

**Changeling Press Presents
Hot Toddy #8
Mystic Christmas
Aubrey Ross**

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Prologue

Dimension 290-2

Kayrin's nipples gathered into jewel-hard knots as Larot lavished them with attention. She arched her back, raking her fingers through his red-streaked hair. His *iede*-laced breath sent fiery darts from her breast to her clit, making her throb. This was Flame Keeper magic. Not that she needed the additional stimulation to respond to him. Her being cried out for his touch, longed for the completeness she only felt while his body surged inside hers.

"Oh my love, I never tire of tasting you." He whispered the words against one breast, his hand firmly squeezed the other.

Long and lean, his body arched over hers, cradled between her thighs. Should she tell him now or wait until they finished? He descended, trailing warm, wet kisses along her torso. Definitely after! He would be afraid of harming her once he knew, and she craved his uninhibited passion.

Each touch, each caress fueled the love burning in her heart, made her ache for the future others would deny them. How could fate be so cruel? Why were people so regimented? It shouldn't matter that Larot was socially insignificant. She loved him desperately.

He eased her legs up and back, gently parting her folds. The care, the reverence, with which he touched her never failed to stir her emotions. Knowing the aggressive desire driving him made his restraint even sweeter. His tongue circled her clit, dragging a moan from her throat. Heat expanded through her pussy making her core pulse with desire.

Fear pushed through her passion. How would he react to her news? Would it drive him away? What would they do?

"Fill me, my love. I need you inside me." He ignored her plaintive words and continued to worship her with his mouth. "Please!"

She had never felt the forces pulling them apart so keenly. The entire dimension had aligned to oppose their union. But she wanted Larot!

He flipped her onto her stomach and pulled up on her hips. She gasped, excited by his urgency. Dragging her arms to the small of her back, he crossed them and thrust into her heat with one forceful drive. Her cunt stretched, welcoming his thick cock. Her body responded with rhythmic pulsations, thrilled by his possessiveness. She needed this wildness, needed to know the desperation fueling his desire. His shaft filled the emptiness threatening to consume her. The pillows muffled her rapturous cries.

Pushing deep, he released her arms and cupped her breasts, working her nipples simultaneously. She rested on her forearms, pushing her hips back against him, unwilling to lose the blissful fullness of his cock.

"I love you," he whispered above her ear as one of his hands insinuated itself between her thighs. "Make room for me, *rijnna mi*. I want to feel your pleasure before I find my own."

She scooted her knees apart, opening herself, giving him room to play. Heat seared her delicate folds. Flame *iede*! He'd coated his fingers with the mystic substance, accelerating her arousal to the point of pain.

"Move!" she cried out. "I can't bear it."

"Yes, you can." He circled her clit with his fingertips. "Accept the heat, absorb it, embrace it."

An unexpected rush of cold counteracted the effects of his Flame *iede*. He gasped and shuddered against her back. "Did you do that on purpose?"

"No. You felt it too?"

"Gods, yes! Your pussy is ice-cold."

"I'm sorry."

He laughed. "Don't be. It feels incredible."

Intensifying the power of his Flame *iede*, he rubbed her clit more vigorously. He pulled nearly out, then slammed back in. She braced against the bed, welcoming the driving penetration of his body. Arching and clenching her inner muscles, she surrendered completely to the sensory storm pounding them.

It had never been this intense before. Never quite so -- savage!

Her back bowed and she buried her face against the bed, muffling her scream as an orgasm tore through her body. He tried valiantly to choke back his passionate cry, but it echoed off the ceiling high above.

Panting harshly, he rolled them to their sides, still buried within her body. "Something is different, my love. What's going on?"

Her breath hitched in her throat. Was it possible? Could he sense the depth of their bonding? Reluctantly separating their bodies, she turned to face him, staring deeply into his eyes. "We're going to have a child."

He stilled, his eyes wide and luminous. "Are you sure?"

"Yes."

She hadn't known what to expect, but his laughter startled her. Wrapping his arms around her, he rolled, bringing her on top of him. "That's wonderful! Are you not pleased?"

"Of course I'm pleased, but..." She straddled his hips, and tried to match his enthusiasm. "What will we do? Where will we go?"

He sat as well, wrapping her legs around his waist. "Why do we need to go anywhere? Don't you see? Keepers can only conceive when they're truly bonded. Your parents will have no choice but to accept our union now."

"There is the slimmest possibility *I* could have been persuaded to accept you, Larot, but the Flame Master had other plans for our daughter." Sierra, Matriarch Flame, stood just inside the chamber door.

Larot gasped and tried to reach the covers at the foot of the bed.

Having sensed her mother's presence just before she spoke, Kayrin wasn't surprised. Her long hair covered her nudity for the most part, so she pressed herself against Larot's chest, and met her mother's angry gaze.

"What Father would or would not have accepted is no longer important. You rule the Order of Flame and I am with child."

"Get dressed! We must make plans." Sierra left the bedchamber as silently as she had entered.

"By the gods, how long was she standing there?" He reluctantly disentangled their bodies, passion forgotten in the face of calamity.

"It doesn't matter. The entire dimension will know of our love soon enough."

His smile returned. "I suppose we can't hide it any longer, can we?"

Matriarch Flame awaited them in her lavishly appointed private chamber. Her long red-streaked brown hair wound about her head in a braided coronet. She stared at her daughter with eyes the same color as the red streaks in her hair. Her rich clothing, her regal bearing, everything about her proclaimed her authority.

"It is no longer safe for Larot in this dimension," she began without preamble. "Your child is at risk too."

"What? Who would dare harm my bonded mate or our baby?" Kayrin objected.

Shaking her head, Sierra expelled a ragged sigh. "You are so naïve. How many times did I tell you that your abilities would make you the most sought after mate in the dimension?"

"I have no unusual abilities! This neutral *iede* you claim I have is useless. I can barely manipulate a Flame sphere."

"You are still very young. Many Keeper abilities remain latent until --"

"It's irrelevant," Kayrin cut in sharply. "I am bonded to Larot, and we are going to have a child."

"Which escalates the danger like never before. If the child is born a Flame Keeper, the risk decreases. But if the child shares your neutral *iede*... They will stop at

nothing to possess you both." She paced the chamber, a rare show of agitation. Matriarch Flame was known throughout the dimension for her unshakable composure.

"What should we do?" Kayrin asked her mother, but she looked at Larot.

"I cannot protect him here. Once it is learned that Larot has stolen what belongs to the Time Master --"

"I belong to no one! I never agreed to bond with Alrick."

Ignoring her daughter's outburst, Sierra went on. "It will come to war if you remain. He must leave this dimension and never return."

"Then I will go with him."

"No!" Larot laid his hand on Kayrin's upper arm, but she twisted away, too upset to consider his objections.

"Do you understand what this sacrifice will mean?"

Kayrin said nothing. How could she not understand? She had been groomed from birth in preparation for her responsibilities as Flame Mistress. Her heart had simply led her in a different direction.

"You are heir to the Order of Flame. Your 'useless' neutral *iede* will one day allow you to master all the Keeper abilities. Not just Flame Keeper skills, *all of them*. Are you listening?"

She heard every word her mother said, but none of it had seemed real until the past few days. Unexpectedly flashes of power had begun manifesting within her. Her body's response to Larot was a good example. She had spontaneously produced Frost *iede*, something impossible for any ordinary Flame Keeper.

"All I know is I love Larot. If he must leave this dimension, then I will follow. And nothing and no one will ever harm this child!"

Larot shook with anger and fear. His expression contorted with emotion. "I will not have you make such a sacrifice for me."

"Would you have your bonded mate united with another? Would you watch the Time Master raise your child?"

He just stared at her, his gaze tormented.

"It's no sacrifice, my love, as long as we're together."

Sierra's handmaiden burst into the room unannounced, her terrified expression halting the Matriarch's reprimand. "He's here, my lady! You must hide Kayrin!"

"Who is here? Speak plainly."

"The Time Master is demanding to see Mistress Kayrin. He claims a vision has revealed her dishonor, and he will not rest until he determines the truth of the vision."

"Stall him any way you can. I will be down directly." Matriarch Flame quickly formed a comm crystal in the cup of her hands and handed it to her daughter. "Take this to Sacha. She understands the need for discretion. I will deal with Alrick."

"Who is Sacha?" Larot asked, obviously embarrassed by his ignorance.

"Most call her Your Eminence," Matriarch Flame drawled sarcastically. "I happen to call her sister."

"The High Priestess of the Sacred Order of the Veil is Kayrin's aunt?" He sounded utterly in awe.

"And she's giving it all up for you." Sierra shook her head. "You better make her happy."

Before she did something practical and responsible, Sierra rushed from the room. She had known for some time that her daughter's affections were straying in an undesirable direction. With a child involved, the die was cast, there would be no going back.

Sierra's own bonding had been negotiated by the elders in an attempt to strengthen the power of Flame *iede*. She had resented every solar cycle she spent under the Flame Master's domination.

Her daughter would not endure such a fate, even if Kayrin must leave the dimension to avoid it!

Indignation emanated off the Time Master in waves. Sierra nearly laughed. Tall, broad-shouldered, with short, sable brown hair and piercing green eyes, he demanded attention with his handsome features and militant bearing.

"Alrick." The informality of her greeting was an intentional slur.

He narrowed his eyes and compressed his lips for a moment before he spoke. "I've come for my mate."

"We've had this conversation before, Master Time. I knew nothing of the contract negotiated between you and my bonded mate."

"That doesn't invalidate the contract."

She cleared her throat and squared her shoulders, meeting his gaze directly. "With all due respect, I find it hard to believe that Osten would have finalized such a contract with *anyone* without so much as mentioning it to me. This is not personal, you understand. If he had made me aware of the negotiations before his death, things would be much simpler now. But as it is, I must validate the contract. If it proves to be authentic, I will approach my daughter --"

"Your daughter has nothing to do with this. I have a contract naming her my bonded mate. I am entitled to court her."

Sierra raised her chin, her dislike of the Time Master growing with each word he uttered. "How can the subject of your courtship have nothing to do with the situation? Your attitude troubles me greatly."

"I saw her, Sierra!" He dispensed with all formality with the use of her given name. "I saw her in the throes of passion, writhing beneath her lover."

"You witnessed this or you had a vision?"

"For a Time Keeper it is the same." He clasped his hands behind his back and glared at her. "I know what I saw."

She took a deep breath and studied his face closely. Betrayal and determination burned in his bright green gaze, but it was the underlying ruthlessness that gave her pause. "It's over, Alrick. Let it go."

His arrogant façade crumbled at her words. Comprehension dawned with ferocious intensity. "What have you done? Where did you send her?"

He reached for her, but she shielded her body with Flame *iede*, and he snatched his hands away.

“This will *never* be over. If I must search dimension by dimension until I find her, I will have what’s mine!”

Sierra trembled as Alrick stormed from the room. Her life just changed forever. The Time Master meant every word.

Chapter One

Dimension 939-3 (Earth)

Olivia Dover sat in her favorite chair listening to the rain pelt the windowpanes. It was supposed to snow on Christmas Eve, not rain. A sad little smile curved her lips. It didn't matter that she lived in New Orleans, she longed for a white Christmas.

She longed for a lot of things, none of which changed the reality of her existence.

Olivia was alone.

A fluffy white cat jumped into her lap and she laughed. "Okay, maybe not alone. I still have you, Baby."

The cat looked at her with adoring, bright blue eyes. She stroked Baby's broad head and the cat purred enthusiastically.

Silver garlands reflected the multicolored lights illuminating the Christmas tree, but Olivia felt anything but festive. The few packages she had bought for the holidays had been packed up and shipped to her goddaughter in Atlanta weeks ago. A miniature village, once her pride and joy, now occupied the space beneath the tree where presents used to go.

Baby meowed, the feline equivalent of a pep talk, and Olivia chuckled. "You're right, pet. Moping doesn't change a thing."

She looked more closely at the miniature village. She had constructed and decorated each little building by hand. The brick chimney from one of the houses had separated and leaned against the general store. Several of the buildings needed fresh paint and the roof of one bowed comically, swollen by humidity.

This would never do.

Grabbing her raincoat and umbrella from the hall closet, she headed out the back door. Charley's workshop was in the back corner of their spacious yard. She'd avoided

the workshop as often as possible in the ten months since she lost her husband, but occasionally she had no choice but to enter his domain.

She opened the umbrella and hurried across the yard. Rain fell in sheets, soaking her pant legs. She shivered violently despite her coat. Mentally listing the things she would need, she pushed open the door to the workshop and froze.

A young woman, soaked to the skin and trembling, knelt beside a man. Olivia noticed the bright red streaks in her hair and frowned. Must be one of those Punk Rockers. The young woman's attention was focused entirely on the man.

The workshop was undisturbed, everything in its place. They didn't appear to be up to mischief. Maybe they'd just been surprised by the storm. An alley ran directly behind the workshop. Still, this was trespassing.

Olivia was about to tell her unwanted visitors to move on when the young woman extended her arms to either side of her body, hands up. A shimmering red substance collected in her palms. Olivia blinked, and blinked some more. It looked like a mixture of glitter and chalk, and it materialized out of nowhere, or flowed directly from the woman's hands.

Impossible.

The woman brought her cupped palms closer together and the shimmering powder formed itself into identical balls. Too stunned to move or make a sound, Olivia watched the balls expand and glow, illuminating the workshop in red.

Torn between fascination and fear, Olivia inched toward the door, but couldn't drag her gaze away from the young couple. Was the man ill? Good heavens, was he dead? He wasn't moving...

She wasn't alone!

Kayrin sensed a person behind her. Craning her neck without deactivating the Flame orbs, she found an elderly woman standing near the door. *Prazot!* She had hoped to go undetected.

"I not will am to harm you." She stumbled over the unfamiliar words hoping she got enough of them right to communicate her meaning.

The old woman crossed her arms and stayed put, staring intently. Kayrin turned back to Larot. Feeding energy into the orbs, she expanded them until his entire body was inundated with red light.

"What's wrong with him? H-how are you doing that?"

The voice came from much closer, but Kayrin didn't divert her attention from her task. "Veil fever."

"I've never heard of such a thing. Should I call an ambulance?"

The image of a vehicle containing medical supplies appeared within her mind. The language infusion was working, just not as quickly as she had hoped. But then she hadn't expected to interact with the natives quite this soon.

"No ambulance. I will heal."

Using the orbs, she monitored Larot's vital signs and his energy levels. There wasn't a whole lot she could do for him. Veil fever was rare. Once a Keeper knew they were susceptible to it there was a preventive inoculation available, but neither she nor Larot had ever come through the Veil before.

"Where are you from, dear? I've never heard an accent quite like yours."

If only she knew. "Far away." Kayrin let the orbs blink out and turned her attention on her reluctant hostess. "Your dwelling, is it warmer than here?"

"Yes, but I'm not sure I'm comfortable having strangers in my house. How about if I fetch some blankets and..." Her dark eyes lingered on Larot for a moment. "How would we get him inside? Isn't he unconscious?"

"You have nothing to fear from us."

The old woman's eyes narrowed. "Your English is getting better. Who are you? How did you come to be in Charley's -- this workshop?"

"The tale will be long in the telling. Can we get my mate inside?"

"Your *mate*? You really aren't from around here are you?"

Kayrin didn't bother with a reply. Reluctantly jolting Larot with an energy charge, she held her breath until he opened his eyes.

"Where are we?"

Kayrin glanced at the old woman. He had spoken in their native tongue, too disoriented to access his language infusion. "Safe," she responded in the same language. "I need to get you into this woman's house. Can you rise?"

"I'll try."

Struggling beneath his weight, Kayrin half dragged, half carried Larot into the cozy house. The old woman eyed them both carefully as if she were searching for weapons. She probably was. Natives of this dimension were notoriously suspicious.

They settled Larot in a bed on the main level of the house and the old woman went to make 'tea.' Kayrin presumed it was something edible and hopefully not poisonous to people from Dimension 290-2. She sat on the bed beside Larot and pressed the backs of her fingers against his flushed cheek. His fever still raged.

The woman returned a short time later carrying a serving tray. "My name is Olivia. What shall I call you?"

"Kayrin."

"Karen?"

"Is that a common name in this -- place?"

"Fairly common."

"Yes. My name is Kar-ran." She attempted to reproduce the other woman's pronunciation.

Olivia poured a steaming beverage from a chubby little pot into a container with a small ring attached to the side. Kayrin waited to see how Olivia picked up the beverage container before she followed suit.

"How long have you and your mate been in New Orleans?"

"Not long. The massive star has appeared three times."

The old woman's brow furrowed at the phrase. "Oh, you mean the *sun*. You've been here three days? Where are you staying?"

Kayrin sniffed the beverage before taking a sip. The taste was faintly bitter, but she welcomed the warmth. "Staying? Yes, we are -- *compelled* to stay."

"Compelled by whom?"

Pretending not to understand the question, Kayrin took another sip of her tea.

"Are you sure we shouldn't get him to a doctor? He doesn't look good."

"He will recover in time. There is no treatment for his -- illness. His body must adjust to the... differences in this location." The words flowed more naturally now. She didn't have to consciously process each phrase.

"Are you hungry? I can make you a sandwich."

Kayrin offered a wan smile. "You are very kind. I must attend to Larot. Perhaps later."

Olivia stayed in the doorway, clearly uncomfortable with the situation. "How did you make those red glowing -- things? What did they do?"

"They are called Flame orbs and they do many different things. I used them to scan my mate, to determine the extent of his illness."

The old woman's expression turned dubious, but she didn't comment on Kayrin's explanation. "I suppose I'll let you get some rest. Do you have luggage or... *How* did you arrive in New Orleans?"

Kayrin just smiled. The more she explained the less likely Olivia would be to accept her answers. "We mean you no harm. As soon as Larot is stronger, we will trouble you no more."

* * *

Karen had seemed too distracted with her husband's illness to eat, but Olivia knew how important it was to keep up your own strength while tending a loved one. She'd had two years of practice before cancer won the battle for Charley's life.

Pushing away the unhappy thought, she made a small mountain of assorted sandwiches. Karen was much too thin. She needed to eat. They should probably try and get some broth down Larry, too. His name had been something more unusual, but with her sketchy memory Larry would have to do.

Karen sat on the bed, gently stroking Larry's hair. Tenderness radiated from her expression, the gentleness of her movements. Olivia smiled. "I brought those sandwiches. You really should eat something."

"You are too kind."

The young woman's smile was beautiful, but the sadness in her eyes made Olivia's heart ache. "Are you all alone? Is there no one you can call?"

"We are strangers to this place. Were it not for your kindness, I don't know what I would have done." Her lovely face blanched and she rested her head in her hands.

"Do you have this fever too?"

She shook her head. "My condition is very different than Larot's."

"What's wrong with you, dear? Can I help?"

"You have been more than generous, and my condition is a joyous thing. I am going to bear a child."

"Oh, you poor dear." Olivia crossed the room and patted Karen's shoulder. "You shouldn't be faced with such uncertainty with a baby on the way."

"The timing is inconvenient, but I am thrilled about the baby."

"As you should be. This is a wondrous occasion. You two relax and don't worry about a thing. I'll see you in the morning."

Chapter Two

Larot emerged from his fiery prison by degrees. His skin no longer burned and the brutal aching in his joints had faded to an annoying soreness. Not everyone survived Veil fever. He should be grateful, but shame and frustration assailed him. His mate needed protection and tenderness as she nurtured their child within her womb. Instead she'd been forced to care for him, to find food and shelter as the fever gradually incapacitated him.

Looking around the shadowy bedroom, he tried to remember where they were. What had happened? How long had they been in Dimension 939-3?

The image of a silver-haired matron formed within his mind. Were they in the old woman's house? His memory was muddled.

Kayrin lay on her side, her back nestled against his chest, her round bottom cradling his groin. He smiled. It didn't really matter where they were as long as Kayrin was safe and their child protected.

Hunger unfurled within him, cramping his abdomen and driving the breath from his lungs. *Prazot!* Combating Veil fever had dangerously weakened him. If he fused their bodies, he could transfer energy directly from Kayrin. He needed her desperately, but he feared for the safety of the baby!

A soft chuckle responded to his dilemma. "What you have in mind won't hurt our daughter, it will only pleasure me."

"You read my mind." He touched her shoulder. "Are you certain we have a daughter?"

She rolled onto her back and raising her hand, gently stroking his face. "The pregnancy has stimulated something dormant within me. Remember what happened

the last time we made love? I'm beginning to understand what it means to have neutral *iede*. I was brushing my hair and my hand turned to Shadow."

His chest tightened as her words drove home the sacrifice she made to be with him. She was destined for so much more than --

"I'm destined to be your mate and the mother of your children. Nothing else matters."

He kissed her hungrily, deeply. "I only wish I could help teach you to control these powers, to reach your full potential. I'm not qualified to mentor --"

"You're not my mentor. You're my mate. And you are the only one qualified for that position."

Fitting his mouth over hers, he tried to be gentle, but her fingers threaded through his hair and her tongue surged into his mouth. She rolled onto her side, molding her breasts against his chest.

"I was so afraid I'd lose you." Her lips moved against his as she whispered the words.

She used her mouth and her hands to communicate her fear, her relief, and her joy. Her hungry kisses and urgent caresses soon had him gasping for breath. Hooking her leg over his hip, she aligned her mound with his cock, rubbing urgently.

"Slow down, my love. I'm not going anywhere." He caressed her back and gentled the kiss until she relaxed against him.

"I'm right here."

"I need you. I burn for you." Her hands moved over his body, squeezing his shoulders, tangling in his hair. She rocked against him, slowly now, each movement a silent plea. Easing away from her, he cupped her breasts, noticing a fullness they hadn't possessed short weeks before.

His heart flipped over in his chest. Her body had already changed in preparation for their child!

"Are you tender here?"

"Not tender so much as sensitive. My nipples especially."

Eager to explore this development, he scooted down along her body and pressed his lips to her breast. He circled her nipple with his tongue and watched it tighten and flush. "Very nice." Moving to her other breast, he lavished it with the same attention, kissing and licking until it too puckered tightly. "Turn around. I want to touch you while I'm inside you."

She had no objection. Rolling onto her other side, she returned to the position she'd been in when he awakened. He rubbed her back and explored the smooth resilience of her rounded ass. Without his prompting, she bent her knee and angled her leg, allowing him access to her slick pussy.

Heat rippled through him, love and tenderness. She was always so responsive, so giving, willing and eager for whatever he chose to do.

He touched her gently, thrilled to find her wet and ready. Parting her folds, he slid his shaft against, but not into her. Surrounded by her moist heat, he molded her tightly against his body and began a leisurely journey across her flesh.

Reaching back, she combed her fingers through his hair as he stroked her breasts, her side, her hip, her thigh. She was so incredibly soft.

Determination surged through him. He would protect her with his life and find a place for them in this strange world, regardless of the price. Love recognized no distinctions, no political agendas. His mate would be happy, his daughter raised in love.

He kissed her neck and entered her slowly, allowing them to savor the blissful fullness of his cock filling her pussy. She sighed, pushing back against him. He groaned, arching forward.

Buried to the hilt, he paused, slipping his hand over her hip and into the valley between her thighs. He circled her clit with his fingertip, smiling at the reflexive tightening of her core. This drove her crazy. And he loved to drive her crazy.

"Move. Please," she whispered.

"Come for me first. I love to feel you come."

"You love making me lose control."

"Guilty. Now come!"

Kayrin trembled in his arms. The warmth of his body molded her back and his cock filled the aching void inside her body. She tightened her inner muscles, thrilled by his determination to give her pleasure.

Everything about him was right. He knew just how to touch her, and he always put her pleasure above his own. Selfless. Generous. *Larot*. How could she help but love him?

His persistent finger circled her clit, building the tension within her. She surrendered to his tender ministrations, allowing the pressure to expand. He nipped her neck. She yelped, but the unexpected sting triggered her orgasm. Her core pulsed rhythmically and waves of sensation engulfed her body.

Circling her clit with his clever finger, he pulled out and rolled her onto her back. "Open for me, *rijnna mi*. Welcome me inside."

She pulled her legs wide, bending her knees, offering herself in blatant invitation. He settled between her thighs, positioning his cock against her.

"Are you sure this won't hurt our daughter?"

"Positive. But I am going to hurt you if you don't --" A sharp gasp replaced the rest of her sentence as he drove home in one firm thrust.

He arched, his head thrown back, eyes squeezed shut. "You feel *so* good." He groaned. Rocking his hips, he dragged his cock nearly out of her, then slid back in. Over and over, with deliberate slowness, until Kayrin arched wildly to meet each teasing thrust.

She gasped, frantically trying to bring him deeper. Emotion quivered through her heart. He had survived Veil fever. They would raise their child together. Her heart swelled with love and tenderness. Despite the uncertainty facing them, she was determined to find happiness -- with her mate.

He thrust firmly, pushed her higher, and intensified the pleasure ricocheting through her body. She wanted to kiss him, to clutch him close against her heart, but he held himself away, balanced on his knees and extended arms.

Shifting his weight, he slipped one hand between their straining bodies, swirling his finger around her clit at the apex of each stroke. She moaned. Sensations rushed from inferno heat to icy chill and back again. Pleasure exploded within her, stealing her breath and making her quake.

He lunged into her, spilling his fiery seed deep within her body with a ragged laugh. "You did it again." He gasped. "We're going to have to figure out how to control that or I'm in big trouble!"

"Or you'll just have to find other ways to pleasure me," she offered with a wicked smile.

"And have my tongue flash frozen? No, thank you. There has to be someone who can teach you to control this."

"Mother gave me a list of Keepers we could contact in the event of an emergency, but we are not to disrupt their lives or endanger their missions."

"Understood."

Easing from her body, he caressed her mouth with slow, leisurely kisses. She indulged her need to touch him, starting with his face and working her way down. Her fingers drifted ever closer to his burgeoning cock.

She snatched her hand back and sat up. "Did you hear that?"

"Hear what? The disappointed groan of my --"

"No. There is someone moving around in the outer room."

He paused, his expression intent as he listened.

"Okay, I can't actually hear them, but they are there. Trust me. Someone is out there."

Effortlessly manifesting clothes as he crawled out of bed, Larot moved cautiously toward the bedroom door. Kayrin dressed as well. Clothing her body in *iede* was one of the few Keeper skills she had mastered before her mystic awakening began.

"You stay here." His gaze promise dire consequences if she ignored his directive.

She tried to obey. He was capable of investigating the disturbance and dealing with any intruder as long as they were from this dimension. Kayrin fidgeted at the thought. What if they were not from this dimension? What if Alrick had sent a Death Keeper...

Stepping out into the hall, she crept toward the front room. Three figures stood silhouetted in the moonlight. She couldn't distinguish one from the other and didn't know how to trigger a light source. Two stood very close together, the third a step back.

Instinctively she manifested *iede* and cast it into the air. Silvery light illuminated the room. Larot ignored the distraction, but the male intruder glanced her way, giving Larot a momentary advantage. The intruder held a knife to Olivia's throat. The old woman shook visibly, her eyes huge in her weathered face. Aiming carefully, Kayrin shot a stream of Flame *iede* into the blade. The culprit yelped and dropped the weapon, giving Larot an opening.

Coating his hands with Flame *iede*, Larot shoved the intruder backward as Kayrin hurried Olivia away from the fray. The intruder screamed, clutching his chest. The clear imprint of Larot's hands burned through his clothing.

Larot advanced. With one forceful swipe of his leg, he knocked the other man's feet out from underneath him and followed him down. Larot pinned the intruder's hands to the floor and kept his knee in the middle of the intruder's chest.

The sparkling *iede* began to sputter out. "How do we turn on the lights?" Kayrin asked.

As if in a daze, Olivia moved to a simple lever mounted on the wall and flipped it up, activating the overhead light source.

Kayrin glanced at Larot, making sure the criminal was completely restrained, then returned her attention to the old woman.

Olivia stared back in wide-eyed wonder. "What are you?"

Chapter Three

The police had come and gone before Kayrin attempted to answer Olivia's question. The authorities were extremely interested in the burns on the burglar's chest and his wild account of Larot putting them there with his bare hands. Larot allowed them to examine his palms, but when they found nothing unusual, they simply recorded the accusation in their report and took the criminal away.

"There has been a rash of burglaries in this area," Olivia told them. She stood at the front windows watching the last squad car drive away. "I wonder if it's been that man all along?"

"The law enforcement personnel are sure to make that determination."

She spun and faced Larot. "I didn't think you could speak English. You certainly seem to have made a miraculous recovery."

"Veil fever is painful and debilitating, but once the body adjusts to --"

"He has always healed quickly." Kayrin figured they had enough to explain already. They sat on the sofa, waiting for Olivia to begin her interrogation, suspecting she didn't even know which questions to ask.

Olivia walked to a heavily padded chair facing the sofa and sat as well. Her stunned gaze darted from Kayrin to Larot and back again. "You saved my life. That creature meant to kill me. I owe you both my life."

"It's no more than anyone would have done." Kayrin tried to sound casual.

"It was much more than anyone else *could* have done. You aren't from another country, are you?"

"What makes you ask?" Kayrin bit back a smile.

"Well, you're either mutants like in those X-Men movies or you aren't from *anywhere* around here."

She sounded tense and still looked terrified. Kayrin wanted to comfort her, but she feared approaching Olivia would compound her discomfort. There really was no point in denying it.

"We mean you no harm, Olivia. We really do have nowhere else to go."

"Are you... from another planet?"

"We are from a parallel dimension, one of many separated from this place by an energy barrier called the Veil."

The old woman nodded, but her eyes remained clouded with confusion. "Veil fever. Passing through this energy Veil is what made Larry sick?"

"Larry?" Larot chuckled. "Is that the Earth equivalent of my name?"

Kayrin smiled at him. "My name is Karen and you are Larry from this day forth."

"Why did you come here?" Olivia fidgeted in her chair. Gradually the tension eased from her posture. "You said before that you were compelled to leave, or something like that."

"There are those in our dimension who oppose our union. When I realized I was with child, it put Larot -- no, Larry in grave danger."

"Karen is a princess and I am nobody. She was supposed to bond with someone of her social standing, but she fell in love with me."

Olivia pressed a hand over her heart. "Just like a real life fairytale. I'm harboring a runaway princess. This is *so* romantic."

They all shared a laugh.

"We have much to learn about your dimension." Karen hesitated. Olivia had been kindness itself and there was a real possibility they would put her in danger. Still they had no alternative. They were supposed to avoid the other Keepers unless it was a dire emergency. Alrick's spies were everywhere. "It is imperative that we blend in so well that no one realizes we are not -- from around here. We would be grateful if you would teach us what we need to know."

"I lost my mate less than a year ago. My life has been miserably lonely without him. I welcome the company."

Larry wove his fingers through Karen's and smiled. "We will not impose upon you any longer than we must."

"This is no imposition." Olivia beamed. "You are foreign dignitaries. I'm honored to offer my hospitality."

"Foreign indeed." Karen gave her mate's hand a little squeeze.

"We'll take things a step at a time," Olivia said emphatically. "We'll get you clothes and work on those accents. I'll have you blending in so well you'll forget you're not American. Do you have a last name?"

They shook their heads.

"Well, Larry and Karen Dover, welcome to New Orleans. Today is a very special day. Not only did you just save this old woman's life," she offered them a beaming smile, "it's Christmas. We'll start your lessons with what that means to the various people of Earth."

Aubrey Ross

Multi-award winning author Aubrey Ross writes under several pen names, according to genre. Though her stories can take unconventional turns, they're filled with passion, intrigue, and emotional realism. Whether her stories are set in Hell, Valhalla, or on an alien planet, Aubrey's sure to entertain.