman tapped her beringed fingers on the kitchen tabletop for long moments after he'd finished.

"She tried to kill Brenna?"

Donovan watched Brenna touch the bruises on her throat with trembling fingers and felt that blinding rage again. He pushed it down and answered as calmly as he could. "No doubt about it."

"Then she obviously didn't know she needed Brenna to read the Sorhineth." When Donovan and Brenna began to speak, she raised her hand to stop them. "Like the Destroyers, it's not common knowledge to the general Terran populace. Hell, I didn't even know until last night. But there's more to it than that. I need to think more. Something's wrong."

"You mean more wrong than my best friend lying out in the living room with her freakin' heart showing? Oh, and the pretty damn sure likelihood one of my own men is a Destroyer as well?"

"Yeah, exactly that. Get me the Sorhineth. I'll think on it while we figure out what in the hell to do with her. Ah, maybe it would be best if we got her out of your living room."

Donovan pasted a stoic expression on his face. Taking care of Jenalee's remains had to be their first priority. Julian's treachery could wait ... but not for long. "Mark, some help here?"

I can do this, I can do this, I can do this. Donovan looped his hands beneath Jenalee's shoulders, lifting as Mark hoisted her legs. They backed into the spare room, placing her gently on the bed. Donovan closed her eyes with his fingertips, muttering a short prayer for her soul. Jenalee might have been the thing he most despised in death, but in life she'd been more than his best friend, she'd been a sweet reminder of an innocence he hadn't felt since the World War II.

An hour later—sixty minutes where Donovan had nothing more to do than obsess about the sight of Jenalee's fingers digging into Brenna's throat—Claire gave a shout of triumph.

"Got it! It's a stasis enchantment, one which gives us some time to figure out what to do, but will keep her body in the same condition, and better yet, hide it from prying eyes."

"Then do it." Donovan forced the words from his throat.

"Ah, you need to speak the incantation. It needs to come from a Protector."

"Fine." Donovan walked down the hallway, Claire at his side, Brenna and Mark a few paces behind. They stopped at the foot of the bed, each staring at Jenalee's devastated body for a moment, quiet in their own thoughts.

"What are the words?"

Claire gave them to him, her voice quiet but strong. He repeated them, hands clasped before him. When the last word left his lips, Jenalee faded from their sight. As if in

response to the spell, his key fob grew warm ... again, like he'd invoked something within it. And as with everything on this strange and wondrous trek, it struck him as a portent of doing the right thing, no matter how hard it might be.

Brenna sighed, a soft sough of sound, then turned to him and wrapped her arms around his waist, pulling his attention to her ... only her.

"I'm sorry, Donovan. I know she meant a lot to you."

He buried his face in her hair, inhaling deeply. "Yeah, she did, but not as much as you do."

She pulled back at that, her gaze darting to Mark and Claire before asking, "Huh?"

"I was scared to death back there." He paused, wondering if this was the right time and place, and then figured, what the hell? "You asked me what *lhiannan* meant. It means beloved, Brenna. You're my mate."

* * * *

Brenna stared at him in shock, warmth flooding through her even as her mind denied his words.

"That can't be right. I'm not Terran, I'm human." She shook her head furiously, heart pounding in counterpoint.

A small smile graced his lips. "Give it time, and you'll see I'm right."

"As much as I hate to break up this tender moment," Claire interrupted wryly, "we've got some serious things to think about here."

"Right." Donovan brushed a tendril of hair away from Brenna's face and stepped away. "Let's get some coffee and we'll figure out where we go from here."

They filed out of the bedroom toward the kitchen. Brenna walked in a daze as she thought about his words, heard Jenalee's when she'd said that Donovan shouldn't have given his heart to her.

Mate? There was no way. But even as she thought it, she couldn't help but revel in it the tiniest bit. It felt so right. Too right.

* * * *

"We need to hole up somewhere, at least for a few hours, just to figure out a plan." It felt good to be taking control again, something Donovan needed on a level bordering on desperation.

"Why? Jenalee was the Destroyer, and I know exactly where to find Julian." Mark had gone past shock and acceptance, and now his voice and attitude were bitter and vengeful.

"I have an idea what's going on, but we need to get out of here." Claire, on the other hand, was strong and positive of what she said.

"The Drake?" Mark looked to Donovan.

"Yeah, The Drake. Tony, the manager," Donovan qualified for Brenna and Claire, "will hook us up ... and Julian's never been there."

* * * *

"Are you sure this is safe?" Brenna asked as they pulled the Jag into the parking garage. She'd spent the majority of the drive over thinking of Donovan's words and what, if anything, she should do about them. While she was perfectly happy in sexing the hell out of Donovan Callahan, she wasn't looking for hearts and flowers, wedding bells and children. At least not right now. And certainly not with a Terran. No matter how much she'd revised her opinion of Donovan over the last few days after watching Jenalee's death, she hadn't made the same leap of faith when it came to Terrans in general. Death and destruction came too easily to them for her to stomach, even when it was forced ... or deserved.

How in the hell was she supposed to address a statement so monumental as "You're my mate"? She liked Donovan too much to tell him that all she wanted was a lot of between-the-sheets time. But she had to say something, didn't she?

Donovan cut her musings short by answering her question. "Yeah. Tony knows us, will think we're gonna be stashing Jenalee here at some point. We've done it before with her and some of our other clients. He understands the value of being quiet and won't do anything to jeopardize us. As long as we lie low, we'll be fine."

He cast her a sidelong glance which told her he was thinking about more than Jenalee, he was stewing over her complete silence on his declaration ... not of love, but that she was his mate. There was a big difference as far as she was concerned. Being mated wasn't something she was comfortable with ... when she said "I do", it would be with

someone she loved more than life itself, not because it was decreed.

As soon as they had a few moments alone, she'd talk to him, try to explain in a way that wouldn't hurt his feelings, especially after Jenalee's defection. She was just afraid there was no escaping the fact that he'd probably see her in the same light ... as someone who'd flushed his trust down the crapper.

"And them?" Brenna forced her mind back into the moment and nodded in the rearview mirror at Mark and Claire, who followed in Claire's car. The Sorhineth was carefully tucked away in one of Donovan's old backpacks, lying at her feet. "Will they be fine too?"

"I hope so," he replied quietly, and Brenna knew he was thinking of more than them, he was thinking of Jenalee. How must her betrayal of him sting? From what she'd seen and felt from him, it had to be a knife to his heart.

He ushered her through a side entrance, Mark and Claire joining them.

Rooms, hell, Brenna thought as Donovan unlocked a spacious center suite. Two doors flanked each side, connecting to bedrooms. It was odd the room didn't reek of Destroyer, but Jenalee obviously hadn't spent much time here.

Mark stepped to the princess phone near the wet bar and picked up the receiver, punching in a string of numbers. "Tony, Mark. Just wanted to give you a heads up that we're here. Cars are in the usual spot, normal precautions." He paused, nodding as the other man answered him. "Thanks,

man." He hung up and turned. "We're set. Carmella knows what to bring up food-wise, and will leave it here in the suite, so we just have to lie low when she shows."

Claire had settled into one of the two leather couches flanking the unlit fireplace. "Brenna, can I have the Sorhineth?"

Brenna slid the backpack off her shoulder and pulled the tome from within, handing it over as she sat down opposite. Donovan sunk into the plush leather next to her. He sat stiffly, his hands fisted on his thighs. His expression was stoic, except for the bunching of his jaw. She laid a hand over his, and curled her fingers into his palm. Even if she couldn't get her mind around the whole "mate" thing, she'd begun to think of him as her friend—a friend with benefits, yeah, but a friend nonetheless. And supporting each other was what friends did.

He'd been strong, showing almost no emotion throughout the day, no regret, no remorse, no fear. It was starting to tell on him. She'd learned enough about him over the past few days to know he'd hold it in for as long as possible, and when he let go it would be a freakin' mushroom cloud. She only hoped he could hold out until Claire said whatever it was she'd concluded.

The clink of ice on glass caught her attention, and she turned her head to see Mark pouring a stiff drink into a highball glass.

She smoothed her fingers down Donovan's arm, then stood and walked to the bar, laying a gentle hand on Mark's shoulder. He started, even though he'd been looking at her in

the reflection of the mirror. It seemed to be the only way he could meet her eye.

"I think we can all use one of those. I'll get the ice and glasses if you'll carry the bottle."

"Sure." His voice was strangled, and she knew there'd be more than one man losing it this day.

They worked their way back to the seating area and Brenna did the honors, pouring them all a glass of Scotch. She raised her glass. "Merry Christmas."

* * * *

They're here. Jenalee has yet to return and the Destroyer link between us has broken. What if the unspeakable has happened and both she and the Sorhineth are lost to me?

If the half-breed has true control of both the Sorhineth and his Warden, then the fate of the world may very well lie in his hands.

It's not something I can—or will—allow. I won't make Jenalee's obvious mistake and underestimate his power. All these years we've let him take the glory, let him run his business, and I'll be damned—or dead—if I let it go on one more day.

Chapter Eight

Brenna's quiet toast hit Donovan like a punch to the gut. Jesus. It was Christmas Day, and look how he and his friends had spent it. While the Terrans as a whole didn't necessarily believe in the ideology behind the holiday, they did enjoy celebrating it.

"Get out, both of you." It was an order, not a request.

"Pardon?" Mark's head popped up and he looked him straight in the eye.

"It's Christmas. Go home, to your families. Forget this mess ever happened."

His only reply was an unladylike snort from Claire.

He shifted forward, planted his forearms on his thighs, and stared at both of them. He might be responsible for tanking Brenna's Christmas all to hell, but Mark and Claire had done nothing but be unfortunate enough to call him friend.

Glowering didn't seem to be having much of an effect, and when Brenna reached up to massage his shoulders, he almost melted into a puddle on the floor.

She'd been studiously avoiding his eyes since he'd told her she was his mate, but had shown in other ways she cared ... brief, fleeting touches, twining her hand with his. He'd known she was too strong to simply accept something fate decreed, but he knew, from her actions, she felt something for him, and he'd do his damndest to turn that something into the kind of love he'd seen in both sets of their parents. But first...

"Listen, you didn't ask to get caught up in all this crap. No one knows what's happened, and no one needs to. Hell," he said, and could feel the proverbial light bulb going on above his head, "having the two of you missing pretty much implicates you as well, if Julian starts poking around. Either we part ways now so he doesn't know of your involvement, or we're stuck together for the duration because things could get even more dangerous. You need to behave normally."

"And we will, starting tomorrow," Claire stated calmly. "Right now, we're sharing Christmas with friends. And part of that is figuring out exactly what we're going to do."

Donovan sagged back against the couch. Claire had never listened to him, and it didn't look like tonight was going to be the start of something new. If he hadn't been so damned soul-tired, he would have pushed the issue, but right now all he wanted was a few moments peace of mind ... in safety. Some time to formulate a plan, because it was a certainty Julian would be coming for the Sorhineth.

"Fine. You're the closest thing we have to an expert on the Sorhineth. Where do we go from here?"

"I think the bigger question is what we're facing. This is kind of an out-there concept, but hear me out. You've been pretty much pissed off at everything Terran since you came back home but especially since October, and made it quite clear, right?"

Donovan nodded, wondering where she was going. His reasons for forming a tight little clique had never been public, but Claire was so damned perceptive she'd figured out something was off. She just hadn't known what.

"And Jenalee, who we now know was a Destroyer, conveniently gives you the location of the one thing you really need. Did you ever stop to wonder why?"

"Shit. You're right. I've been so busy thinking about what happened..." He'd never killed a woman before, and the fact it had been his childhood playmate and adult lover was something he still didn't want to really consider. Instead, he'd been appraising it tactically, wondering what he could have done differently. He could have cast a silence spell, but it would have been of little good with Brenna being strangled. As the vision played in his head, he felt a flash of fury again which he quickly tamped down. He needed a clear head for this. He'd done the right thing in deflecting Jenalee's spell right back at her. He had to keep thinking that, or go completely insane.

"As you should have. But Jenalee and I were never close, so I haven't had to deal with any of your emotion. She gave you the location of the Sorhineth because she wanted *you* to find it. She wanted *you* to bring it back to San Francisco and hand it over, pretty as you please."

"But my place..." Brenna protested.

"Probably she and Julian hedging their bets. Jenalee's 'abduction' had to be a diversion, nothing more."

"Who is this Julian you guys keep talking about?" Brenna sounded a bit exasperated, and Donovan was sorry he hadn't pressed the issue and explained the Terran's role in all this the moment he'd been mentioned back at his house.

"He's one of the Terrans who works for me, almost from the first day I started the company. Apparently he found a

better deal." Donovan didn't even try to hide the bitterness in his voice.

"Okay, so somehow he's involved, and Jenalee shows up at your house, expecting you to hand over the Sorhineth, but overheard me saying I could sense her taint on Mark, so shifted her tactics," Brenna concluded.

Damn, he'd known she was sharp, but this ... her cognitive abilities quite simply blew his mind. She was a good person to have on his team, mate or not.

"That's the way I see it," Claire agreed with a dip of her head.

"Hmmm, pretty seamless," Donovan conceded, running a hand through his hair. "But why me?"

"Because you trusted her unconditionally. But you told me she said something about 'your true nature.' I think, for some reason, in your hands, the Sorhineth becomes dangerous to them. And they didn't figure it out until after you'd already retrieved it."

"That's ridiculous. For God's sake, I'm a mixed breed, half Protector and half Earth Elemental. The power I hold is meager compared to full bloods." While he'd been many things in his life, delusional wasn't one of them. There were true beings of power within the Terrans, Claire being one of them, but he wasn't in their company. Claire was full of shit.

"And yet you defeated a full-blood Singer," Claire reminded him gently. "Singers' power is held within their words, and you destroyed her with yours. You are more than you ever anticipated, Donovan, fated to do something none of us can even comprehend. Jenalee said as much."

Donovan laughed it off. "I'll buy your hypothesis on Jenalee, but me being something special is just goofy."

He didn't miss the long look Brenna and Claire shared, but was too damned pissed to worry about it. Instead, he pressed on.

"So now we think we know why. What do we do? When I started this, I wanted to find some way to bring the Terrans back to being what we were meant to be, stewards of the earth. Now I don't know who to trust outside of this room, or where my priorities should be."

"You have the best instincts of anyone I've ever met." This came from Mark, who'd been conspicuously silent for their entire exchange. "What's your gut tell you?"

"To protect Brenna, my family, and you two, and to hell with the rest of it." The answer was so simple it startled him. "But what does that say about my noble goal to make things better?"

"Maybe this is the first step toward attaining that goal," Claire offered.

"Since when did you become a mystic?" Donovan tried to keep his words light, but knew his frustration was coming through. He wasn't very good at acting. Even planning beat the hell out of dissecting his life. If they went down that road, he really would lose it.

Claire laughed. "Just call me Obi-Wan, thank you very much. So here's what I think we should do. Let's order some lunch and figure out exactly what the Sorhineth says."

Donovan nodded. She was right ... about it all.

* * * *

Lunch was light fare, and more than any of them could really stomach. Mark hovered on the sidelines, obviously wondering what, if anything, he could do. If he would only look at her, Brenna would try to engage him in conversation of some sort. But he studiously avoided her gaze, as he had since this morning when he'd made his comment about her being brilliant. Brilliant. What a laugh.

With a sigh she turned her attention back to the journal. Donovan and Claire were hunched over the Sorhineth, muttering every now and then. Brenna supposed she should feel a bit put out over the fact the Sorhineth was obviously more Claire's forte than hers, but strangely she felt perfectly comfortable in handing over the precious tome to the pretty little Terran. Maybe it was the fact Claire's library was so impressive, but she thought it was more because the book seemed at home in the Terran's hands.

But more than that, the Sorhineth preyed on her mind. Something Jenalee had said, "settling for second best" made her think of this mysterious Julian. Was he the second-best she'd spoken of? And if so, what did it mean? Was she a complete idiot for not voicing these questions aloud?

Damn, all this inner thinking was making her head hurt. She turned her attention to the journal laid out before her. Anything had to be better than introspection. Her eyes skipped over her ancestor's spidery handwriting, then she lifted them to study Donovan. He'd laughed off his obvious power, downplaying his heritage and importance in what was happening, but he seemed to forget he had put it in motion.

Claire was right. There was something bigger going on here, and she had the feeling Donovan was the pivotal piece to the puzzle.

She dropped her gaze again. Maybe the journal held a clue.

* * * *

Forty minutes later she had it, but wasn't sure what to do with what she'd found. She excused herself for the ladies room, and pondered what she had read. As she washed her hands, she made her decision.

When she reentered the room, the tableau had changed very little. Donovan and Claire were still seated on the couch and Mark stood by the window, framed by the late afternoon light.

"I think I found something," she announced, and watched their heads whip up.

Donovan stood and walked to her, running a possessive hand over her shoulder and arm. "What did you find, *Ihiannan*?"

And damned if his words didn't give me a little girly shiver. What if I'm really his mate? Would being bound to a man like Donovan really be such a bad fate? Even if I don't love him? But that was a thought, and a discussion, for later when they were alone.

"Well, I'm sure it's in the Sorhineth, but you'll probably have to dig to find it. Anyway, the journal talks about a kind of special Terran called a Talisman. Does that ring a bell for any of you?"

All three shook their heads negatively.

"Well, these Talismans each represent a form of Elemental power, and apparently they're all vital to keeping the earth in balance when the shit hits the fan."

"So there are four of these Talismans, and since we've all become so complacent, we have no idea who they might be, or what to tell them if we ever do find them. Isn't that marvelous?" Donovan's voice was mocking and a hint bitter.

"Do you think KOTE knows?" Mark asked, breaking his silence.

Brenna mulled over the agonizing choice of correcting Donovan. There were *five* Talismans—Earth, Water, Air, Fire and *Spirit*. What she really wanted to know was what the "fruits of the earth" she'd read about related to. They were what indicated a Talisman who had been preordained.

Given everything that had happened, and a feeling deep in her gut, she was pretty sure the Spirit Talisman was standing in front of her, clueless and alpha as he could possibly be.

No matter how much Donovan had agonized and even waffled since Jenalee's death a few short hours ago, she thought she knew the reason. As a Protector, he was designed, even bred, to kill while performing those duties. But a woman—and his best friend? No way he could dismiss something so huge without great difficulty.

Being the Spirit Talisman was something he certainly wouldn't welcome, but she felt the truth of what she'd read, deep in her bones.

The diary said that according to lore, the Spirit Talisman would bring the Terrans back from spiritual apocalypse and

save not only his people, but thousands of human lives at the same time. She didn't think Donovan would appreciate being looked at as a savior, even if he had started this quest with something vaguely similar in mind. He'd been looking to save his people, yes, but not in so direct a role.

She was saved from her choice by Claire.

"I think KOTE knows of the Talismans, but maybe not who they are." Claire's voice was solemn.

"So the more we look at this, the more KOTE is becoming a bad guy, right?" Mark's question was stunning in its simplicity.

"I don't know about that," Brenna cut in. "If KOTE knows, then why didn't one of them just come and ask me for it? As Terrans, it would be their right, and I would have acceded to it, just as I did with Donovan. I'd have to say Jenalee and Julian are more likely suspects, though how they knew about the Sorhineth is a mystery."

Donovan hummed before answering. "Maybe, but we're still back to my original question of where we go from here. My gut still tells me to close ranks around me and mine."

"I think the bigger issue is why KOTE should even care what we do." This was what bothered Brenna more than anything, and if her hunch about Donovan being the Spirit Talisman was correct, they were in bigger trouble than they'd originally surmised. If not from Julian, then from KOTE. There was no way they would let her, Donovan and the Sorhineth go free once they discovered they had it.

She opened her mouth to let them all know what she'd found and then shut it slowly. She needed to read more of

her ancestor's words before she let something so big and wondrous fly. But more than anything, it was something she needed to tell Donovan alone.

Donovan considered her with a thoughtful expression, oblivious to her inner turmoil. "You're right. I suppose they could just want to keep the Sorhineth for themselves. So why would it make a difference if I have it, even for a little while?" He turned his gaze to Mark and Claire.

"Because you threaten the status quo, that's why." Again it was Mark who slashed through the nonsense. "I still think it's KOTE who's behind this. They sent you to Boston, through Jenalee, not only to retrieve the Sorhineth, but to bring Brenna here. Jenalee may have been connected within KOTE, but you've been making too much noise lately. Without you raising a red flag, no one questions when things like Loma Prieta or Hurricane Hugo happen."

"But how does making the world safer threaten them?" Brenna's head was starting to hurt even worse. She understood the concept of what Mark was saying, but none of it really made sense, at least not yet. The pieces were there, but she was missing some important piece, something to tie it all together.

"I don't know," Mark admitted, shaking his head. "But it's the only thing that gels, at least for me."

"While I don't have any love for KOTE," Donovan said, "I can't buy that yet, Mark. What you're suggesting implies way too much subterfuge. Carlyle Winthrop could have just as easily flown to Boston himself and picked up the Sorhineth. There's no reason he couldn't."

"I can think of a good one," Brenna said quietly, and the realization hit her like a ton of bricks. If she was right ...
"What if he's a Destroyer? If he's the head of KOTE, he might know I can tell the difference."

Donovan shook his head slowly. "At this point, anything's possible. As much as I would like to believe a big, shadowy organization is out to get me, versus some of my best friends betraying me, it's too circuitous."

"We need to take a break," Claire declared with finality.
"Too much has happened today, we've got too much spinning through our heads. We need time to let it settle, so we don't go off half-cocked. You're safe here, and you were right before, Donovan. Mark and I need to go home, put in an appearance. While we can certainly be attacked individually, us being out there won't raise any eyebrows ... it'll make the Destroyer think it's just you and Brenna, rather than the four of us, and we can use all the surprise we can get. Plus, there are some books I need to look at. We'll swing back by later this afternoon, and we can think this through some more."

Mark looked almost relieved at her suggestion, and Brenna wondered if he'd be back tonight. She wouldn't blame him if he wasn't.

* * * *

Donovan closed the door behind his friends and leaned against it for a moment, getting his bearings. Brenna sat on the couch, legs curled beneath her, and for a brutal, blinding moment he saw Jenalee's fingers curled into her throat, saw sixty years of loneliness without her by his side, saw himself

old and bitter and used. And then the flash of the future was gone and he was back in the present, his mate looking at him with a quizzical expression.

He pushed away and strode forward with quick, long strides, his gaze intent on her beautiful face. Only one thing would make him feel whole right now, and that was her in his arms.

When he reached the couch, he pulled her up into his arms and held her, relishing the feel of her soft curves against his hard body. The unmistakable sensuality she projected was just Brenna. She fit perfectly against him. And if she wasn't ready to accept the reality of mating with him? That was fine, he'd bind her to him physically with passion and work on wooing her mind as they went.

He lowered his lips to hers. She met him willingly, her lips parting beneath his, her tongue first stroking, then demanding as her arms slid around his neck, fusing them together even tighter.

Falling into her, body, heart and soul, was easier and hotter than anything he'd ever imagined. She was pliant against him, burning him as they stood, locked in a full-body embrace.

He walked them into the bedroom, the bed bumping against the back of his knees. He pulled her down, cushioning the impact with his body.

Brenna landed atop him, knees straddling his hips. She laughed, and the sound went straight to his groin. Not that his cock already wasn't standing at full mast ... it had been

since he touched her. But her laugh, ah, it was enough to make a man feel strong enough to hold the world at bay.

She leaned down and captured his lips with hers. Her kiss was sweet, almost chaste. He let her set the pace, content to simply be in her arms, even if he burned for more. When she licked at the seam of his lips, he opened his mouth, leisurely taking her inside. It was then he knew this would be a session of lovemaking, not the frenzied mating they'd had in the past.

He settled his hands on her hips, flexing his fingers into the ultra-feminine curves. He felt the curve of her lips as she smiled and pulled away. She reared up over him and peeled her sweatshirt off, revealing the sapphire bra he'd first seen her in. It contrasted magnificently against her fair skin, and in that moment he wanted to eat her up.

She smiled again, the slow smile of a woman who knew exactly what she was doing to him as she reached behind her back and unclasped her bra, letting it slide over her shoulders, then her forearms, before dropping it on his chest.

Then she repeated what she'd said in the motel room in Flagstaff, sliding off him as she did. "You. Naked. Now."

This time he was more than eager to comply. He watched her shimmy out of her jeans as he peeled off his t-shirt and sweats, then lay back on the bed.

His cock sprang out, eager for her warmth, for the homecoming he knew he'd find in her arms.

And then she was atop him again. Her nipples pebbled, awaiting his touch. Her heat scalded him as she slid her pussy over his cock, teasing them both.

He lunged up, capturing one nipple in his mouth, torturing it with teeth and tongue as her breath hitched and her motion faltered. Then she leaned into him, her juices coating his cock as he nibbled and sucked and savored.

Her hands closed around his biceps, testing strength and density as she threw her head back, her lower lip caught between her teeth as she slid along him, shuddering slightly each time her clit brushed his cock.

Donovan reveled in the loveplay, even as he struggled to restrain himself from tossing her on her back and taking her, hard. Her expression was priceless, timeless. It was pure beauty softened by desire. His heart did a slow roll in his chest, before thumping painfully with possession. She was his, only his.

She rose to her knees. He let go of her breast with profound regret, then found joy as she positioned herself over him, guiding his cock into her clenching heat. He groaned in relief as he slid into her; her velvet muscles grasped him, pulling him deeper until he couldn't tell where he ended and she began.

Then she started to move, slow, sensual moves that showcased her toned, lithe body, her perfectly proportioned breasts swaying with each thrust.

Donovan clenched his teeth and fought against grabbing her hips and pushing up, up, up into her, and instead held on for the ride of his life.

Brenna dropped down, bracketing his torso with her arms and took his mouth in a hot, hungry kiss which totally belied her languid pace. The heat and possessiveness in her kiss told

him everything she'd never said and maybe didn't even realize. He returned her embrace, tongue tangling with hers furiously as he gave into his urges and began to thrust, meeting her with each downstroke, his cock filling her to the brim. When she reared up again and speared her hands through her hair, giving herself over to the rhythm, he shifted one hand, strumming her clit until she was gasping for breath, her juices flowing over both of them.

He thrust up into her hard and pressed her clit with one thumb. Her muscles contracted around him, and he looked deep into her eyes as she shuddered over him, her eyes filling with tears of completion. Her fair skin was mottled, and he'd never seen anything so beautiful in his entire life. He reached up and brushed a thumb over her bottom lip and exploded as she sucked it into her mouth, biting down hard. He came for what seemed like forever, his body jerking, his cock slamming into her as her teeth scored his thumb. Then her tongue laved away the pain, and in that moment, he knew he'd come home.

* * * *

The temblor rocked the city gently, chafing Donovan's nerve endings like a rasp. What in the hell was that?

Brenna murmured sleepily at his side, her breath wafting across his bare chest like a caress. "What's wrong?"

"Just an aftershock. It's nothing."

She woke more fully and lifted her eyes to his. "It's not nothing if it makes you tense up. Talk to me, Donovan."

He shrugged, not quite sure how to put it into words. "I *felt* the earth as it shifted."

"Me too. So what's the difference?"

"No, I mean I felt it, in my bones, as if they were scraping together."

"Has this ever happened before?"

"Hell no. I don't know if I could live here if that happened all the time."

Brenna propped up on an elbow, letting the sheet fall to her waist. Donovan was momentarily distracted by the sight of her breasts, then pulled his attention back to the matter at hand as she spoke.

"It's got to have something to do with the Sorhineth. Remember back at the library, when you laughed and the sound picked up the energy of the room? Well, what if the Sorhineth is a kind of amplifier?"

He considered her words for a moment, then shrugged. "You mean in addition to being a book of lore? Makes as much sense as anything else so far. But I don't like the feeling that mini-quake gave me. It was as if something was horribly wrong with the ground itself."

Brenna considered him.

"What?"

"I think Claire was right. You're a much bigger player in this than you're giving yourself credit for." She paused, as if wrestling with something, and he could see the decision she made in her eyes. "You need to see something."

She stood, totally comfortable with her nakedness, and strode into the suite's main room. Donovan admired her

departing heart-shaped ass and contemplated getting up to follow her. She beat him to the punch, though, returning with the journal and Sorhineth.

Settling onto the side of the bed, she opened the tiny book to the place marked by a thin red ribbon, then held it out to him.

Donovan took the diary slowly, not understanding the dread curling through him as his fingers slid over the worn cloth cover.

Spidery handwriting crowded the pages from margin to margin in faded blue script.

My grandfather told me, when he handed down the Sorhineth, what a joy—and burden—it would be. Then he sat me down and told me something I'd never heard before. He spoke of the Talisman—Air, Earth, Fire, Spirit and Water—Terrans who would use their special gift to redeem not only themselves, but their people. One Talisman of each sign will appear when they are needed most by their people and by the world. They will know of their summoning when the fruits of the earth appear before them, and those fruits will enhance their power to the unimaginable. There is a tale, passed down from one who Sees, that the Wardens were put into hiding because the Sorhineth was too great, too important, for any one Terran to hold ... until the Spirit Talisman is called. Great Spirit Talismans have included the likes of Aristotle, Newton and Galileo, and once their deed is done, they shall revert back to their normal life, should they choose ... if they still live. But in this case, the Seer said, this one Talisman shall lead us back to what we should be.

Donovan stopped reading and raised his eyes to Brenna. "And you pointed this out because..."

"Because I think you're the Spirit Talisman of our time."

He laughed, and it was a wonderful feeling. "Ah, Brenna, I do love you. What in the world makes you think I'm in the same league as Aristotle? I'm a bodyguard, nothing more, nothing less."

She stroked his cheek. "You're so much more, but I won't push it. I just wanted you to read what I had, to know where I was coming from."

He looked into her eyes and saw that she believed, not only in what she'd said, but in him. It was a wholly humbling experience. People had respected him, been afraid of him, wanted him on a sexual level, but had anyone ever believed in him?

He could answer in one word. No.

"I wanted to wait until we were alone to talk about this," Brenna began, and shifted her gaze to the bedspread, which she began to pick at nervously. "There's no good way to say this, Donovan. I like you, a lot, but this whole mating thing ... I don't know that I believe in it."

She paused, and then continued in a rush that had Donovan biting back a grin.

"I love the way we fit together, but I have some serious issues, both with my past and our future, not as lovers, but as Terran and Warden. I've had to overcome some serious bias against Terrans over the past few days, and while I'm convinced you and Claire are good guys, I haven't seen a lot

that tells me the rest of the Terrans aren't the scumbags I've been raised to loathe."

"I didn't realize you felt that strongly, but I guess I can understand what you're talking about. It pains me, but I understand. Know this, Brenna, whether your heart and mind know it or not, you are my mate. I've no doubt of that. But we can continue as we have, as two people getting to know each other and having spectacular sex while we do." He grinned lasciviously.

"As friends with benefits?" she asked with an answering smile.

"Definitely. But don't think I won't try to sway you to my point of view, and as often as possible."

"I think I'll enjoy that." She smirked, then grew serious. "While we're talking about relationships..."

Donovan grimaced. "I don't like the sound of that."

"And you won't like the content, but it's something we need to discuss. We need to talk about Jenalee at some point." Her voice was low, concerned, compassionate.

Her complete one-eighty stung like salt on an open wound, especially since they'd been talking about much more pleasurable subjects.

"I think we've covered the topic more than enough." He tried to keep his voice light, but knew he hadn't succeeded ... the bitterness and anger crept through.

"I don't mean her actions, I mean what she did to you, Donovan. You trusted her for almost ninety years, and she repaid your friendship by stabbing you in the back."

Even though her tone remained the same, it pushed all of his buttons. He didn't want to talk about Jenalee, but Brenna had been honest with him, so he'd reciprocate, even if his reaction might scare the hell out of her.

"Don't you think I know that?" Repressed rage pulsed through him, not at Brenna, but at himself. "She fucking *played* me. I spent years on the battlefield, led men to their deaths, started a business which has made me a millionaire, and I couldn't see past her lies. How do you think it makes me feel? It makes me feel like a fucking fool, as if I shouldn't even be here—with you or the Sorhineth. Because if I can't see the truth about my best friend, how in the hell can I do what I anticipated when I started this?"

"Oh, Donovan." She laid a soothing hand on his arm, and in doing so, completely diffused his ire. Only a mate could do such a thing, and in that he well and truly lost his heart. "In the life you've lived, haven't you learned the people closest to us are the ones who hurt us the most?"

Any reply he might have made was forestalled by the sound of the door opening in the other room, and the unmistakable stench of evil which could only be attached to a Destroyer, washing over them.

* * * *

The Destroyer's presence chilled Brenna right down to the roots of her teeth. She dove off the bed, taking the Sorhineth with her. Donovan could handle whatever was out there, she knew that for a certainty, but the Sorhineth was her primary responsibility.

The bed shifted as he rose and came into her line of sight. His vehemence had miraculously turned into something else in a few seconds. He positively glowed with good, clean energy; a corona of power arced from the book in her hands and melded to his well-muscled body before fading from sight.

He strode forward in long, sure strides until he was framed in the doorway leading into the suite. "Julian, how did you find me?"

When Donovan spoke, it was with something she recognized as The Voice, even though she'd never heard it before.

"You could put some clothes on to welcome me, Donovan." The intruder greeted him, and even though his words were calm, almost reasonable, there was an underlying, simmering rage that chilled her to the bone.

Donovan waved a hand, almost nonchalantly. This was not the man she knew. This was the Spirit Talisman, no matter what he'd said earlier. And in the small move, his seeming acceptance of his power, she lost her heart to him. She'd already been halfway there when he'd confessed his feelings about Jenalee, but this second in time pushed her the rest of the way. Why that should do it, as she crouched naked on the floor with the precious Sorhineth clutched to her chest, she couldn't say, but it was so. Not that she'd let him know it, at least not yet. It was too soon, too new, too wondrously terrifying after her fumbling attempts to brush off his claim just a few moments ago.

"How many are you? Should I expect more company?"

Donovan's demeanor, even from her vantage point in the next room, was calm, practically vibrating with power and presence.

"More than you could ever hope to overcome. You may have defeated one of us, but too many more follow. Save yourself and your Warden. Hand over the book now. You could have a place with us, Donovan, a powerful place, and bring your woman with you."

Brenna couldn't see the Destroyer, but his voice echoed, booming through the two rooms. The Sorhineth absorbed some of the evil; she could feel it crawling against her breasts. Shuddering in revulsion, she did the only thing she could think of, ducking her head and curling around the book, protecting it with her life force as the two Terrans faced each other.

"Thanks for the offer, but we'll have to pass." Donovan's reply was dry, and oh-so in control. It was a perfect dichotomy to his ire a few minutes past.

A strange voice began to gnaw at her consciousness. *Warden ... Bring the book to me and he'll live. You can leave together, and we'll let you...*

She shook her head violently and clutched the precious tome closer. She had to trust that Donovan would take care of the Destroyer, even if she was now scared down to her bones for him, for her, for the fate of the world.

It'll be so much easier, so much safer.

Brenna couldn't see Donovan now, but with the Sorhineth sandwiched against her body, she was connected to him on an elemental level, could feel him as he strode into the living

area and threw a roundhouse punch into the body of the man he had once considered a friend. Oh, his anger had been carefully banked, but now it all came out in his blow. She felt the impact of his fist, heard the surprised grunt Julian made, felt the silence spell that Donovan hadn't used against Jenalee settle over the room. Then, Donovan brought his knee up, pulverizing the Destroyer's face and knocking him out cold.

And as suddenly as that, the voice inside her head was gone, making her wonder if she'd imagined it. Relief, quick and sudden, flooded through her, quieting the curl of dread the voice had insinuated.

"*Lhiannan*, you can come out now." Donovan's voice, still resonant with unlimited power, shivered over her bare skin like a caress. "We need to figure out what to do with this piece of shit."

Brenna rose and shimmied into one of the silk robes hanging on a hook next to the bathroom.

She grabbed a pair of shorts from the bag Donovan had hastily thrown together before leaving his house then walked into the living area with the Sorhineth tucked under one arm.

Donovan stood in the center of the room, spectacularly nude, over his fallen employee. Julian's face was a bloody pulp.

Good for Donovan. Maybe he had vented some of his self-doubt and anger in his display of physicality. It wasn't until she saw he was unharmed that she realized how truly terrified she'd been, how she'd wondered if they might very well die this afternoon.

She handed him the shorts. "Here you go."

He slipped them on, much to her great relief ... and regret. Naked and commanding, he was a serious piece of eye candy.

"I don't suppose you guys keep some rope handy around this place?"

He smiled, a flash of white teeth, and where it had given her the warm fuzzies before, now it went straight to her heart. She stepped forward into the welcoming circle of his arms and held on tight.

She opened her mouth to tell him of her love, but he answered her earlier question before she could. Then the moment was gone, swept away by the necessity of dealing with Julian. Bastard.

"No such luck, love. He'd probably just escape them anyway. Maybe I should have just killed him." The calculation in his voice told her he was still in Spirit mode, no matter how much he looked at her with love. It made her shudder, even as she understood and accepted it.

She pulled away, not in fear, but to look him in the eye. "You can't kill him. We need the answers he can provide."

Donovan brushed his knuckles across her cheek. "You're right, of course, but after Jenalee, well, this kind of betrayal doesn't go down easy. I'd just as soon kill him and be done with it."

She nodded, maintaining eye contact. "So, what do we do now?"

"We wait, we question him, and then, we go on the offensive."

Chapter Nine

"What are we going to bind him with?" Brenna asked.

"Words alone. Julian doesn't have the age or wisdom to combat them, even if he is a Keeper." Donovan fought to keep the smug tone out of his voice. While it stung, mightily, that Julian had betrayed him, after Jenalee's betrayal, it wasn't as much of a surprise. What he wouldn't give for the loyalty he'd seen in the field in war after war. Was it a measure of today's society, and of the Terrans in general, that treachery was the norm rather than the exception? That humans held their honor in more regard than the beings made to hold it dear?

"Why'd you hit him in the first place?" There was no censure in Brenna's question, but genuine curiosity.

"Because he expected something else. Seems to be a trend. Guess I took a page from your book." It felt good to see the blood on Julian's face, to know he'd hurt him physically in a moment of swift, blinding vengeance.

"Hmmm. Tactics, huh?"

"Exactly."

Brenna settled onto the couch next to him, the Sorhineth at her side. "So what are we gonna do when he wakes up?"

"Standard interrogation."

"And how do you know about that?" Again, interest rang in her voice.

Donovan hesitated for a moment, mind whirling as he pondered how much he could, or even should, tell her. It took

only seconds to make the decision. She'd already seen him at his worst and returned to his side. His past was nothing to be ashamed of.

"World War II, for starters. I was stationed in France, and then in North Africa, served with Patton there. I was taken prisoner after Kasserine Pass in '43 and escaped to Morocco just after the end of the war."

What he hadn't put into words was the terror and heartbreak of seeing his comrades gunned down, the survivors tortured at the hands of the Nazis. He omitted his life before Africa, with Angeline, of the glories of Paris before it fell. Before she died fighting with the Resistance. And the three years spent in a prison camp that hadn't officially existed.

"And then what?" Brenna's voice was subdued now as if she understood the weight of his unspoken words.

"Himmler himself was on his way to question me when I escaped."

"Holy shit! Himmler? Why?"

Donovan was glad for her knowledge of World War II history—he'd have to ask how she'd come by it. But first...

"He'd been searching for something to give the Reich an edge, and somehow I came up on his radar."

"Was he a Destroyer?"

Donovan stroked his chin. "Maybe. Hell, probably. If he'd been Terran, it would explain Hitler's fixation with the occult."

She seemed to ponder his statement for a moment, then urged him forward with a wave of her hand.

"French Foreign Legion through '62." He paused, lost for a moment in memories of Algeria, of blood and dust and unspeakable dying.

"So you've been there and done that?"

Her comment brought him back to the present. He was more than a little uncomfortable that it was so easy to bare his soul to her. It made sense, since she was his mate, but he'd never felt so free in reliving the past and dealing with his inner thoughts. Not with Jenalee, not with Angeline—women who had helped form exactly who and what he was, for the good and bad. He just hoped he could shield her from the primal beast he became when roused to the point of anger he felt in war.

With a low moan, Julian began to wake. Donovan stood, pulling Brenna up beside him, before guiding her to a safe place near the wet bar with a movement of his head. Then he settled into the armchair opposite Julian, arms folded across his chest, glancing back and forth between his mate and his enemy.

Brenna looked at him and Julian calmly. His words of war hadn't alienated her, and for that he was grateful.

His gaze drifted once more to where Julian lay. The big Terran groaned again and strained at the binding entrapping him.

"Didn't think I knew the words, did you, *old friend*?" Donovan mocked, taking great satisfaction in the flash of fear that entered Julian's eyes.

Claire and Mark pushed open the door to the suite as his words died, and for a brief moment he had to wonder at their

timing. Was his betrayal to be complete? Then he saw the look of complete surprise on both of their faces and knew, deep down, they'd remained true to him.

"Julian, you bastard," Mark spat, lunging forward. His curled hands ricocheted off the binding spell.

"Huh. I didn't expect that," Claire said, a frown wrinkling her brow.

Brenna let out a small laugh, drawing Donovan's attention away from the trio. She was smiling, obviously amused at the difference between Mark and Claire. Mark practically foamed at the mouth, while Claire studied the binding spell as if it were a new and fascinating science experiment.

"I do believe it's time we got some answers," Donovan said. He released the silence incantation with a wave of his hand. While most Terrans had abandoned their protection of the earth and the people who inhabited it, the Protectors had no problem in keeping the magic.

* * * *

"Stupid son of a bitch," Julian snarled through smashed lips. "You can only bespell so many of us. Any Protectors left are in our pocket."

Brenna watched Julian, wondering how Donovan was going to handle him. The bound Terran twisted once and looked at her, his gaze full of such hate she stepped back, bumping into the bar. Damn, if all the Destroyers were this pissed, they were in for a heap of trouble. She shook off the shiver of fear that worked its way down her spine.

They would do what they had to do to defeat the Destroyers. It was so simple, yet so complicated. Even though the very concept of killing repulsed her, she was beginning to see its value.

Once again, a sinister voice whispered in her ear, nudging her attention away from Donovan to Mark. *Why trap yourself with a being who has seen ninety years of life when you can have a human, simply for the asking?*

Mark looked at her with none of the downcast glances of before. Instead, his gaze was full of male appreciation and something else, a kindling spark of lust that transformed his eyes to a smoldering emerald. And for the first time, she found herself taking in his full appearance ... the fair hair so like her own, handsome, wholly masculine features, cut body. What if Donovan wasn't for her? She remembered how easily he'd dismissed his relationship with Jenalee. How he'd admitted to killing in war.

She stepped forward on numb feet, and Mark moved toward her just as quickly. His eyes locked on hers. His obvious, impressive erection pushing at the fabric of his slacks.

A throb of desire surged through her, animalistic and raw, bringing her nipples to hard points, setting her pussy on fire. She could live on this kind of passion, feast on it, center her life around it.

Mark was human, male, desirable—hers for the taking ... if she wanted it. And right now she wanted it, more than anything. It was all right ... and right here, if she took it.

She rounded the corner of the couch, intent on one thing only—tasting Mark. Taking his cock into her mouth, into her body. The thought made her pulse thud, made her clit tighten in anticipation.

Oh yes, she needed to fuck the man—and right now. The need screamed through her blood, her heart, her mind.

"Stop!" Claire's voice rang with authority, slicing through her mind.

Brenna halted in her tracks as if stuck in glue, and shook her head. She felt fuzzy, muddled. Her blood thundered through her veins as if molten.

What had she been doing? Mark was halfway across the room instead of right in front of her. He had the same look of confusion in his eyes.

"Donovan, bind Julian again, all of him."

Donovan stood, towering over Julian, and silenced him with a few words before moving to stand beside Brenna, pulling her into the shelter of his arms. "What in God's name was that all about?"

"He was bespelling them with his thoughts," Claire explained. "Trying to do the one thing that would tear you apart and destroy your concentration."

"Brenna? Mark?"

Brenna shook her head again, trying to jiggle some sense into it. "I don't know what happened. One minute I was looking at Julian, the next, I was walking toward Mark."

"Same thing here. It doesn't make any sense." Mark's voice sounded bewildered, and a bit belligerent.

"It does if he's a Singer. This is dangerous, Donovan. *Two* Air Keepers; both Singers? What *e/se* are they gonna throw at us?" Claire fisted her hands and stared hard at Julian.

Brenna struggled for coherency. "What in the hell is a Singer? The Sorhineth and journal don't say anything about them." What shook her even more than the introduction of yet another faction was the concept that Julian had been able to enter her thoughts not once, but twice. Because she recognized now that his was the voice she'd heard before Donovan knocked him out.

An even more frightening thought was that she'd been so easily manipulated. Could Donovan, her supposed mate, be using the same kind of control? She remembered feeling bombarded by stray emotions in Flagstaff, and then again after they had first visited Claire. What if the emotion she felt was false, placed there for an agenda she couldn't even begin to fathom?

As if reading her mind, Donovan tightened the arm around her shoulders. "Unless bound, a Singer can use thoughts to direct the actions of others. Julian must have used it, if the way you and Mark looked is any indication. I'd almost forgotten he could do it. He's only used it once before around me, ten years ago, when we were bodyguarding the quarterback for the Niners. It only works on humans." Self-disgust was evident in his tone.

Brenna shivered. Whatever the Singer had been trying to do couldn't have been good. Mark had taken a step back, as if to distance himself from both her and Julian.

Julian might have failed in his attempt to take the Sorhineth, but he'd planted a seed of doubt that was germinating at a frightening speed.

"If we're going to question him, they need to leave." Claire stated unceremoniously. "And the next room isn't good enough."

Donovan cocked his head and pulled Brenna against him tighter, until she almost couldn't breathe. "I don't want to split up. Remember, if she goes, the Sorhineth fades."

She pushed away a bit, giving herself a bit of space. She wanted, more than anything, to believe her love for Donovan was true, but there was no way she was going to ask him whether he shared Julian's talents in front of an audience. And would she even know if he was telling the truth? She'd think hard about her suspicions, and decide what to do using logic, not emotion. Donovan deserved that much, as did she. She was stuck in this situation, bound by her family's word and their continued wellbeing. She needed to make the right choices, and to do that, she needed information. "We'll be fine here if you keep an eye on us, right?"

"Probably, but do you really want to take that chance?" the pretty Terran asked, her eyebrows raised in question.

"Only if the Sorhineth is in the next room where none of you can see it. That way, if Julian uses his abilities against *you*, it's safe. Know this; I'll never willingly give its location if your loyalty is in doubt. Mark and I can take care of ourselves, now that we know what we're up against. Right, Mark?"

"Uh, yeah." He looked uncomfortable with the suggestion, but at least he could meet her eyes now. After a whole morning of avoiding her gaze, it was a shocking development. Whatever Julian had done, it had changed Mark. It remained to be seen if it was a good or bad thing. Right now her gut went with "good" because he could finally look at her without flinching.

Brenna walked into the unused bedroom and placed the Sorhineth next to the Bible in the nightstand, locking the door behind her when she left. When she returned, Mark joined her, and they sat in a set of chairs, close enough to hear what was going on, but far enough away to hold a muted conversation and not divide Donovan's and Claire's attention.

Personally, Brenna wasn't sure she wanted to know what they were going to do to Julian. Given Donovan's past, it wasn't likely to be pretty. There was no question it was necessary, but that didn't mean she had to witness it. The scariest part was that after what Julian had just done to her, she really didn't give a damn anymore. How wrong was that?

"So what happened a few minutes ago?" She kept her voice low. She felt Donovan and Claire lift the binding spell, then something just as unnerving settled over the room, making her skin crawl. No matter how long she was around it, she'd never get used to the magic. Especially when it was being used to interrogate someone.

"He, ah, made us question our allegiance."

"How is it that you know his intent, but it's still really foggy to me?"

Mark shrugged. "I've been around them a long time. Since I got out of the military ten years ago. Maybe I'm not totally susceptible any more. Or maybe it was because he made eye contact with you, and not me."

Brenna leaned forward, Julian pushed to the back of her mind now. Now that she knew what to look for, she'd keep it in mind ... on both ends. Right this second she was intrigued by the prospect of learning more about Donovan, even if it was through Mark. She needed to make her own decision regarding Julian's treacherous invasion of her mind. Needed to make up her mind as to whether Donovan had spoken true of his inability to manipulate her feelings. "So you were in the military, like Donovan?"

He laughed and leaned back in the chair, more relaxed. "I don't think any human can compete with what Donovan did over three decades. Naw, I was in the Marines for a few years, did a gig in Monterey at the Language Institute and ran into Donovan."

"What was he doing there?"

Mark looked at her questioningly, and she grinned at his odd expression, more at ease than she'd been since last night's dinner.

"It's not like we've really had a lot of time to do more than figure out the Sorhineth. If I'm going to be stuck with you guys, I'd like to know a little bit about you."

"Fair enough, but if there's something I think Donovan should answer, I'm going to let you know."

"Works for me." She paused and listened as Julian let out a yelp, more of surprise than pain. It should have made her

shudder in empathy or disgust, but didn't. "So what exactly do you do?"

"Provide bodyguards and security for high rollers. You heard Donovan mention the quarterback for the Niners?" At her nod, he continued. "That kind of stuff. Jenalee was more of a running favor. Sure she had her share of security risks, but as a Singer, she could take care of herself." There was an undertone of pain to his voice, but somewhere along the line, maybe when he was out with Claire, he'd come to grips with what had happened this morning. She hoped Donovan would be as lucky, no matter what kind of alpha-he-man vibes he tried to cover it up with.

"And how many people work at your firm?"

"About forty. And before you ask, most are human, ex-military, and don't have a clue what Donovan and the rest of them are. Julian and a few others are the exception."

That shocked her. "How can they *not* know?"

"Hell, you think they would have survived this long, undetected, if they weren't discreet?"

"Yeah, but ... how did you find out?"

"I've always known, I guess, that there was something different about Donovan, from the first day I met him in Monterey. He was teaching Russian to a bunch of guys back when the Cold War was really firing up, and he was just ... I don't know ... more than the rest of us. He looked up from his lecture and saw me, and somehow, the day I got out, he was there, offering me a job. Obviously, I took it, and I'd do it again in a hot second. Since then, I've moved through the ranks, to where I am now, as second-in-command."

"That sounds very military."

"Yeah, but if the shoe fits..."

"Brenna, Mark, c'mere. I think we're starting to get somewhere." Donovan's voice drew her head up.

"Thanks for the talk, it helps, y'know?" She stood, and he followed suit.

"Yeah," and then he was striding past her. "What've we got?"

Brenna sidled up next to Donovan and looked down at Julian. He looked scared as hell, but no worse for the wear besides the dried blood caked around his nose and mouth. The change between the being who had looked at her with such hatred and the cowering mess at her feet was shocking. The smell of his fear overrode even the taint of Destroyer, thick, cloying, nauseating. Even more unsettling was the fact that his fear smelled good to Brenna, like victory.

"What did you do?"

"Just showed him a little of what I told you earlier this morning, things no one really knows about the time I spent in the field."

Brenna warmed inside at the words, even as she wondered at the truth of them. He'd shared with her things almost no one else was privy to, but had those experiences truly frightened Julian that much?

"A little, ah, demonstration of what I learned was all it took." A wicked, satisfied grin curved his lips.

"So where are we?"

"Julian is going to tell us a story, aren't you, Julian?"

The Terran made no sound, crouching at Donovan's feet, his head bowed.

"Go ahead, sit up on the couch. We're listening."

"What do you want to know?" The voice that had been so superior, so hate-filled, just a few minutes ago was now subdued, almost broken.

Brenna just hoped it wasn't a ruse as Julian heaved himself onto the settee.

"What do the Destroyers want?"

"The Sorhineth, and you and the Warden with it."

"Why?"

"I don't know. We were just told to direct you to Boston, and then Jenalee found out something, I don't know what, that made her panic. She had one of our people there try for the Sorhineth first, but he couldn't find it, and then you lost him in the storm."

"So there's obviously more Terrans than you and Jenalee involved. Who's behind this?" This from Mark, whose voice had gone dangerously low.

"KOTE. That's all I know." His reply was wire-tight and filled with fear. "And now that I've betrayed them, I'm dead."

"Don't forget it was me you betrayed in the first place, you worthless bastard."

Brenna heard the anger under Donovan's words, and knew it was because he'd expected loyalty from his men. Hell, from what she'd learned of Donovan, he deserved it. And even if it wasn't her place, Brenna had to know. "Who else can enter my thoughts?"

Julian's head lifted, surprise written on his features. If he hadn't been tainted by pure evil, he would have been extraordinarily handsome. What a waste.

"Only Singers can affect outcomes, but only verbally."

The wash of relief coursing through Brenna was almost sexual. While the power Donovan held as the Spirit Talisman was still in question, the knowledge he hadn't been using something on her intentionally eased her mind and heart. "And how did you become a Destroyer?"

"They offered me the world. No one seemed to care anyway, so what did it matter?"

* * * *

Donovan stiffened. Hell, if that's all it had taken for Julian to turn, then hadn't he been a Destroyer himself, simply by not acting?

Brenna's sweet voice, laced with steel, continued, "But how? How did you start?"

Julian's voice became animated, as if in the telling he was redeeming himself, if only a little bit. "Jenalee brought me in. It was little things at first, dropping packages off at construction sites, running messages for a few extra bucks. Then it got bigger, providing some muscle on my off time."

"Sounds a lot like the Mob," Claire said dryly. Donovan could tell she was still on her guard, ready to unleash the binding spell again if need be. She needn't have worried. Julian was well and truly broken.

"Pretty close," Julian conceded, as he finally relaxed a bit and leaned back against the cushions. "It was always about

the money, until Jenalee changed her focus, then it was about power."

"And what did she do differently?" More than anything, that was the question Donovan wanted answered. He hadn't given himself the chance to really dissect what had happened a few short hours ago, and if he had his druthers, it would remain that way until this was all over. Then he could think about it. But the need to know *why* burned.

"Used her power as a Singer, to influence things. Government, corporate decisions, hell, everything. Being who she was, Jenalee had access to almost everyone in power in San Francisco. And she used her access to make money. A lot of it."

There was more, Donovan was sure of it, but now they had enough to move. And the clock he'd felt earlier ... Well, it was dangerously close to striking midnight. The time to act was now, before KOTE came to them.

Chapter Ten

The Jag arrowed for the familiar triangular Transamerica Building. The afternoon had faded into a cold, sullen evening, sending a chill through Brenna's bones as she considered what she and Donovan were about to do ... alone.

Claire and Mark stayed with Julian, locked behind a protection spell that should keep out even the most determined Destroyer. While Julian had accepted his prisoner status with little grace, Donovan had been loath to kill him outright, saying he'd been the cause of enough bloodshed over his lifetime. It was something she was glad of, but she would have understood it if he had dispatched the traitor, as he'd originally voiced.

But Julian's admissions had brought more questions than answers. She'd been thinking about some of the things he'd said ... and what he hadn't. And what niggled in the back of her brain was the fact Jenalee and Julian had been more intricately interlaced than either had implied. It wasn't a certainty, but rather a gut-deep feeling. If Jenalee and Julian had been in on something together, where did that leave KOTE? And did she really care, with one dead and one in custody? To be honest, she was glad Jenalee was dead, if for no other reason than her betrayal of Donovan.

It made her wonder when she'd become so bloodthirsty. It took an actual effort for her to remember her life just five short days ago. Before Donovan. Before she'd discovered being a Warden might just cost her life ... and quite possibly

her humanity, since she had no regrets over Jenalee's death, and wouldn't have shed a tear over Julian. And now, given what she, Donovan, Claire and Mark had decided was the best course of action, her mortality was definitely hanging in the balance. They were, quite simply, going to storm KOTE and demand answers. Donovan, Mark and Claire had all said the element of surprise would be the kicker, and Brenna hoped to God they were right, because she wasn't so sure.

It was time—past time—she earned her title as Warden, even if she'd broken her family's most sacred covenant by handing the Sorhineth over to Claire. No way in hell Donovan was going to face this alone.

And because of that plan of attack, there was more she needed to know, and now.

Brenna felt like she was pulling teeth, but if they were going to get out of this alive, the man needed to talk. Julian's revelations aside, something else had been plaguing her for days; now she had every right to ask it. And if she were truly his mate, he would answer.

"What changed your mind?" she asked baldly.

"Huh?" He pulled his gaze from the road, meeting her eyes with confusion.

"Eyes on the pavement, Callahan. This traffic makes me twitchy." When he complied, albeit grudgingly, she continued. "What made you come after the Sorhineth? It must have been something big if you were okay with everything until then."

Donovan clenched his jaw and tightened his hands on the steering wheel before answering. When he did, his voice was rife with a mixture of rage, disgust and sorrow.

"There was a woman, years, decades ago. Her name was Angeline, and she was my first true love." He kept his eyes on the road, but Brenna could sense he *really* didn't want to tell her this. She wasn't sure she wanted to hear it, but she'd been the dumb ass to open her mouth. Then he switched gears so fast it made her head spin.

"A few of us were in the City when Loma Prieta hit. Me, Claire, Mark and Julian headed down to the waterfront. I don't remember much about '06 ... just fire and screams. But this, it was worse somehow. Buildings sliding off their foundations. People screaming and crying like their hearts were going to explode. Fear so palpable you could actually taste it. And then I saw a woman, and she looked so much like Angeline it froze me. She was crouched over the body of a young man, and the sound she was making almost killed me. I've seen death before, hell, it was my life for thirty years, but nothing I'd ever seen floored me like her grief. It took me back, back to France. I'd never had a flashback before, but knew what it was.

"I saw Angeline again, saw her lying on the ground as if she'd gone to sleep, but the bullet hole between her eyes told me differently. Her head was resting funny, and it took me a moment to realize the back of it had been blown off by the force of the bullet. I was devastated. As a half-breed, I never thought I'd find a mate, so poured everything into my relationship with her. Then I saw Luc, our compatriot,

crouched over her, huge, silent sobs wracking his body, I knew ... She'd been his mate, the man who had loved her from afar while we carried on our affair. By simply not knowing, I'd denied him a life with his mate, even if it was a shortened one because both were human. Had I known then what being mated truly felt like, I would have gladly walked away.

"All of that came back to me as I stood there, feeling the aftershocks as they rumbled through me, and I felt useless, as if nothing I'd done had made a difference. Why win a war or fight for freedom when something as random as an earthquake can take it all away?"

He went silent, and Brenna knew he was torn between two sets of memories. She leaned across the console and brushed a kiss across his cheek.

"Don't think I'm a noble man, Brenna. I've killed people, done things even I don't want to remember."

"Do you regret them?" she asked softly.

"Some of them, yes."

"Then you're a good man, Donovan. Nothing more, nothing less."

"After hearing that, do you really believe I'm your Spirit Talisman? I don't think so."

"Ah, but I do, and I know when push comes to shove, you'll realize it too."

He snorted in pure derision, but it didn't bother her much. Donovan was what he was, and time would tell.

She peered out the windshield, clutching the backpack to her chest as doubts began to assail her. Should they really

have left Claire and Mark guarding Julian? What if they needed them, especially Claire? Who was she to go into battle? Especially against the likes of KOTE? The Warden title should have gone to Terry, the youngest brother, she was now positive of that. It would have meant she might have missed out on meeting and falling in love ... yes, love ... with Donovan, but wasn't the future of the world more damned important?

She turned to her mate ... yes, mate ... and voiced her trepidation. "I'm scared. Terry would have been so much better suited for this. I wasn't meant to be the Warden. Gram must have been wrong. For God's sakes, I'm a librarian!"

Donovan quirked up his lips. "You're more than a librarian, Brenna Kennedy, and I can think of no one I'd rather have guarding the Sorhineth. Your brothers are fine when it comes to brawn, hell, even brains, but have they learned to temper both with compassion? Have they learned the fastest course of action is not always the correct one? I think not. You know all of these things without being taught, realize what is important. If one of your brothers had been in The Drake, would they have thought to protect the Sorhineth, or would they have charged forward, ready to do battle?"

She thought long and hard, focusing on the traffic swirling around them before answering "Battle. They would have chosen battle."

"And so your birthright as Warden was appropriate, yes?" The grin was still in his voice, as if he had no cares in the world, as if they were not headed toward a fateful confrontation.

"Is this the smartest thing to do, then?"

"Good question, and one that deserves answering. Yes, because if we don't, they'll always be one step behind us, and we'll spend our lives on the run. I don't know about you, but it's not something I'm willing to accept. We need to meet them on our terms."

"But you don't have to go. They're after the Sorhineth, and by extension, me. This doesn't have to involve you at all."

Donovan whipped the car to the side of the street, threw it into park and whirled in his seat. His face was angrier than she'd ever seen, ever imagined seeing it.

"You would have me leave you, my mate, to such a fate? Do you think so little of me, then?" His words were hard, bullets leaving his mouth in rapid fire.

She shook her head in denial, hair whipping around until it nearly blinded her. "No, that's not what I meant. I just want you to be sure this is what you want, not something you're doing out of obligation to me, or to Jenalee, or to Angeline."

"And what makes you think my past lovers have anything to do with you and me?" Now his voice was silky, smooth in menace. It scared her right down to her toenails, but she forged on, because it had to be said.

"Because they helped create who you are, and that's important, almost more important than the Sorhineth."

"I doubt that very much, but thank you for your concern."

"Don't make light of this, Donovan. We've been over this before. Your best friend is lying dead in your guest room. That has to mean something."

He reeled back as if struck. He'd obviously thought they were finished on this subject. He didn't want to think about it anymore, but she needed to be crystal-clear on where she stood, where they both stood. "Jenalee has nothing to do with you and me."

"Of course she does."

He mulled over her words, and she could tell he was suppressing the rage she'd seen only once or twice before. When he finally replied, his words were clipped. "If Jenalee hadn't been the Destroyer? Then it would have mattered. But she became everything I despise. When I came back from Algeria in '65, I had the same feelings I do now about saving the fucking world. And what I saw when I got home—protests in the street, kids being gunned down, and the Terrans not giving a shit, I realized everything I went through in that prison camp made no difference. I'd held my own under torture because I didn't want to reveal the Terrans, and when I get home, they're worse than the humans. I turned my ass around and went to Cambodia, worked as a mercenary. I saw horror that pales in comparison to what happened today, so don't think I'm all wound up about Jenalee's death. She brought it on herself, and she deserved it. Don't ever put yourself in the same sentence with her. I may be a reasonable man about most things, but not about that."

"Oh hell," Brenna said in disgust and no little amount of exasperated love. His little speech about the horrible things he'd done meant nothing to her. She knew the man he was underneath. Yes, he was capable of the things he'd done—he was a survivor, and right now, his life experience was what

she was counting on. "You're worse than a freakin' woman, you know that?"

"Explain." No emotion coated his words, just a stark, vacant tone.

"Don't get all Alpha on me. I just wanted to give you the option, let you know you had an out if you wanted it, after what happened today. Everything that happened."

He curled a hand around the nape of her neck and drew her in for a thorough kiss. When he released her, she could feel her heartbeat matching his.

"Don't ever leave me, Brenna-girl. I don't know what I would do without you." His tone, full of love, made her soul ache. Could she ever find a man to complement her more?

"No fear, Callahan, you're stuck with me." She didn't qualify it was for the duration. If there *was* a duration. At this point, she wasn't so sure. But there was one thing she was positive of. "Since we're about to walk into the lion's den, as it were, I need to tell you something." She took a deep breath. "You were right. I *am* your mate. And God help me, after only five days of knowing you, I love you more than life itself."

Donovan's face creased into a huge smile and he swooped in for another kiss, this one long and lingering. In it she felt everything they would be, could be, once this showdown was over. Once KOTE was neutralized, and they could spend some time really getting to know each other.

She eased back, pure joy suffusing her entire body. They would get through this ... they had to. The future beckoned too brightly for it to go any other way.

Donovan jerked upright, a flicker of discomfort crossing his face, chasing away his own expression of wonder and elation.

"What?" she asked, then felt it, a tremor surging through the earth, gently rolling the ground beneath them, shifting the car minutely before easing to a halt.

"It's wrong, the earth feels wrong." His voice was troubled. "I think we may have a bigger worry than KOTE on our hands."

* * * *

Donovan fought to quell the unease nipping at him as he piloted the car through the narrow streets. Why now? Why did his damned Earth Elemental genes have to come to the fore now? This was the worst possible time for his empathy with the earth to break free. It weakened him, split his concentration from what he really needed to be doing.

And now since Brenna realized they were meant for each other, his heart rested easy on that front. They'd have ample time to learn each other when this was over and done with, and if they didn't succeed, he would take death as a necessary byproduct of life, having loved, and being loved in return by his mate.

He shot a look at Brenna, and she still appeared discomfited by his statement. He thought of her words earlier, of how she'd questioned her ability to perform as Warden. Right now there was no one he'd rather have at his back, especially in a time and neighborhood like this. Especially when the people he trusted had dwindled to a scant handful.

And what of Jenalee, lying dead in his guest room? Julian, broken by the mere suggestion of the things he'd seen and done in Cambodia. Those things had irreparably scarred his soul, left a dark stain on his heart which only lifted when he was with Brenna. And she hadn't given a damn, after hearing them. In that moment he knew she was more than his mate ... she was his redemption.

And now she was willingly putting her life in his hands because she believed in him.

He wondered, again, if this was the right time, if he was the right person, to change the status quo. Why shouldn't he just hand the Sorhineth over? He could deal for Brenna, have the Sorhineth transcribed or something, and they could just leave. Head south for Mexico.

As soon as the thoughts crystallized, he was ashamed of them. No, now was the time to take a stand. To do what was right, after years of apathy, years of watching things go to hell around him. This was the right thing to do, even if it killed him. He would justify Brenna's faith in him.

He turned his attention to the street ahead of him, to the deteriorating neighborhood they were driving through. The Tenderloin hadn't been hit as hard as the Marina, but the signs of Loma Prieta were there in the listing buildings, the listless street people tucked away in sheltered storefronts.

This was what he needed to make right, he realized. The City, which had been his true home, no matter where he traveled or how long he was gone. The rebirth of the Terrans had to start somewhere, and he couldn't think of anywhere better than right here.

It was a somewhat uncomfortable insight for someone who'd been living for himself for so long. And again he wondered if he hadn't been so terribly different from KOTE and the Destroyers for the last fifteen years.

Another tremor, so insignificant as to be unnoticeable by humans, rumbled through the ground, and in it he felt the innate wrongness, as if something was manipulating it, and the earth was trying its damndest to fight it.

Donovan returned his full attention to the road, his eyes registering the car pulling out of the alley split seconds before his foot hit the brake, bringing the Jag to a shuddering halt. The narrow road before them was blocked by a monstrous Lincoln with its windows blacked out. Donovan weighed his options for about two seconds before making his decision. "Out," he ordered tersely. "Then I want you to run as fast as you can toward that store. Go straight inside and hide in the back."

"No."

"Now is not the time to get defiant, goddamn it!"

"I'm going to stand beside you. We're going to get out of this alive and do what you planned. You need the Sorhineth. It needs *you*."

Three Terrans exited the Lincoln, and they were huge. They were also his men, he saw, unsurprised after Julian's comment, the last of his hand chosen crew with power. Brenna had picked a damned fine time to show boldness. These guys were as battle-tested as he, and even with his newfound power, it was a fight they couldn't win. It was a

fight there was no way out of. He voiced his frustration, and a fear that tasted foreign on his tongue.

"I don't want to lose you, dammit!"

"And you won't." Her voice was calm, sure. A damn sight more certain than he.

"Fine, then let's face this standing on our feet, not sitting on our asses." He called the spell he knew by rote, casting protection with nothing more than a thought. It came so easily, and for a moment he wondered if it had worked. Then he saw Brenna squirm, much as she had just a few days ago in Boston, and knew he'd laid the ward true.

And then something prodded the air around them, sending questing, probing fingers against the protection spell around Brenna before being buffeted back.

She jerked as if struck and cast him a frightened look. "It feels almost the same as with Julian, but damped down by your ward."

"I thought you didn't remember that."

"He tried it twice, once when you were fighting him. That's what I feel right now."

Damn. Brenna was susceptible simply by being human. Then another thought struck him.

"Is that why you asked who could enter your thoughts? Did you think I was doing something similar?"

She dropped her head for a moment, staring at her hands, then raised it again. "Yeah. I had to know if what I was feeling was true, or being manipulated somehow."

"Okay. So we're back on an even keel?"

"We were never uneven; that kind of question was just something I couldn't brush aside."

Donovan mulled her statement over; she was right. She was the Warden, and had to understand where she stood in anything concerning the Sorhineth. She'd kept her head about her when most people he knew—Terrans included—would have run screaming.

"All right, what do you say we get this show on the road? As long as you're under the ward, we should be fine."

She nodded and leaned in to place a quick kiss on his lips. Her hand crept around his head and caressed the nape of his neck before she withdrew. "Sounds like a plan to me, Callahan. Let's rock and roll."

Donovan looked deep into her eyes. The future shone brightly in them, confirming everything he needed to know. It would do. She would do. As if he'd ever had any question.

He stepped out of the car slowly, keeping his hands wide and free. Not that he could do much to harm his ex-employees, but it never hurt to be careful, at least until he figured out how he was going to handle this scenario.

Brenna joined him at the side of the car, her back straight and true. Love, tinged by just a hint of fear, surrounded her.

But even more alarming was the sudden burn in his pants pocket, as his key fob pulsed in time with his heart.

* * * *

Brenna slung the backpack over her shoulder, her earlier fear evaporating as their secret weapon rested against her back. But her heart, oh no, it still thundered in her chest.

The three Terrans fanned out in the middle of the street looked like mobsters.

Brenna sucked in a breath, tasting fumes, the salt of the Bay and the undeniable taint of age and decay.

No one would step in to aid them here; it would be every man—or woman—for themselves. She shot a glance at Donovan, who looked even more intense than usual, and a little disturbed. She chewed on her lip. Yeah, their element of surprise was shot to hell, but her belief in him as the Spirit Talisman was true.

They would stick together, of that she was certain.

As if in response to her thoughts, the wind blasted off the Bay, slicing down the narrow streets, buffeting around her like an angry banshee, seemingly trying to separate Donovan from her. She stood firm and stared straight ahead.

When one of the gorillas spoke, his voice was surprisingly low, surprisingly gentle.

"You've been summoned by your leader, and ignored your summons."

Donovan jerked, his body humming with tension. "What makes you think I have any interest in KOTE? Until now, you've never had any in me."

A gravelly, aged voice answered from the still-open door. "Because, young Terran, this moment has been Seen."

Donovan froze, as if every muscle had locked in place. Brenna threaded her fingers through his, lending him anything—everything—she had to help them get out of this alive.

"So I keep hearing. And what was the outcome of that Sight?" Donovan's voice was clipped, perfectly controlled.

"That it would come to this moment in time, this moment of decision." The voice in the car was weary now. "Will you come with us willingly, or shall we destroy what's left of this neighborhood where we stand?"

Donovan turned to her, his face drawn in stark lines.
"Lhiannan?"

She forced a smirk. "Do we have a choice? We'll figure it out as we go. That's what we've been doing so far, right?" She squeezed his hand in support, and the pure, unadulterated heat of his returned clasp seared her down to her soul.

* * * *

Donovan's mind shifted to the purely tactical in an instant. He knew that voice, knew it was somehow tied to the jewels burning hotly in his pocket. But was the old Terran an ally or an enemy? And what was the significance of the man's gift? What choice did he really have?

He couldn't overpower the Terrans standing before them, not without compromising Brenna's safety.

So he did the next best thing. It was bitter to be doing the very thing Jenalee and Julian had tried to force upon them, but he could certainly bluff.

"We'll accompany you, but only because we choose it. After all, we were going that direction anyway. And with the power of the Sorhineth behind us, I'm sure you realize it *is* a choice?"

"Aye, Callahan. Otherwise this conversation would be moot, because both of you would be dead."

Donovan forced a sarcastic smile, knowing the Terran in the limousine could see it with his enhanced senses. "Ah yes. Both of your efforts failed."

His adversary sighed. "And now KOTE sees what they should have done in the first place. Offered you a position among us. Both you and your Warden."

Like there's a chance in hell of that, Donovan thought sardonically. "We'll listen. I can't promise more than that."

"Very well. I don't suppose you'd like to ride with us?" Wry amusement colored the hidden Terran's voice now.

"Thank you, no." Brenna's response was just as amused. And just as forced. If he hadn't known her—intimately—he would never have heard the difference. "We'll follow."

"In five minutes," Donovan said firmly, and stepped back to his open door. Brenna did the same, and with that, their course was set.

* * * *

"We're going to die, aren't we?" Brenna fought to keep her voice steady as she settled into the passenger seat. She let the familiar smell of the Jag calm her, and the beloved sight of Donovan center her. He'd pulled his key chain out of his pocket, and was running his fingers over the beautiful inset stones.

Right that second, she didn't give two hoots about his keys, it was more important than anything to speak her feelings aloud ... again.

"No, we're not going to die. Give me your mobile." His eyes openly caressed her, and she knew he was lying. They were going to die.

Brenna dug into the travel bag and held out the phone, keeping it in her grasp until he turned his attention to her.

"I love you, Donovan."

"And I you, pet." He didn't use the endearment lightly, but instead gave it a wealth and depth that made her heart soar. "But don't get all maudlin on me. We'll get out of here yet. I've been in tighter scrapes than this."

He pulled the phone from her fingers and dialed, then propped it between shoulder and ear.

"Mark, it's begun. Let me talk to Claire." He waited a beat, then held the key fob up to the light. "Think fast, wonder-girl. I've got a key chain a wicked-old Terran gave me over Thanksgiving as a 'gift.' It's set with stones that look like rubies and diamonds, and they're huge, four or five carats each, probably worth a fucking fortune. The setting is old, looks handcrafted, gold." He winked at Brenna. "Whoa, slow down, Claire, I need to relay this to Brenna as you say it, so we're both on the same page.

"Okay, yes, they're triangular, which is what made me think they were semi-precious, rather than the real deal, but now I have to wonder. As an Earth Elemental, they're calling to me, getting warm when I do specific things. What things? Hell, I don't remember. Only that it's not all the time."

"Fruits of the earth," Brenna breathed as a vivid memory struck her, and she scrambled to unearth the journal from her backpack. While Donovan spoke she rifled through the pages.

"Here it is!" she crowed, not giving a damn if the Terrans in the car in front of them were waiting or not.

"Claire, hold on a sec. What did you find?"

"It's in the journal ... look ... *One Talisman of each sign will appear when they are needed most by their people and by the world. They will know of their summoning when the fruits of the earth appear before them, and those fruits will enhance their power to the unimaginable.*"

"Damn! You may be right. Okay, Claire, put Mark back on. Mark? You and Claire know what to do." He reached out for a brief moment and tucked a strand of hair behind Brenna's ear. "If you don't hear from us in an hour, kill Julian and contact Terry. As the eldest Kennedy, he'll know what to do with it until another Warden is born." Then Donovan held out the phone so she could hear Mark's answer, much as she imagined Mark and Claire were doing.

Mark's voice was choked. "I still don't feel right about this, Donovan. Let me come to you, fight with you."

"No, the Sorhineth is more important than Brenna and I."

Mark sighed, but when he spoke, his tone was hard as granite. "All right, but I'll be expecting a call, telling me it's all over."

"And I look forward to making that call, old friend. Have Claire bind Julian and get the hell out of the City." He hung up and tossed the phone on the seat behind them, then ran his thumb over the key chain.

"Where did you get it?" Brenna asked, her voice threaded with excitement.

"A little over a month ago, from the Terran in the limo. Don't get excited. For all I know, it's something to drain what power I have, rather than enhance it, but that's not what it feels like. When I think about it, it feels *right*. As if I'm supposed to have it. Until now, I didn't even realize ... but when I think about it, it warmed when I made a good decision or held the Sorhineth."

"Given what this says," Brenna tapped the open journal, "I'd have to say you're fated for it."

"Maybe, but I'm not making any assumptions, even if it's something that's been Seen. Now let's go kick some ass."

* * * *

The Transamerica Building loomed tall and stark above them, and for the first time she saw it as an evil omen, rather than the "welcome to San Francisco" it had been designed as.

They entered the empty lobby flanked by the three big Terrans and Donovan's mystery gift giver. Their shadowy-faced summoner was at last revealed as a wizened Terran who looked older than San Francisco. Dressed in an impeccable charcoal suit, he resembled a lawyer or judge. He gave them the once-over and nodded almost imperceptibly before preceding them into the elevator.

Brenna itched to press him on the key chain, but that was Donovan's right, and she understood his silence with the three towering Terrans crowding them.

The elevator was screechingly slow and claustrophobically cramped. Not a word was spoken as they ascended, but the power humming throughout the tiny enclosure was deafening.

Brenna felt each second tick by as if it were an hour, and for the first time since she'd abdicated her role as Warden half an hour ago, she was glad the Sorhineth wasn't with her. What she and Donovan were going to do was pure lunacy, a point well argued by both Claire and Mark. But she knew he'd been right. They needed to inflict what damage they could upon the highest echelons of KOTE, get the Sorhineth to her brothers, and let them know a war was on.

The elevator ground to a halt, and their aged host threw his arm wide, gesturing them through the open doors.

They entered an atrium which would be sun-filled by day, but now only unrelieved winter darkness pushed at the windows. At this height, even the glow of lights from the city far below them was dim.

And standing in the room, one hip propped casually against a richly stained teak reception desk was a man Brenna instantly recognized.

Carlisle Winthrop III, the face of San Francisco reconstruction, owner of one of the Bay Area's football teams, and all around philanthropist. His taint of Destroyer was just as strong as Jenalee's, but more cultured somehow, more refined. Nattily dressed in khakis and a button-down dress shirt with a navy dickey, he was the very picture of the cavalier yachtsman.

But his voice echoed with authority as he pushed away from the desk.

"Donovan Callahan. The Spirit Talisman. How unfortunate Jenalee saw you as harmless, when you're everything but. By

the time we realized what you were, the wheels were already in motion."

Brenna stiffened. Her hypothesis about Donovan had been on the mark. He *was* the Spirit Talisman. But how had the Destroyer known? She wasn't sure if she was pleased or mortified of the validation by this ... thing.

Donovan answered easily, as if this were a meeting for cocktails rather than them battling for their very lives. "Winthrop, imagine finally meeting you in the flesh now, after all the times I've guarded your players."

Winthrop dismissed the Terran muscle and the old man with a flick of his fingers.

"About Jenalee," Donovan stated blandly. "You had her for a long while, didn't you?"

"Twenty years, at least. As a Singer she was a valuable asset."

"An asset, perhaps, but a twisted one," Brenna broke in. They knew Jenalee and Julian had been in on something together, but Brenna had never gotten the impression it was fully condoned by KOTE. She had a feeling they'd been working together on the side. Had they pushed Julian further, they probably could have uncovered it, but Donovan had wanted to move against KOTE, and she'd agreed with him. Now, though, it was time to play her hunch and see how Winthrop reacted.

"How so?" The Destroyer's voice was almost uninterested. Almost.

She could feel Donovan tense beside her, but he played along. In retrospect, she should have said something ...

Winthrop didn't need any kind of advantage. But hindsight was always twenty-twenty, so she pressed on. "She was playing both ends against the middle. If she'd taken the Sorhineth, she and Julian would have used it for their own gain."

"And you deduced this, how?"

"The way she used Donovan so relentlessly. If she could do that to her best friend, there wasn't anything stopping her from doing the same to you. She was cold enough, and Julian was nothing more than the muscle. Muscle she brought in."

"An interesting hypothesis, Warden, but one that can never be proved, and is a moot point, since I assume you've disposed of both." Winthrop settled his attention squarely on Brenna. A chill swept over her as she felt him begin to probe her mind, her aura, but was blocked by the ward.

"Stop that," she snapped, although it wasn't like she could do anything about it.

Winthrop had the gall to look amused as he withdrew his presence. "Very well, Warden. I must say, you're not what I expected."

"I could say the same, Destroyer."

Donovan shifted to stand even closer to her. Brenna felt him begin to gather power, and mentally crossed her fingers. They'd agreed the head Destroyer needed to be killed, and now that they were alone with him the distasteful duty could begin. But first, they needed to know more ... fill out the picture that had become more and more apparent since they'd started this journey less than a week ago.

Winthrop unknowingly aided them by cutting right to the chase.

"Join us, as one of the inner circle."

"And why should we, when we've got the Sorhineth and you don't?" Donovan asked, his tone even.

"Because if you don't become one of us, we'll hunt you down and take the Warden and Sorhineth from you. I haven't taken it yet because I'd prefer having you as an ally rather than a corpse. Perhaps you were correct about Jenalee and Julian, Warden. But as I said before, it makes no difference since they are dead and you still hold the Sorhineth."

Winthrop's tone was just as reasonable, as if they were discussing the weather, or perhaps the stock market.

"And just how would we benefit in selling our souls?" Donovan's voice held distaste and a measure of disdain now.

Winthrop took offense; it was evident in the flare of his nostrils and narrowing of his eyes. "You've enjoyed our prosperity, and now you feel fit to decry it? You're a hypocrite."

"I paid my dues in blood, sweat and tears, not making money at the expense of innocent lives, you bastard."

"Innocent? Don't delude yourself, Callahan. Everyone dies, even Terrans. This is America, and I daresay no one has been innocent here in a century. Money rules here, son, and you'd do best to remember that before you martyr yourself."

His words sparked something inside Brenna, made her think of some of Mark and Julian's statements, and the pieces fell together neatly like a jigsaw puzzle. She fought and failed to keep the fury from her voice. "You allowed events like

Loma Prieta to occur so you could make money. I see it now ... Carlisle Winthrop, the great rebuildier. All those construction jobs, the corruption that allowed you to basically take every big project that came along. How very pedestrian. Was it worth it?"

"Watch yourself, Warden. You speak of things you do not know."

"Oh, I think she's on the right track," Donovan said, picking up her train of thought unerringly. "I'll bet even money one of KOTE's subsidiaries is cleaning up Alaska right now, and there's a Destroyer just like you in China, and you have the contract in Hurricane Hugo cleanup."

Winthrop's lips tightened, but he said nothing.

"What makes you think I'm not powerful enough to take you right now, and flush all of the Destroyers as well? I'd be doing the world a favor."

"Because I'll kill your Warden first, the Sorhineth be damned. You aren't coldhearted enough to watch yet another woman perish." Satisfaction coated his words now, as if he held a trump card.

Donovan let out a harsh laugh. "You think you know me, but you have no idea what I'm capable of. As for the Warden, we both know we'll probably end up dead anyway."

And even though they'd spoken of this in The Drake, had known the very real possibility of it happening, it still scared Brenna to think he was probably right. Their secret weapon weighed down her backpack, zippered securely in the front pouch where Donovan could get to it quickly.

"But there's no need for it. Hand over the Sorhineth, and you and your Warden will be secure, happy and rich for the rest of your lives."

"At the cost of our consciences?" Donovan's headshake was small, but firm. "I don't think so."

Winthrop sighed. "Then this conversation has gone on far too long. You're too naïve to ever be an asset to us, both of you."

Brenna felt the full force of his power as he curled a fist of air around her, hampered by the protection spell, but still reaching through, squeezing the breath out of her incrementally.

Donovan shifted back as he poured more energy into the protection spell, unzipped the backpack and pulled the Beretta out. He chambered a round and swung the weapon, pointing it directly at Winthrop.

* * * *

Donovan tightened his finger on the trigger without any hesitation. This was one death he wouldn't regret. He looked into Winthrop's eyes, and saw them widen in surprise. Just like Julian, he hadn't expected the physical threat. He had Brenna and the way she'd dealt with Jenalee to thank for that.

"Goodbye, asshole."

The ground beneath him jolted sharply, pulling his attention from Winthrop for the split second it took the Destroyer to vault over the reception desk.

Donovan shook his head as pain lanced through him, setting his body on fire.

The building swayed sickeningly. Hayward Fault, his Earth Element genes screamed, and it took everything he had to maintain the protection spell draped over them rather than channeling his power into the wounded earth.

He looked for Winthrop, but the damned Destroyer was still cowering behind the desk, and Donovan could feel him strengthening his weave on the air, cutting off Brenna's oxygen and beginning to infringe upon his own.

The earth jolted again and he realized he had to make a choice. Brenna or San Francisco. Protector or Earth Elemental. His life and his beloved's or the lives of thousands, perhaps millions. And if he chose Brenna and himself, then he was no better than the Destroyers who had precipitated all of this in the first place.

All of these thoughts took a flash in time, but he could feel the instability along the fault growing more tenuous by the millisecond, and knew intuitively that Winthrop had nothing to do with it. The Earth was rebelling all on her own.

"Do it," Brenna gasped, as if reading his mind, and held her hand out for the gun.

He dipped his head and pressed the gun into her palm, even as his heart overflowed with love for her. Then he cast his soul into repairing the rift miles beneath his feet, abandoning his all-too-human mate to the full force of Winthrop's power. As he did, he felt the jewels in the key chain course to life, adding an almost divine energy to his channeling.

Winthrop's spell hit him full force, pushing the air from his lungs with a visceral punch.

From the periphery of his vision he could see Brenna step forward haltingly, the Beretta raised. He knew she had to be on the last reserves of breath, but she struggled ahead. A distant part of him hated the fact she was doing what he should be, but even the scant amount of attention he drew away to keep tabs on her lessened the impact he was having on stabilizing the ground beneath him. So, with great regret, he let it go, let everything go, and fed his very being into his Earth Elemental genes.

As he did, it was as if a great light beamed down on him, filling his senses with peace, with overwhelming power. And in that moment he *knew*. Brenna had been right. He was the Spirit Talisman, the Terran who had been Seen those many years ago. A dull roar sounded in his ears, and he wasn't sure if it was a lack of oxygen, or a greater power. He didn't really care. Let the dice fly high; there was nothing left but try his damndest to do the right thing.

He sluiced all of himself into the earth, coaxing the tectonic plates together, soothing Mother Earth with everything he had in him. And as he did, he felt her answer in return, settling back on her haunches and considering him. Then she smiled, and it was a balm to his soul. By sacrificing himself and Brenna, he had given the Bay Area another chance.

And as he lost consciousness, he hoped Brenna's family would have the wisdom and absolute heart she did, and would use the Sorhineth as it had been meant to be ... for

good, for right, for Earth. Claire and Mark would be the new face of KOTE. They had to be.

Lhiannan, my mate, my everything, he thought, and then he was gone.

* * * *

Brenna fell to her knees and forced herself to crawl onward, Beretta dangling weakly from one hand, breath sawing in and out like a bellows. Black spots danced in front of her eyes, and she felt, rather than saw, Donovan collapse, and knew they were done, one way or the other. But she was taking that son of a bitch Winthrop with them.

Pure energy hummed in the air around her, more pure than Destroyer magic, but it was dimmed by the way her body was shutting down.

She rounded the corner of the reception desk and saw Winthrop crouched in the knee space, eyes closed as he frantically recited under his breath.

The pistol rose as if by its own volition.

"This is for Donovan, you coward," she rasped out, and pulled the trigger.

The gun bucked in her hand, and she had the gut-deep satisfaction of seeing his head explode before the spots coalesced into a dark veil.

Her last thought was of Donovan, and the knowledge they would be together again, even if in the afterlife.

Chapter Eleven

"Jesus, they're both dead."

Donovan heard Mark's whisper as his friend crouched over him, and cracked open one eye when Claire's protection spell dropped over them like a shroud. The room spun around him.

"Brenna..." he rasped, and tried to push himself up, but failed. If Brenna was gone, there was no reason for him to live anymore.

"Shhh," Claire soothed, dropping to her knees beside him. "Mark's checking on her."

"She's alive. Shocky as hell, but alive." Mark's voice was a study in pure relief, and Donovan closed his eyes, letting them continue to talk around him. If Brenna was all right, then it had all been worth it.

"Claire, help me move her. I don't want her waking up to that sight."

"What sight ... Oh shit." Donovan had to smile at the obvious disgust in her tone.

"We need to get them out of here, now. We can do clean-up later, if we have a chance to."

Mark looped an arm under Donovan's shoulders and pushed him into a sitting position. "Donovan, talk to me. Is there anyone left we can trust?"

"Brenna's family. Get them out here," he croaked, and opened his eyes. The spinning had stopped, and he slowly turned his head to see Brenna lying next to him, her face far too pale, pulse beating weakly in her throat. He laid a shaking

hand on her forehead, deluging her with all the love he felt, just as he had with Mother Earth.

Her eyes fluttered open and her hand rose to grasp his wrist.

"We won, my *Ihiannan*. We won."

* * * *

They reached the lobby of the Transamerica Building unaccosted. Donovan was pretty sure Claire had cast an invisibility spell, but he was too damned tired to really give a damn.

Brenna was still weak as a kitten, but at least now she was standing on her own, although she was hanging on Mark like a lifeline.

The street was packed with people of all races and economic types, united by the Christmas spirit and the second earthquake in less than three months. They wound through the crowd unnoticed, just another set of survivors among the many.

If only they knew.

The Jag was just where they'd left it on the street, and Donovan slid into the back seat with a relieved sigh. Brenna joined him, snuggling into his side and resting her head on his shoulder.

"Where to, boss?" Mark was behind the wheel, Claire riding shotgun with Brenna's backpack and the Sorhineth tucked between her feet.

"The Drake."

"But Julian's still there. We left him unconscious and so bound he couldn't move an eyelash if he tried," Claire countered.

"I know. Just take us there. You'll understand in a few moments." Donovan wondered if they thought he was going to kill Julian. It would make sense, but was the last thing on his mind.

"Did you contact my family?" Brenna asked, her voice expressing her obvious exhaustion.

"Not yet. We, ah, decided to bind Julian and get an idea of what was happening first. The quake hit just as we pulled into the parking garage." Mark shot Donovan a quick look in the rearview mirror. From the look in his eyes, he expected to be chastised for going against Donovan's order.

"We're good, Mark. No worries."

His friend let out a quick huff of breath and nodded sharply, then started the car.

As they pulled away from the curb and navigated between the mass of humanity, Donovan propped his head against Brenna's and deeply inhaled the scent of her.

He had many things to say to his mate, but it could wait until they were alone. Now he was going to ponder what had happened while it was still fresh on his mind, and try to figure out where they went from here.

Winthrop was dead, but the war was still on, and Julian played right into his plans.

* * * *

Julian was awake and fighting mentally against his bonds, his face beet-red with exertion, though he hadn't moved a muscle.

"Release him," Donovan said, as he settled onto the couch, facing his former employee. Claire and Mark stood by the bar, ready to jump into action if they had to.

Brenna sat next to him, lending what little support she could as she wondered what he was up to. Whatever it was, it would be the right thing, of that she had no question.

She'd spent the car ride over thinking about what she'd done. She'd taken a life. Granted, it was a completely justified action, but it still grated at her soul. She knew it was something she'd relive over and over again, but in the end she was glad. Glad she'd done it, that Donovan had had the inner strength to do whatever the hell he'd done, that they'd come out of this alive.

"It's over, Julian." Donovan's voice, quiet and authoritative, brought her back to the room.

"Obviously, if you're sitting here." The Destroyer had regained all of his hatred, his malice, in the short time they'd been gone.

"KOTE is mine now, by right, and I'm taking it ... taking it all."

Damn, Brenna thought, he was laying it all on the table. If she didn't absolutely know Donovan's true nature, as recognized by the key chain he now dangled from one hand, she'd swear he sounded like a megalomaniac corrupted by his taste of power. But maybe that's exactly what he wanted Julian to think.

"And you're telling me this ... why?" Julian sneered, but his bravado was a façade Brenna could easily see through. He was scared, and he had every right to be.

"Because you're going to spread the word. Let them know they're welcome to come after me now ... you know where we'll be. Tell them the Spirit Talisman has taken over the helm, and damn anyone who thinks we'll be doing anything but what we should, as Terrans. Starting today, we go back to the old ways ... with the weight of the Sorhineth, the Warden, Claire and Mark behind us. No new identities, no more money, no more anything for anyone who reeks of Destroyer taint."

Holy shit, he'd done it! Brenna stared at Donovan with wonder and awe. He'd not only accepted he was the Talisman, but had lobbed the ball firmly back in the Destroyer's court by offering the challenge.

"So you're letting me go, just like that?" Julian asked, obviously looking for a trap.

"Just like that. I never want to see you again. You have three hours to leave San Francisco. If you're here after that, you're dead. All Destroyers have twelve hours to clear out. By noon tomorrow, we go hunting."

"But that's not enough time," Julian whined, and the change in him was startling. Donovan's death threat had had the desired outcome. It gave Brenna no little satisfaction to see the Destroyer reduced to a sniveling hulk.

"It'll have to be. You have a network, don't think you can delude me into thinking you don't. Start as soon as you get home. I don't really care one way or the other, but I'd rather

not spill more blood the day after Christmas. I will if I have to. I don't know what kind of game you and Jenalee were playing, trying to double-cross Winthrop, and I don't really care. She's dead, he's dead, and you will be in three hours. Now go." Donovan stood and motioned Julian to his feet. "Go, and don't ever pollute San Francisco with your presence again."

Julian shuffled to the door, casting one last look over his shoulder as if he expected Donovan to attack him from behind. He closed the door quietly behind him, and Brenna let out a sigh of relief.

Donovan sank down onto the couch with a tired huff. "I could really, really use a drink right now."

"Coming right up, boss." Mark's voice was full of unrestrained glee.

Brenna feathered a hand over Donovan's cheek. "You did it."

He turned his face into her palm. "No, we did it." Then his eyes turned haunted. "I'm so sorry you had to kill him. It should have been my job to do."

"No, love. You had more important things to take care of, like saving a few million lives."

"What?" Mark sputtered as he set the bar service down on a side table with a clang. Claire joined him in pouring, then they sat down opposite Donovan and Brenna. "It might be nice if Claire and I knew what had happened, since we're helping in reforming KOTE."

Donovan grimaced. "Those were just words, you know, to show him a united front."

"To hell with that," Claire replied vehemently. "We're in it for the long haul, aren't we, Mark?"

"Damn straight."

Brenna smiled. The two were definitely a pair, and she was glad they were behind her and Donovan.

Mark pressed a drink into Donovan's hand. He took a long swallow, then rolled the glass over his forehead. "It was the Hayward Fault."

"And that means..." Claire prompted.

"If it had let loose, the whole City would be gone. The damned plates were so unstable it felt like the whole mass was going to break off. Hell, it would have, and Vallejo would be beachfront property."

Mark swallowed audibly. "What did you do?"

Donovan answered with a short laugh. "Apparently I placated Mother Earth enough so we didn't all go swimming. I've got the feeling if I don't hold up my end of the deal by turning the Terrans around, all bets are off, though."

"And Winthrop?" Claire asked.

"Brenna took care of that." He turned and placed a kiss on her lips. It was chaste, but swamped her with the emotion behind it.

"So what do we do now?" Mark, who seemed to be the voice of reason of their group, had already moved on past Brenna's dispatch of the Destroyer.

"Clean up first. We need to get rid of Jenalee and Winthrop's bodies, come up with some sort of cover story. They were too visible to just drop off the face of the earth.

Then we need to start beating the bushes for people we can trust."

"I think you'll find more of those than you might think," Claire said cryptically. "I placed a strong warding on Winthrop's office. Not the same one you used on Jenalee, but something similar. It'll hold until tomorrow. And as much as I'd like to continue this, you both need to get some rest. Mark and I will watch Julian's place to make sure he hits the road, and we can start on this ... quest, tomorrow." She stood and tossed back her drink. Mark followed suit and they walked to the door together. "How does sevenish sound?"

Brenna groaned, then smiled. "Too early, but I'll be up."

"Seven it is. I'm laying a ward at the door. If someone's determined they might make it through, but you'll know long before they get in."

Donovan stood and gave her a hug, then shook Mark's hand. "Thank you ... for everything."

"Hell, this is the most excitement I've seen since the Marines," Mark grinned and placed a hand on Claire's back, urging her out the door.

Donovan closed it behind them as the clock on the wall chimed midnight softly.

"Well, we made it through Christmas, *Ihiannan*."

She stood and stepped to him, circling his waist with her arms. Laying her head on his broad back, she whispered, "Yes we did."

He turned and gathered her close. "I thought I was going to lose you, Brenna." His voice was thick with emotion.

"I'm not so easy to get rid of. And now you've got me forever, providing the leader of KOTE wants to consort with a simple Warden." She made her tone light, but knew he would understand the question behind her words.

"Ah, Brenna, you're no consort. You'll be my wife, as soon as we get this mess straightened out. Providing your brothers don't beat me to a pulp over even thinking it." He smiled a lopsided little grin, and it warmed her heart.

"As much as my mind wants to throw you over the back of that couch and fuck you raw, then bury my face in your pussy, I don't think my body's got the drift."

He gave a heated but wry smile, one she matched, even though her heart was beating in triple time. The picture he painted with his words excited her beyond reason. But just like Donovan, she didn't think her body was ready to cooperate with her overheated brain, not after what they'd both been through.

"I think we're on the same wavelength then, because I'm about ready to fall asleep on my feet."

They wound their way into the bedroom, shed their clothes with little fanfare and crawled under the covers, cuddling each other as they dropped off to a sleep so deep it seemed drugged.

* * * *

Brenna woke to the unholy sensation of Donovan's hands on her breasts, his mouth on her pussy. She arched beneath his touch and tried to move her hands down to run them through his hair, only to find herself bound to the bedposts.

Donovan's chuckle against her clit sent a shiver of pure desire through her. He lifted his head and looked at her with an expression so deliciously sinful and sexually potent it froze her in place.

"Do you mind?" His voice was pure smoke.

She shook her head numbly. She didn't mind at all, not with Donovan. In fact, the idea titillated her, made her hotter, wetter, until she could feel her juices trickling out, coating the sheet beneath them. How had he known that right now, right this second, she needed him to take control because she didn't *want* the responsibility of making a choice? The fact he'd read her thoughts, her deepest, darkest desires, sent a shiver through her.

Donovan smiled wickedly, holding her gaze as he tweaked her nipples, then trailed his hands down her body, spreading open her pussy lips with strong, sensual fingers, before snaking out his tongue and teasing her clit with quick, feather-light strokes.

Brenna was trapped by his gaze as he tantalized, tormented. His fingers slid down, and he dipped one finger inside, then two, thrusting slowly in time to each flick of his tongue.

She bucked against him, still snared by his eyes. God, she burned; her pussy spasmed around his fingers as her mind went blank, her eyes drifted closed, and she reached for her climax.

And then he stopped. Fucking *stopped*!

She thrashed against her bindings as he pulled out of her. "Donovan," she groaned.

"Trust me, love." His palms coasted over her thighs, bringing her down slowly, gentling her frustration.

His lips were on her again, his fingers plunging faster than before, reaching deep and brushing her G-spot with unerring accuracy. His other hand spread her wide, allowing cool air to wash around her, chilling her wherever his mouth and fingers were absent. Her nipples pebbled until the sensation was almost painful. Her heart rabbited in her chest as her muscles clamped down on his fingers again. She strained against her bonds, teetering on the edge of coming.

He slowed again, sending her frustration screaming. "Donovan, goddamn it!" She was almost sobbing now, she was so close. Cool air caressed her inflamed pussy as he pulled away, and if her hands had been free, she would have happily strangled him.

She splintered the second his cock slid inside, heaving against the hard wall of his body as he thrust so slowly, so methodically. Her mind went blessedly blank as her body settled, sated.

When she came back into herself Donovan still set the same slow pace, his face lit with joy as he watched her face.

"Hello, my love," he breathed, and dropped down to kiss her, his tongue mapping her mouth with lazy efficiency. She could taste herself on his lips, smell herself on his skin, and the sensation was so erotic she felt her pulse bump up again.

He smiled against her lips and trailed a hand down, grabbing her ass and tipping her hips. His cock slid deeper into her pussy, filling her to overflowing.

She moaned against his mouth and pushed her breasts into his chest, reveling in the feel of her nipples against all that sweaty manhood. Tilting her hips even further, she planted her heels on the bed and rose up to meet him with each thrust, daring him to maintain his snail's pace. When it appeared he was going to do just that, she did the one thing she knew would prod him...

Capturing his bottom lip between her teeth, she nipped, not hard enough to draw blood, but enough to get his attention.

"Had enough, have you?" he rasped, his eyes deepening to the whiskey color that meant he was losing control.

"I can take whatever you can dish out," she said, then gasped as his cock drove into her again and again until she was physically being pushed up the bed. *Oh yeah.*

His face was strained above hers, his arms corded, his body slick with sweat.

Brenna stopped focusing on goading Donovan and gave herself over to the sensations flowing through her body. She felt him begin to swell inside her and came again in an explosion.

She lay there, boneless as Donovan rolled on his side and untied her arms, then pulled her close.

"Love you, *Ihiannan*," he breathed in her ear.

"Hmmm," she murmured, "me too, my mate. But next time, *you* get tied up."

Epilogue

Christmas Eve, 1990

Brenna stepped out of the elevator onto the top floor of KOTE's headquarters, glancing around the atrium with satisfaction. A Christmas tree graced one corner, decorated with brightly colored balls, tinsel and garland. It was fake, of course. With his newly defined sense of Earth, she would never have asked Donovan for anything else.

So much had happened in the past year, it made her mind whirl. It had taken time, and no little effort, but the City was reasonably Destroyer-free. Julian had followed their orders to the letter, putting the network he'd denied into motion, and then had cleared out of town. Last they'd heard he'd been seen in New York. From what she remembered of the city, it was a perfect haven for Destroyers, and far enough away that they weren't worried about it ... yet.

Even the goons who had been "assigned" to them last Christmas were gone. Cowards that they were, they'd never even returned to the pyramid, but instead vanished within moments of Winthrop's demise. The security cameras had shown it in blinding clarity. The one thing that worried them the most was the old Terran who'd given Donovan the "gift" he still carried in his pocket. He might be dead ... or not. Having someone with so much knowledge of both the Destroyers and Donovan's abilities on the loose wasn't exactly a comforting thought, even if he was an ally. Why he'd given Donovan the jewels was a question none of them could

answer, no matter how much they researched the name the mystery Terran had given Donovan on that fateful Thanksgiving weekend over a year ago.

Claire and Mark had taken on their new duties with gusto. Claire's library had been relocated to the floor directly beneath the atrium, and included a heavily warded Sorhineth. Only Claire, Donovan and Brenna were allowed to touch it.

And as Claire had predicted, there were a substantial number of Terrans who had been sitting on the sidelines, but were more than willing to help. They now had a full complement of Keepers and Protectors, and their numbers grew with each passing week. Granted, each retained their mundane "day jobs", but they were there, ready to be called upon when needed.

So much had changed in that short year; the world was teetering on the edge of something monumental.

The Berlin Wall had come completely down just months ago, presaging a new world order. While Brenna knew their actions in San Francisco hadn't been the catalyst for it, she had to wonder if they hadn't played some small part by rattling the old KOTE and the Destroyers, forcing them to regroup, and perhaps turning their attention away from something they might have become involved in, if circumstances had been different.

Only time would tell.

Explaining away Jenalee and Winthrop's deaths had been ridiculously easy ... a boating accident in Mexico. Their bodies had been identified by their good friend Mark. Once Jenalee's body had been removed, Donovan hadn't returned to his

house, purchasing another on the other end of town and having movers pack it up, instead.

And Brenna had never been happier. She'd wangled a job at the downtown library, specializing in the history of San Francisco. Donovan had protested, of course, but she'd had her way in the end.

As if he materialized from her thoughts, he spoke from over her shoulder.

She turned to face him, a smile on her face.

"I just wanted to steal a moment alone before your family got here with the last of your things," Donovan said, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear.

"Yeah, they're bound to be ... boisterous," Brenna replied with a grin. Her mama and papa had taken her engagement to Donovan in stride, but her brothers, especially Tommy, well, that was another story.

"Hey, look, we're standing under the mistletoe," Donovan grinned.

His face and demeanor had been ... easy ... since their confrontation one fateful year before, as if in saving the Bay Area he'd been absolved of the things he'd done in war and peace in the past. One of these days she'd get him to spill all of it, but until then, she was happy to go with the flow.

"Hmmm, imagine that," she said as she tipped her face to his. "You're a cocky bastard, Callahan."

"Damn straight, especially when it comes to you, *Ihiannan*." And then he swooped in for a kiss and Brenna found she really didn't care if he was cocky. Donovan Callahan was hers, and that was all she needed to know.

Redemption
by Keira Ramsay

* * * *

My time on this earth is coming to a swift close, and I can't help but reflect on the differences between today and that memorable day on the battlefield in Gettysburg. If I have Seen nothing else of value during my life, it was that Donovan Callahan and his Warden mate would set things right, and that I would be instrumental by passing on the Fruit of the Earth. A new Seer will be born as I pass, and I can only hope his or her life will be as rewarding as mine.

The End

About the Author:

Keira Ramsay is the pen name for TL Schaefer, paranormal mystery writer. She has been writing seriously since 2000, finishing four mainstream projects and beginning her life as an erotica writer with the publication of Blink of an Eye for the Zodiac series.

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