

BONNIE ROSE
LEIGH



HUNTER'S REVENGE

BY

BONNIE ROSE LEIGH

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Hunter's Revenge

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ISBN: 1-55410-995-7

Cover art and design by Martine Jardin

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Published by eXtasy Books

Look for us online at:

www.extasybooks.com

Dedication:

My thanks go to fellow authors Jennifer Loy, Antonia Pearce and Tianna Xander for their valuable input as I wrote this manuscript. I'd also like to thank my beta reader for her help in getting this book ready. And of course, I can't forget the man in my life, Chris, who even through illness and strife, has stayed by my side, encouraging me in all that I do.

PROLOGUE

Brantiff Shi'Lan, King of *Chantrea*, sat at his throne holding his mate's hand as he watched the festivities going on around him. His youngest son, Taliff danced with his new Earther-*Lionese* mate, Eve. What a strong, proud woman this Eve was. So courageous. She would be a strong mate to his son, and would not only be good for Taliff personally, but would be good for *Chantrea*.

He turned to his mate, Luma. Smiled at her as he raised their entwined hands to his lips and kissed her knuckles. It had taken their kidnapping for him to see just what a strong woman he'd mated with. For so long, he'd taken her for granted, ignored her strengths, using her only as a vessel for his seed. Only during captivity did he finally get to know and love his mate. That was a damn crime, in his opinion.

Now if only Hunter could find someone who would make him as happy as Eve has made Taliff and his own mate, Luma, made him. Where was

Hunter anyway?

He searched the crowd until he finally spotted him, leaning against the wall, watching his brother and Eve dance. Brantiff put his hand to his chin and watched his eldest thoughtfully. What thoughts could possibly put such a desolate expression on his face?

* * * *

In the farthest corner of the room, away from the surging crowd, Hunter sighed wistfully as he watched his brother and Eve dance. His mate was out there somewhere. It was only a matter of time before he brought her home. Easing away from the wall, Hunter left the others behind and made his way to his suite. He had packing to do.

CHAPTER ONE

Above the ice planet, Visara...

Hunter Shi'Lan, former High King and now, once again, Crown Prince and heir to the throne of *Chantrea*, stared down at the barren planet below him. Tension ran through his body, causing the beast within to stir and stretch. If he didn't get a grip on his emotions soon, he would end up shifting into his *Lionese* form right here in the middle of the command deck of the *Manruvian* Warship, *Victory*.

He could feel her--feel his mate. He didn't know her. Didn't know her name or what she looked like, but somewhere below, on a planet of ice and snow, his lady mate awaited him.

He shuddered, imagining all the horrors she could even now be suffering. He had no doubt that the rebels had raped her, probably repeatedly over the course of her imprisonment. Such was the fate of every one of the unfortunate females kidnapped

by the infamous Black Rose and her demented followers—those who were unlucky enough to survive their capture, anyway. At least six of the women from his brother's ship were below, according to the microscopic tracking devices Taliff had inserted into their bloodstreams when they'd left Earth.

Once he freed the women held captive within the subterranean caverns, he would finally meet the *one* woman whose injured spirit had called to him across the vast emptiness of space. Even now, he could feel intense pain crawling through her body, sense her waning spirit, feel her tears of grief and rage in his mind—as he had for the last three lunar cycles.

Three moon rotations of her suffering had about driven him mad, enraging the lion within who roared his anger, his thirst for vengeance. How had she survived such torment for so long? Even now, he knew of the insidious whispers in her mind, telling her it was best to end her life. She felt she would be better off dead—and in the hands of the Black Rose, it was true. But soon, he would have her, hold her in his arms, and somehow he would make everything all right again. He had to.

“Excuse me, Prince Shi’Lan?”

Startled out of his dark thoughts, he growled then turned toward the *Manruvian* warrior standing behind him. “Yes, Sander?”

“Prince Logann is requesting your presence in

his private quarters."

Hunter nodded then turned his gaze back toward the viewport. "Tell him I'll be there momentarily."

"Yes, your Highness."

Braced against the viewport with one arm, Hunter lifted his free hand to run his fingers down the *transomani* – the translucent and indestructible material the *Manruvians* developed to mimic windows. Close. He was so close to being able to touch her this way.

His gut twisted. He needed to remind himself that she'd be traumatized and no matter how much he would want to hold her, explore her body, he'd have to proceed slowly. She would fear him. She would fear any male. He'd die before he purposely inflicted harm upon her.

Straightening away from the portal, Hunter tucked his hands in the pockets of his uniform pants. "Soon, my mate. Soon, I'll bring you home where you belong." With one last glance at the icy planet below, he turned and walked away.

* * * *

Amy Morgan lifted her bruised and battered head when she heard the groaning creak of the opening door. Not another man. Not again. She couldn't take another one so soon after the last. Already she felt as though she would never heal from the

numerous injuries she'd suffered during these animals' attempts at impregnating her. How did they ever expect a woman to survive, to carry a child to term? If she *were* to become pregnant here, her child would never draw its first breath. She was certain of it. And, if it were a female, would she have the heart, the strength, to smother her in her sleep to spare her this fate?

"Please, Goddess, just let me die," she sobbed into the dirty mattress as she felt the bed dip beneath yet another man's weight. She tried to shift away from the new arrival, helpless to stop the agonized groan when even the slightest movement sent shards of burning pain through her abdomen.

A tender hand pushed the hair from her face and she cried for she knew she must be dreaming. No man residing in this hole they all called the 'land of promise' had such capacity for gentleness.

"Please, please don't touch me," she sobbed onto the stained mattress. "If you ever loved your mother, your sister, take pity and kill me when you're through with me."

The large hand splayed over her back, gently rubbed soft circles on her bruised flesh. It wasn't the first time one of them tried to trick her with the illusion of gentleness. She wouldn't fall for it this time. Not again—never again would they trick her into believing they cared for her welfare. It took a while, but now she knew these animals didn't know the meaning of true gentleness. She wondered if

any man truly did. The men here didn't have an ounce of compassion between them. They liked to hear her beg them to help her escape, to return her to her home world, Earth. Hell would even be better than here.

She'd been tortured, abused, raped several times a day since they kidnapped her from the ship that stole her from her home. She longed to hear her mother's voice again. Wished she could be home, held in her father's arms. He may have been strict, but he'd loved her, protected her from animals just like these.

Her body ached, sometimes bled from each encounter. One day ran into the next and she just wanted to rest. To die would be preferable to having countless men rape her day in and day out.

The hand stopped its soothing motion and she knew it would begin again. She clamped her mouth shut, determined not to scream. They always liked it when she screamed.

"Sssh... *Moya*, do not cry so. Your ordeal is over. It's time to take you home."

She shuddered. She couldn't bear to listen to the soothing rasp of his voice, wouldn't dare to believe he had come to help her escape. Thoughts like those led to madness.

She felt the air stir beside her, felt the bed rise once the male behind her stood. The air whooshed out of her lungs when she realized she might actually get a reprieve. Why wasn't he groping her,

ripping the sheet from her body, shoving her legs open and rutting on her? Or was this just a way to catch her off guard?

Minutes passed and the silence lengthened. The tension in her shoulders, her spine, began to ease. He must have left. Why would he leave before he got what he wanted? Wasn't impregnation in the attempt to breed more females the entire reason they'd kept her locked behind iron doors?

Only when she was sure he'd left did she completely relax and ease away from the rough cavern wall. Despite the tortuous pain moving caused her, she rolled to her back and forced open her swollen and bruised eyes.

"There you are, *moya*. What is your name, little one?"

Oh, God. Why didn't she realize he'd never left? Were her senses now failing her just as her body had? "Why?"

Through heavily swollen eyes, she watched the large man make his way toward her. She gasped, in fear, in confusion. His face... His face looked so familiar. Yet, it didn't quite fit in her memories. He looked wrong, somehow.

Why couldn't she remember him? Had the continued beatings affected her memory? Did she even know him or had she finally cracked? Perhaps she had a concussion. With as many times as they'd beat her, she wouldn't be surprised to find she had brain damage.

There was no time to figure it out as he moved closer and closer. Her heart stuttered in her chest. She tasted the fear in her throat. Even now, knowing he couldn't possibly do anything different than the others, she feared his touch. Why couldn't she just lose herself and grow used to it as she'd been told so many of the others had? She'd been told some of them actually welcomed the men to their beds. She shuddered at the thought. Before she could prepare to defend herself, he leaned over her, reached out with his large hands—hands that were scarred, calloused, rough looking. They were hands that could crush her with a single blow. How had she ever thought he would be gentle?

She inwardly cringed, swallowed past the lump that suddenly lodged in her throat. She couldn't take her eyes off those large hands, knowing they could tear her to pieces with barely any effort, especially considering the shape she was in.

She whimpered when he touched her, ran his fingers through her greasy, limp hair. Tears poured from her eyes when she knew it would come as it always had. How many weeks, months had she spent here, dreading the arrival of the next male? How much time had passed while she'd been held here in her stone prison, as nothing but a vessel for her kidnapper's seed? How long had she spent in stasis as her kidnappers transported her to this frozen wasteland? She felt so much older. When she'd woken inside the stasis chamber, her body

didn't quite feel like it used to and then the first of many men came to her, used her, and nothing had mattered since.

She couldn't even starve herself. If she didn't eat the slop they provided, they injected her with something that replaced the nourishment she refused herself and the beatings would start all over again. She wasn't supposed to fight or rebel. They expected her to be submissive, to just spread her legs and take it. In the beginning, she couldn't do that. Just as she could never seem to find the courage to end her own life.

She shuddered as his hands smoothed over her flesh. His lingering touch passed over her arms, her legs before he pulled away. When she thought she'd get a slight reprieve, he once again touched her, this time sliding his hands beneath her bottom.

She groaned. Grief and pain warred within her. She was a coward. No. She was worse than a coward. She deserved everything she got because she'd fought at first, then finally, after countless males violated her, she resigned herself to the fact that no one would come. No one knew where she was, no one cared enough to come for her, and she was lost.

For the last several weeks, she'd lain on her semen-stained cot and waited, dreaded the inevitable visit of the next man. One after another, they visited her—sometimes as many as six or seven in a day. Those days she tried to leave her

body, lose herself in her mind. There she was free, they couldn't touch her and she would lose count of the men who visited her. She no longer fought them, no longer even acknowledged them, just let them use her body for their cause.

One after the other, they came to her. They came inside her with brutal disregard for her well-being. She didn't have the heart—or the courage—to bring her life to an end. What kind of worthless piece of shit did that make her?

He lifted her against his chest then stood, cradling her against his torso. “No, please. Please. Don't take me to them. No, please. You can fuck me, do what you want with my body, but don't take me to those butchers, the ones who call themselves healers.”

With what little energy that remained in her body, she jackknifed against him, desperate to get out of his arms. She'd do anything to avoid another internal exam while the doctors stuck their dirty instruments in all her private areas and her kidnappers looked on with maniacal glee.

“Hush, *moya*. It will all be over before you know it.”

Before she realized just what he'd planned, everything went dark. She could feel herself slip into darkness and thanked all that was holy that they'd finally decided to end her worthless life.

As his mate succumbed to unconsciousness, Hunter dropped the tiny syringe on the dirt floor, crushing it beneath his feet. He hadn't wanted to give the sedative to her, especially since he didn't know what other drugs they'd pumped into her during her captivity, but she'd given him no choice. He wouldn't take a chance with her life. If she inadvertently raised the alarm while he tried escaping this vile prison and the enemy captured them, her life would become even harder, if that were possible.

When he'd first entered her cell, his inner lion roared in denial. It took all his control to prevent himself from shifting, ripping her bedding to shreds beneath his claws. The smell of other males in the room, the scent of their semen mixed with his mate's essence had nearly driven him over the edge to madness.

Seeing her there, lying battered and bruised, her spirit nearly broken, was all that kept his beast leashed. Her needs, her welfare came first. Tears of frustration and rage burned his eyes when she begged him to kill her. That his mate felt so alone, could feel such hopelessness, nearly brought him to his knees.

Pushing down his anger and despair, he vowed before all that was holy – on the feet of the Goddess Alana herself – he would avenge his mate. He'd hunt down every man whose scent still hung in the

air. Every vile creature that soiled her would die. Slowly. Painfully. When he finally found their ringleader, The Black Rose, she would wish she'd stayed dead to him, his sister or not.

Pulling his mate closer to his chest, Hunter's arms trembled as he forced his rage to pass over him. No matter what he had to do, he'd see that she healed. She'd never want for anything again, be it emotionally or physically. First, he had to get her out of these seemingly endless subterranean caverns.

It had taken hours to locate her and the others—hours of slipping unseen through the tunnels while they searched for as many prisoners as they could. He needed to get her and the others aboard *The Victory* for immediate medical treatment. That, however, might not be so easy.

This far below the ice planet's surface, they couldn't use the ship's transporting technology to simply transfer themselves aboard the warship. They'd need to travel through the tunnels until they reached the surface, each carrying an injured or traumatized woman. The task ahead was daunting, but not impossible with the right amount of determination. He and the men who'd accompanied him were *very* determined, indeed.

Careful not to jostle his mate, Hunter made his way to the thick iron-ore door and slowly eased it open. As he expected, his ally and closest friend, Mikel Logann, High Prince of *Manruvia*, stood

guard, watching his back even now, when danger literally surrounded them.

Nodding at Mikel, Hunter silently moved behind his friend and into the narrow, low-slung, rock-carved tunnel.

"You had to sedate her then." It wasn't a question so Hunter didn't bother to answer. He could only be thankful his brother's mate, Eve, had commissioned their planet's healers to make a large enough supply of the powerful sedative. With it, those in pain and suffering with their injuries would be more comfortable for the trip home to *Chantrea*.

While sedated, their bodies would have a chance to heal and they would be blessedly free from the pain they had lived with over these last months. Their minds, however, were another matter. It could take years for their psyches to recover and even then, the women would forever carry mental and emotional scars.

"Let's go. All teams have reported in and are on the move back to the pickup point," Mikel whispered through his com unit, a tiny black matte microphone clipped to his collar. It was an ingenious design. If one didn't know where to look for it, they would think it nothing more than a part of the uniform. His gaze constantly roved the dark tunnel, searching for any potential danger. They'd been lucky to get this far without raising an alarm. Tarrying only made the risk of discovery that much

greater.

They'd gone no more than a meter down the length of the tunnel when all hell broke loose... literally. Alarms blared. The tunnel shuddered. The ground quaked. Rocks fell out of the tunnel walls, the ceiling. Hidden lights flashed, temporarily blinding them. With his arms filled with his precious burden, Hunter could do naught but run, staying a step behind Mikel as they raced toward the surface—or so they hoped.

One meter closer.

Five.

Twenty.

For what seemed like hours, they ran. Hunter carried his beloved mate, refusing to hand her over to Mikel even for a brief respite as they dodged falling debris, and evaded the patrolling rebels.

Finally, they could see the opening to the hidden cave entrance up ahead. Almost there. Five more meters. Almost there. *Come on, almost there.* Hunter pumped his burning legs harder, held his mate tighter against his chest. One more meter to go. By the Lady Goddess Alana, they were going to make it. Thank the goddess. They were going to make it.

"Stop, or I'll shoot."

CHAPTER TWO

“Stop or I *will* shoot you in the back. Don’t expect me to say it again.”

Hunter stopped, turned. Mikel shifted behind him, preparing to fight if he knew his friend as well as he thought he did. With his mate clutched to his chest, Hunter eyed the rebel warily. Beneath the layers of filth, Hunter could see that this follower of the Black Rose enjoyed what he did. It was in the maniacal light in his eyes, the leer twisting his lips, the steady aim of the laser gun aimed at them. And, of course, his scent.

This man’s scent was all over the woman Hunter held in his arms—Hunter’s own mate. The fact that, at the moment, he could do naught but ensure she wasn’t injured in the coming confrontation made the lion inside him snarl his fury. And, there would be a confrontation. This man would rather die than let them go. Right now, with his lion roaring for vengeance, he would rather rip her assailant to shreds than leave. But he had his mate to think

about. Her life was more important than his need for revenge.

Through his com unit, Hunter heard static, then Mikel's voice whisper, "Drop." He didn't hesitate. Following his friend's instruction, he dropped instantly to his knees then rolled with his precious burden out of the line of fire. He knew Mikel would do whatever he needed to get them out of there alive, even sacrifice himself. He hoped it didn't come to that. He would not want to be the one to tell the *Manruvian* people that the heir to their throne had passed over to the other side because he'd chosen to save his life.

He covered his mate as best as he could and watched as laser fire lit up the tunnel walls. The hiss of the guns, the smell of burning flesh and the startled gasp of the fanatic rebel as he died, were all memories that would forever stay with him, though only seconds had passed since the rebel announced himself.

Hunter turned his head, expecting to see Mikel waiting for him at the entrance to the tunnels, a cocky grin on his face. Instead, Mikel was on the cavern floor, his chest covered in his own blood. His golden skin was now pasty white. Strain lines bracketed his mouth. He could hear the *Manruvian's* lungs rattle. His lips were already turning blue and his eyes were glassy as the fight to remain conscious got the better of him.

Shit. Shit. Shit. If he didn't get help for Mikel

immediately, his closest friend would die. Nevertheless, he couldn't carry out both his mate and Mikel. He'd have to leave one behind.

Unless...

With no other choice, Hunter reached inside his vest, pulled a marked hypodermic needle out of the hidden pocket, and without wasting any more time wrestling with his decision, injected his mate. *By the Lady Goddess, please, please let her understand what I'll ask of her.*

Hunter waited as the counteractive agent went to work on waking his mate. The only way all three could get to the rendezvous point on time was if his mate could walk with his assistance while he carried Mikel over his shoulder.

* * * *

Amy opened her eyes and looked around her. Instead of the walls of the grimy cell she'd occupied since her kidnappers brought her here, she was in a cave. Light came from behind the man she recognized from her cell.

Her heart stuttered. Her stomach clenched. Her vision blurred. *No, no, no.* She scurried backward, out of his reach, unable to bear for him to touch her. Still, things didn't seem quite right. Something wasn't right. What was going on? Where was she? Why was she here? She shook her head, confused, frightened. Nothing made sense.

"It's okay, *moya*. Everything is going to be okay. I need your help or my friend is going to die."

Ha! Like she'd never heard that before. She continued to move back, her eyes never straying from the stranger's gaze until she bumped into something, something softer than the rock wall, and it was warm. She raised her hand, saw the fresh blood and screamed. She gasped, shuddered, closed her eyes and warily looked behind her.

She turned and stared down at the man she hated most. His glassy eyes stared at the roof of the cave. His life had completely gone from him. No breath moved his chest and no evil leer froze his features. How many days and nights had she wished, dreamed, of seeing him this way? Of all the men here, he'd been one of the cruelest.

She looked back at the man who had carried her from her cell and licked her lips. What if he had truly come to help her? Looking beyond him, she noticed another man who lay dying on the floor. His chest barely moved. She could hear his raspy breaths as he struggled to draw the frozen air into his lungs. Blood coated his front, yet even near death, he still clutched his weapon in his hands. It didn't take long to realize the man had sacrificed himself for her and for the man standing before her. At least now, the beast would never harm another woman.

Wiping her hands on the stained sheet the stranger had carefully wrapped around her like a

toga before taking her from her cell, she stood and kicked the dead body, unable to keep herself from showing her anger, her despair. If this man used it against her in the future, so be it. At least she'd had that one momentary pleasure.

Amy looked beyond the two men to the light. A cold breeze touched her face and fresh air brushed the greasy hair at her temple. Could that really be the entrance to the cave? Was she really that close to freedom?

Even with the excruciating pain wracking her body, the thought that freedom was just feet away, gave her the motivation to do whatever she needed to get off this freaking cold ass barren planet and its vile inhabitants. "What kind of help do you need?"

Was it relief she saw crossing his features as he leaned down to lift the downed man into his arms. "I need you to trust me, *moya*. We are so close to freedom. Just a few more yards, but I can't carry you both. He risked his life to save ours. Now I ask you to trust me. To follow me from this hellhole and do your best to keep up." His gaze traveled from the top of her head to her bare feet and his expression gentled. "I know you're in pain and unprepared for the bitter conditions and I will help you all that I can. Will you do this?"

She knew she wasted precious time for his friend's life but she had to know. The question plagued her. The last thing she wanted was to jump from the frying pan and into the fire.

"Where do I know you from?" She tilted her head with a frown. "I know I have seen you before. You're too familiar to me."

He smiled. The action made him seem even more familiar. Still, she couldn't think of where she'd seen him before.

"We have never met before this day, *moya*. But you *have* met my brother."

"Your brother?" *Oh no, oh no, oh no.* She backed away. *God, please don't tell me his brother is one of these animals.*

"Yes, my brother. I am Hunter Shi'Lan. You met my brother Taliff, Eve's mate, just before you were stolen from his ship."

Memories came flooding back. Eve, with her kind ways, keeping that bitch Myra from queening over everyone. Taliff, who had kidnapped them all, promising them a better life...she almost laughed aloud at that. Right, her life was going just great right now. Then the ship went dark, gunfire, women screaming, and then darkness.

"Will you trust me and follow me to your freedom, *moya*? Even now, Mikel dies in my arms."

She nodded as she remembered his brother called Eve, *moya*. Something about that memory, something elusive, made her realize that she could at least trust this man to get her out of this hellhole.

"Hunter? You did say that was your name, right?" She frowned, trying to remember what it was that his brother had said about him. It seemed

important... She shook her head. It didn't matter now. All that mattered was getting the hell out of here and getting his friend the medical attention he needed. It was the least she could do for what he was suffering on her behalf.

"Yes, *moya*?"

"Lead the way. If you hand me the weapon, I'll do my best to cover you, though I don't know how much help I'll be."

Hunter nodded, handed her his friend's weapon. "Any help is better than none. Follow me."

He led the way toward the light, his friend cradled in his arms. The closer they got to the entrance to the tunnel, the more excited she got. *Freedom*. She could practically smell it. The fresh air caressed her skin and though it was cold, freezing even, for the first time in months hope filled her heart. Hope and the first stirrings of rage. She would have her revenge, somehow, someday. The Black Rose and all her followers hadn't seen the last of Amy Morgan. Not by a long shot.

Clutching the borrowed weapon in her hand, she took her first step into sunlight in weeks, months, hell, it could even have been years. She just didn't know. As far as the eye could see, there was nothing but snow and ice. The light from the sun glistened off the ice and snow. It would have been beautiful had it not been for the fact that she'd been held captive here. The glittering world before her only served to remind her that she'd been kept

prisoner underground, forced to live in the bleak artificial light her captors chose to provide or withhold as they saw fit. The only things distinctive about their surroundings were the mountain peaks around them and the small, barely noticeable valley below.

She looked down at the trail she'd have to follow, glanced at her feet. She shook her head, knowing the only way she could get down this trail was if she shifted to her lioness form. She could just as easily defend the men in that form, it would just happen in close quarters rather than from a distance.

Hell, she didn't even know if she could shift. The few times she tried to shift below the surface, blinding pain had incapacitated her for hours, leaving her at the mercy of her jailers. But, she wouldn't know if she didn't try, and standing here wasting time as Hunter's friend lay dying in his arms was unacceptable. Besides, if she were in her other form, the pain she felt now wouldn't be as debilitating. These injuries were next to nothing for a lioness. Without giving herself any more time to worry, Amy closed her eyes and called upon the shifter magic inside her.

Searing heat blasted through her body, truly warming her for the first time in months. Even behind her closed eyelids, she could see the light coalescing around her body as she shifted in an instant. She felt her face turn to a muzzle, felt the

fur warming her body for the first time in ages. She dropped to the ground on four large paws. The lioness roared its joy at finally having the freedom to run, to hunt. She shook her body, luxuriating in the feeling of being in her hunter form after so long a slumber. Why hadn't she been able to shift in the caves? Had they used some form of technology to keep them from shifting, some sort of medication in their food? She hadn't ate last night, she' been too sick. She'd flushed it down their version of a toilet to avoid the beating she knew she'd get for refusing to eat. She turned in a circle, scented the air.

There. She could scent the path Hunter had followed on his way to rescue her. Skirting past the gaping man, she led the way down the trail. She'd have to think about why he'd looked at her so strangely later. Right now, all she wanted was to get off this planet; heal, then get her revenge.

Behind her, Hunter followed, carrying his burden gently in his arms. They were nearly halfway down the mountain when the scent of fear hit her. The sounds of whimpering and flesh striking flesh soon followed. Then that voice. The voice she'd never wanted to hear again echoed across the frozen tundra.

Up ahead, Hunter stopped, turned his head toward the newcomers. He started to put his friend down, to go help whomever they'd recaptured. Amy couldn't let him sacrifice his friend. She'd take care of this. Amy padded over to Hunter, grabbed

his pants in her teeth and started pulling him back toward the trail.

His gaze was uncertain, guilt and grief warred on his face, but he finally nodded and headed back down the trail. Once certain he wouldn't turn back, she darted off the trail and headed toward the downed rescue team. The voice of the betrayer grew louder as she approached.

"Too bad her rescuers had to die. I would have liked to ride them. Grab the woman and take her back to her cell. The more women here when the Black Rose hears about today's rescue attempt, the better for all of us."

"Yes, Lady Myra. It will be as you say."

Everything in Amy, both the human and the lioness demanded revenge. She wanted to rip the woman apart. Eve had done no favors for the women when she spared Myra's life on Taliff's ship. Amy didn't blame Eve for what had happened to her and the others at Myra's hands—didn't blame her for sparing the bitch's life—but, that didn't mean she'd follow Eve's example and show the traitor mercy. No, if it was the last thing she did before she died, she would make sure Myra paid for all the pain and suffering she'd caused.

Amy slowed as she neared Myra and the others, lowered her body until she was creeping just above the snow-packed ground. She did her best staying upwind so the chances of Myra catching her scent were lower. No sense in making herself a target

before she pounced, or so her ma back home had taught her when she'd taken her on her first hunt as a child. The men would be no protection for Myra in their human form. They were little more than brainless brawn.

These people hadn't learned it yet. Centuries on Earth had taught the Earth *Lionese* that the female were truly the stealthiest of the species. The female stalked and hunted the prey. The men were the stronger, but only if they had the strength of numbers and the female lacked the element of surprise. Both luck and circumstances were on her side this night.

As physically weak and exhausted as she was, she needed as much of an advantage as she could get if she hoped to rescue the woman they'd recaptured. During their "stay" here, the rebels went out of their way to ensure that bitch Myra stayed happy and healthy. *Compensation for her role in procuring the Black Rose females, most likely.* Crawling forward on her belly, she watched, hoping to find an opening that would give her the advantage over her enemy.

"No. Please. I can't go back. Just let me go, I beg you. Just let me go." Amy knew that voice. A female from the cell next to her--Maryann. How did she get here, anyway? Taliff hadn't taken her from Earth aboard his ship. Had they sent more ships to Earth to procure more females? She shook her head. Now wasn't the time to ask those questions. They

would have to wait.

Another slap, another pitiful whimper. Fury and rage rode the lioness hard. That was the last time Myra or the others would raise a hand to the once exuberant girl. The next person that raised a hand to her died.

Amy stopped, plastered herself across the cold snow and watched the horrifying scene in front of her. Myra stood with her back to the lioness, a laser whip fisted in her hands as she towered over the sprawled unarmed girl. Though, she wasn't really a girl now either. She looked to be in her early twenties at least. How long had they kept her in stasis—forcing her body into a slowly aging hibernation—before bringing them to this planet? How many years had she lost?

As Myra lifted the whip, Amy crept forward, shoving her worries to the back of her mind. Time enough to contemplate her miserable life later. Besides, she was in no hurry to see herself in a mirror. Right now, Maryann needed her and for once, she wasn't helpless. This she could do something about.

Just as the bitch began her down swing, Amy lost what little control she possessed and pounced. Losing her element of surprise, she tackled the woman from behind, pinning the one handed woman to the ground. Before she could grab on to the traitor's neck to tear out her throat, she felt the sting of the whip rip across her back. Dammit! How

could she have forgotten the men? *Such a stupid, stupid, mistake, you idiot*, she berated herself. She knew better than that. She'd just made a childish mistake that may have just cost both her and Maryann their lives.

Another man stepped within view. With one at her front and the other at her back, wielding the whip, they had her at a disadvantage. She knew her mistake. It was her mother's first rule of the hunt. *Never let your emotions rule your actions*. A clear head meant a clear target and an easy kill. This had just become anything but easy.

"Back off," the man gestured with his phase pistol, "or I'll rape the girl in front of you. Would you like that, you feline bitch? Like to hear your friend beg me for mercy before I strangle the life out of her?"

Maryann whimpered. Amy's hackles rose and she cursed her own stupidity. Fuck, what was she going to do now?

CHAPTER THREE

Agitated beyond belief, Hunter watched as the transporter beam took his friend to the ship where med-techs were on standby, awaiting their prince. He hoped he wasn't too late. The last thing he wanted to do was let him go up to the ship alone. He felt as though he should be there. His friend risked his life for him and his mate. It seemed such a small thing to expect of one's best friend.

He hated to leave him alone with the healers. No one deserved to wake injured and alone but he needed to go back for his mate. As much as he hated to admit that his bond with his oldest friend was changing, his mate needed his help now more than Mikel did. Mikel was their prince and his people would do everything in their power to ensure he lived.

Turning back to the path that would lead him to where he'd last seen his mate, he inhaled deeply and followed her scent. Pride filled him at her inner

strength. She would be no submissive to follow his lead. This woman was strong enough to rule by his side and as his father had just decreed, that was as it should be. Even as injured and filled with pain as she was, she'd managed to overcome her own inner turmoil to help when needed.

Hunter longed to bond with her – to truly be one. Yet, he knew he must wait a while longer. He knew she wasn't ready for a mate bond. Hell, she may never be ready for it, but it would come, no matter how hard she resisted. She may not realize it, but the emotional tie between them was strong and soon, like it or not, their bodies would demand the formal binding of the *Manruvian* mate bonds. It was strange how for months he and his mate had shared a connection, both mental and spiritual and yet, he still didn't know her name.

He heard a woman's scream, and though he knew it wasn't that of his mate, he quickly shed his clothes and changed to his other form on the run. He would stop any threat to his mate, no matter the cost. Their tie was already strong enough that he knew he would die for her – heir to his father's rule or not. His life would be worth nothing without her in it.

When he rounded the corner, he saw a man using a laser whip on his mate. Cold rage whipped through him. A fury as icy as the planet they now found themselves on stole through his body when he saw the wide gash in his mate's fur. Blood

welled up from the wound, dripped down her side and stained the snow red. An icy storm brewed within him as his anger grew, seethed, as he watched her precious life's blood flow onto the once pristine snow. For that reason alone, the man would die.

Another male loomed over a trembling female, the one he'd heard scream no doubt. The young woman cowered from the man, defense wounds on her arms and hands where she'd already attempted to deflect the blows from the deranged fanatical follower of the Black Rose. She scurried backward, terror filling her face as the large man followed her. He held a laser whip gripped in one hand, a phase pistol in the other as he looked on her horror-filled gaze with maniacal glee. Pinned beneath his mate's weight, a lone female struggled, doing her best to escape her fate. Obviously, this one had lost a challenge in the past if her lack of left hand was any indication.

He'd seen enough. It was time this ended. With little regard for his own safety, and before anyone could react, he'd pounced on the one holding the whip, ripped his throat out and was landing on the other male roaring out his outrage before the rebel could so much as utter a sound.

Behind him, he heard a terrified whimper. Knowing there was no time to waste, he made quick work of the trembling male beneath him, tearing out his throat as quickly as he could. He

ignored the inevitable death twitch and whipped around, scented for danger, ready to defend his mate against anyone who dared harm her or those she protected.

His mate, though injured, was in fine form. She made quick work of the traitorous female, swiping a paw across her throat, leaving her to bleed out on the ground. Though he wanted nothing more than to shift and cuddle his mate to his heart and make sure she'd be fine, Hunter padded over to the still trembling woman instead. Gently as he could, he nudged her with his muzzle, indicating she should climb onto his back.

Rather than take the hint, she scurried away, curled into a tight ball and began to rock back and forth, whimpering into her chest. Realizing that being near her only caused her more trauma, Hunter retreated a short distance, and lowered himself to the ground. Laying his head on his front paws, Hunter waited for the woman to relax, though he knew before long they'd have no choice but to leave. The last thing he wanted to do was force either of these two women to do anything. Up until now, others had forced their choices on the women, giving them no say in what would happen to them. He refused to begin his relationship with his mate in the same way, if he could help it. Within seconds of lying down, his mate nudged the woman. When she still wouldn't respond, wouldn't move, his mate nipped the woman's thigh then

gave a low growl.

His mate nudged her again, and this time the woman pushed herself to her wobbling elbows before sitting up. She reached a shaking hand out to the lioness, rubbing her behind the ear as if she were a pet. "Thank you," she whispered.

The frail woman turned toward him, lowered her gaze. She swallowed once. Twice. He could tell the thought of speaking to him directly terrified her. "Thank you, too. If you two hadn't shown up when you did, they would have taken me back down there." She shuddered, whether from cold or fear, Hunter didn't know. "I couldn't have survived down there much longer." Tears ran down her cheeks, glistening on her face as they froze in the icy cold of the elements.

Hunter grunted, the only acknowledgement he could give her while still in lion form. Again, his mate nudged the woman, this time none too gently as she grabbed the woman by the bottom of her thread-bare tunic. She had to be freezing, but at least she had some form of covering. His mate had naught but a filthy sheet to wrap around herself.

His brave lioness pushed the woman closer until she slipped up onto his back. Burying her face in his thick mane, she sighed. "You're so warm. I haven't been warm in weeks—maybe months." She turned to look at his female. "Oh God, I can't thank you enough for rescuing me. I should have known, should have been stronger, should have fought

harder.”

The woman continued to babble as Hunter began the long trek down the mountain, evidently soothed by the droning sound of her own voice. It was fine with him as long as his mate kept at his heels. He refused to leave her on the mountain this time. If there were others to rescue, he would send more men down. His mate also needed medical care and she needed it now. She would need the help of the female healers—those who healed the mind and the body. Both of these women would soon need to seek their council.

They rounded a bend he knew led to the clearing where his ship sat below. He would have just had them transported aboard, but it was more difficult for the *Manruvian* transporters to lock onto their life signs while they were in their *Lionese* form. And now, with their weapons and clothing left behind, their human forms were not only more vulnerable to the weather, they were also more vulnerable to attack.

A cold feeling clenched his gut and he rolled onto the ground, throwing Maryann into a nearby snow bank. His mate too felt the threat with her heightened *Lionese* senses. She ran to the girl, pushed her toward the ship and snarled. The girl, not needing another warning, turned and ran to the relative safety of the ship until she reached the entry and several males rushed out. His bodyguards and those of Mikel rushed toward

them as he and his mate turned to face their enemy. When would these poor, demented souls realize they worked for a lost cause? When would they give up and quit trying to stop their escape?

Hunter barely had the time to wonder exactly how many women they'd actually rescued from this hellhole before his mate growled a warning. With a speed that astounded him, she threw herself at the lion easily twice her size that seemed to appear out of nowhere to ambush them.

By the Goddess Alana, he'd never seen a lioness move that fast. Before he could aide his mate, a dozen or more lions rushed the small clearing. Surrounded, they were cut off from the ship and their avenue of escape. With a roar, he charged into the fray, taking down every lion shifter between him and his mate. He'd fight by her side, in this, as in all things.

By the time he reached her side, the frozen ground was littered with the dead and dying. Some were his allies, but most were the enemy. Back to back, Hunter and his mate stood, their bodies quivering, their lungs billowing as they tried to absorb the frozen air.

Energy coursed through his body. He knew, as soon as they reached safety, he'd want only one thing, especially with his mate finally within touching distance. He'd want to mount her. He knew that he wouldn't be able to take his mate, wouldn't be able to sate the desire that would

bombard him and knowing that, he wanted to destroy the rebels that intercepted their departure all over again.

Through their bond, Hunter could feel his mate weakening. Her body swayed and their connection dimmed. Sensing her coming collapse, he shifted back to his human form and moved to her side.

"It's okay, *moya*. I have you. Shift and I'll get you to safety."

A few seconds passed, while Hunter waited, holding his breath to see what her decision would be. Would she trust him in this? He hoped she'd rely on him, at least in this. If not, he'd do whatever he needed to earn her trust. He wouldn't give up on her — on them.

As though the Goddess Alana herself heard his prayers, his mate shifted, collapsing into his arms in an unconscious heap. With great care, Hunter lifted his mate into his arms. Heedless of the cold or his nudity, he carefully navigated the clearing. "Gather up the living, have their wounds treated then moved to a holding cell. I want to know everything we can about the Black Rose's activities."

"And the dead?" Beran, one of Mikel's bodyguards, asked.

"Leave them for their compatriots to deal with. I'll be in the medical bay if anyone needs me."

"Understood, Prince Shi'Lan and may I be the first to congratulate you on finding your mate."

Hunter nodded then moved into the transport

beam. Only after the medical personnel assured him she'd live would he finally be able to rejoice. Until then, all he could do was pray.

* * * *

For the first time in Goddess knows how long, Amy felt well rested and ready to take on the day. She slowly stretched, luxuriating in the feel of the soft mattress beneath her, the sweet scent of lilies in the air, and the blessed warmth of the bedding around her. She smiled, enjoying this lovely dream. Soon, she'd wake and she'd be back in her dank cell waiting for the next male to rut on her unwilling body.

She shoved her bleak thoughts aside, doing her best to enjoy this short respite. She rolled onto her side, smiled into her feather soft pillow and inhaled the clean scent. Minutes passed, and still she didn't wake. Her brows furrowed in confusion. The scents were all wrong. The warmth, the comfort, the feeling of safety--all wrong. Everything felt too real, too substantial to be a dream. And, if she wasn't dreaming that meant this was all real... The bed, the warmth, everything. How?

Afraid to open her eyes, Amy just laid there, allowing her mind to work through the problem. Questions circled in her mind, questions she had no answers to. Where was she? How did she get there? Who had her and what did they want? In the

months since she'd been held captive, she realized one thing—favors were always given with the taking of favors in exchange. Her only question was how high was their price?

Her heart thumped madly against her chest. Panic threatened to overwhelm her. She continued to lie still and feign sleep while she tried to calm her racing heart. It wouldn't do to alert whoever guarded her that she'd regained consciousness.

Before she could come up with any answers, she heard the unmistakable hiss of a door opening then muffled footsteps approaching. That answered one question then, she was on a ship. That wasn't a sound she'd likely ever forget. Her body tensed as she sensed the newcomer approaching. This might be her only chance to flee, and she wouldn't waste the opportunity to escape if it presented itself.

The footsteps grew closer then stopped altogether. Someone cleared their throat—a woman, if she had to guess. “Why don't you get some sleep, Hunter? You haven't left her side in three days.”

Amy's breath hitched. Her heart stuttered then galloped in her chest. She knew that voice, prayed for months she'd hear it again one day.

“I can't, Eve. Could you leave the room if it were Taliff lying in that bed, unconscious and unresponsive?”

Amy heard Eve sigh. “You have a valid point. I wouldn't want to leave his side either, Hunter, but collapsing from both exhaustion and starvation

won't help either of you in the long run. You should at least eat something. You haven't eaten since we brought her aboard."

"I just can't leave my mate, Eve. I need to be here when she wakes. She needs to know that I'll be by her side—that I will always be there when she needs me."

Amy could hear the male's worry, could feel it in her mind. She barely kept herself from shuddering. She didn't want to be connected with a male. Any male. After the horrors she'd been through, she didn't think she could ever let a man touch her again. Not willingly.

"Amy isn't going anywhere, Hunter. And you were right there when the healer who treated her insisted she only needed sleep."

"But it's been three days."

"Yes, Hunter, and it may be three more. Look, go eat and while you're at it, bathe. By the Goddess Alana, you stink. You don't want your mate's first glimpse of you when she wakes to be of you with your hair sticking up every which way, three day's worth of hair growth on your face, and bloodshot red-rimmed eyes."

"But..."

"No buts, Hunter. I'll call you on the communications system the second she shows signs of waking."

"Fine," the man agreed. She could hear both reluctance and resignation in his voice, could

almost feel it. But, that was impossible. Wasn't it? Nothing about this situation made sense, especially nothing they said. And what's with all this mate business anyway?

She felt the lightest touch as someone smoothed a hand down her hair. Calloused fingers trailed down her cheek, the column of her throat. Then the hand retreated and so did some of the warmth surrounding her. Goddess, she'd lost her mind. It was the only logical answer to the strange connection she sometimes sensed between her and the male—if you could call insanity logical. She couldn't be connected to him. She refused to admit to any connection with him. He was a man. That alone was enough to keep her from wanting anything to do with him.

"Already I can't live without her, Eve. What if she won't accept me? Won't accept the bond between us?"

Amy sensed Eve move closer. "Just give her time, Hunter. She needs time to adjust—adjust to her new surroundings, even to the freedom she'll have aboard your ship. Hell, Hunter, nothing is going to be easy on her once she wakes. Let her take this time to rest so that at least her body is rested and strong when it's time for her to face the everyday things we take for granted."

Amy heard Hunter's sigh and relaxed a bit, knowing he'd soon leave the room. How could she tell Eve she would never be comfortable here? She

could never be comfortable with a man, ever again.

"You're right, Eve. No wonder my father made you his advisor. You are wise beyond your years. I'll be back shortly. Take care of her while I'm gone and if..."

"Yeah, yeah. I know. I'll call the second she so much as twitches."

Even with her eyes closed, she sensed Hunter's hesitant nod, could visualize it in her mind's eye. Within seconds, she heard the door whoosh open then close. She felt it the instant he left the room. Some insane loneliness crept over her when he left. Just knowing he was gone left her feeling strange, bereft, insane. She would *not* feel anything for the man. She would *not*!

"It's okay, Amy. He's gone. You can open your eyes now."

At first Amy stiffened then relaxed, opening her eyes for the first time since she regained consciousness. She should have known that Eve would realize she was awake. She squinted, holding her hand above her eyes, the seemingly bright light of the room nearly blinding her. It took a moment for her eyes to adjust, even with the lighting dimmed as it was. Only half the bulbs of the recessed lighting were lit and she still felt pain when she opened her eyes. How long had she been kept in the dark tunnels? How many months had they kept her there, trying to impregnate her and the others?

When her eyes finally grew accustomed to the light, the first thing she noticed was the beautiful woman sitting across from her. Oh, Goddess. She was real. Eve. So many days she woke in hell, wishing, praying Eve would come for her. Days became weeks, weeks became months, and eventually all hope for rescue withered and died. "It's you. It's really you." Tears slid down her cheeks as she stared at the woman she'd longed to see for so long.

Eve smiled, tucked a long strand of her blonde hair behind her ear as she leaned forward. "Yes, it's me."

Amy watched as tears filled Eve's eyes. She turned her head away and quickly wiped them away before turning back. "We never gave up hope of one day finding you." Eve cleared her throat. "You and the others," she added. "Hunter wouldn't give up. He knew you were out there. After a few years of searching, he said he finally felt you. He said he felt your pain, your humiliation. He wouldn't rest—hasn't truly rested—since he connected with you several months ago."

"Connection?" What connection? She wondered, but her heart knew. She'd felt him there from time to time. Felt him giving her comfort. Whispering unbelievable promises of rescue. She'd never believed him. How could she? He was a male, after all. What man would ever be that caring, that compassionate?

One question ran through Amy's mind repeatedly. She needed to know. "How l—"

Her voice cracked so she tried again. "How long?"

Eve winced, lowered her head to stare at the floor. Amy stiffened, tried to sit up. Eve stood and quickly pushed her back against the pillows. "Just lay down and rest. Your body still needs to recover. I'll answer your questions." With a sigh, Eve returned to her seat, rubbed her back yet again. That's when Amy finally noticed the curve of Eve's belly.

"You're pregnant," she said, though how she hadn't noticed it at first she'd never know.

Eve chuckled. "Yes, and not for the first time either." Eve's smile disappeared and her gaze grew somber as she reached for her hand. After lacing their fingers together, Eve looked her straight in the eye. "Nearly six years, Amy. The Black Rose attacked Taliff's ship, kidnapping you and the others nearly six years ago."

Amy swallowed, looked away. She fisted her hands in the sheets as rage filled her. Six years of her life stolen with no way to ever get them back. Six fucking years. If she ever got her hands on the Black Rose, nothing and no one would stop her from hacking the woman into bits with her claws.

She licked her lips then turned back to Eve, letting her see all the hatred and rage inside her. "How many women were rescued besides me?"

Eve stood, running her palms over her belly as she did. "Counting you, we brought nearly three dozen women on board."

Amy heard the sadness in the woman's voice and knew whatever Eve said next would not be pleasant. "One woman died before she could get to the medical bay for help. Several more are in critical condition."

"And those sent down to the surface? How did they fare?"

Eve grimaced, rubbed her belly before returning to her seat. "Two, as you know, died protecting Maryann. There was nothing we could do for them, but—"

Amy pushed herself to her elbows before slowly sitting up. Gripping the sheet beneath her arms, she scooted back until she rested against the headboard. Even that much movement wore her out. She didn't have time for weakness, not now, maybe not ever.

"What aren't you telling me?"

Eve stood again, paced from one end of the small room to the other and back again, rubbing her lower back the entire time.

"But what, Eve?" she asked again. "Don't stall. I'm obviously not the girl I once was." She cast her gaze around the room thinking. God, how old was she now? Twenty-five, Twenty-six? Shaking her head, she turned her thoughts back to what was important. Her age didn't matter anymore. "I can handle whatever you have to say."

Eve winced then nodded before turning to face her once again. "Myra wasn't with the others. Somehow, she managed to find a hole to crawl into before we sent the guards to retrieve the fallen men."

Amy snarled, not even bothering to control the furious lioness that raged within. She should have made sure the treacherous bitch died before they headed to the rendezvous point.

Eve nodded. "I had the same reaction when I heard that piece of information. The good news is we have one of the Black Rose's followers in a cell for questioning. Perhaps we can finally learn where she keeps her headquarters."

"I want to be there. When you question the rebel, I want to be there."

"I figured you'd feel that way." She stood and made her way to the door, then stopped and turned giving her a thoughtful look on her face. "You're right, you know. You're not the same girl I knew. Now you're a strong, courageous woman. You've grown in the last years. You've become stronger, more sure of yourself and you've become a woman who has and *can* face anything, and don't you forget it." Eve waved as the door slid open then stopped on the threshold. "I imagine Hunter will be here shortly. I'd take this time to shore up your defenses. It's never wise to let a man—any man—see you at your most vulnerable. It always has a way of coming back to bite you on the ass when

they do." She turned to go then stopped herself once again. "He's a good man, Amy. He deserves a chance. At least give him that."

"I'll remember that," Amy whispered, but Eve was already gone leaving her alone with her thoughts.

CHAPTER FOUR

By the time Hunter managed to clean in the public bathing pool and grab a quick meal in the ship's refectory, more than one standard hour had passed. He hated leaving Amy, even for that long, no matter the reason. He couldn't fault Eve's wisdom, though. He *did* feel better, rejuvenated, after the small respite. But he'd been gone long enough, he needed to return to his mate.

How much longer would she sleep, he wondered. If she slept much longer, he'd contact his father's personal physician on *Chantrea*. Perhaps, he'd have some advice, something to suggest that the *Manruvian* healer may have missed because of the difference between the *Lionese* and *Manruvian* physiologies. Briefly, he wondered if she would be upset or relieved by the news she must be told.

As he moved closer to their quarters, Hunter's connection with his mate strengthened. He knew before he reached their suite that she was awake. Awake and agitated. When he reached their cabin,

he braced himself before entering the security code that would allow him access to the suite. He just prayed that whatever his mate needed to heal, to move forward in her life, he had the power or the resources to give it to her.

He closed his eyes and prayed to the Goddess Alana that he would also have the patience. His body raged at him, his inner beast demanded he claim his mate but he knew she needed time. He just hoped he had the strength to give her the time she needed. The last thing he wanted was to become the monster she now thought every male to be. Taking a deep breath, he forced his raging libido under control and waited for the door to open.

Tucking his fear and nervousness into the farthest corner of his mind, Hunter stepped into his quarters. He immediately looked toward the bed, expecting to find his mate huddled beneath the covers. Instead, he found her bent over one of his storage chests, rummaging through its contents. Pride surged through him as he realized just how strong his mate was. She was one to take action when the situation warranted it. She stepped up and took charge of her life, instead of sitting back and waiting for things to happen. Those were wonderful and almost required qualities for a queen.

His cock jerked, pulsed with need as he glimpsed the pale cheeks of her rounded bottom as she bent over. She hadn't heard his approach yet, so for just

this moment he could watch her while her guard was down. She managed to locate one of his tunics to cover herself in his absence, but that didn't prevent him from remembering exactly how she looked unclothed while in the healing chamber.

Her skin had been as soft as a dream, her complexion creamy and flawless. Her golden-red hair hung long and thick, nearly to her waist. Her breasts—her breasts were perfect, high and firm and would completely fill his hands. He closed his eyes for a moment and swallowed thickly at the memory. Her waist was narrow, her hips and bottom lush. His breath hitched when he glanced at her legs. They seemed to go on forever. Her entire body had a lushness to it that absolutely fascinated him.

The healers had thought him out of his mind when he demanded that every cut, every bruise be healed before she awoke. It was bad enough she would have her memories of her time with those animals. She didn't need the visual reminders of her abuse.

He'd give anything to have the right to touch her right now, to bind her to him using the *Manruvian* Mate Bonds stored in the trunk she was busy ransacking. He wanted to sink his cock into her wet heat, to merge their bodies as he bound their souls together. But no matter what his body wanted, his soul craved, her needs came first, would always come first. He would not take away her choices,

would not force such a bond on her. She'd suffered at the hands of others enough. He refused to act like all the others, taking away her choices for his own selfish needs.

Knowing she'd hate being caught unawares, Hunter silently stepped back out into the hallway. As soon as the door silently slid closed in front of him, he pressed the button for the suite's intercom system. He hoped in announcing himself to her before meeting him face to face, she might feel more in control, thus more comfortable in his presence. That was the plan anyway.

"Yes?"

Hunter shook his head when Amy's voice cut through his thoughts surprised to be caught daydreaming. *I wonder how many times she responded to my call while my worries played through my mind?* He cleared his throat then spoke as gently as he could. "Good morrow, Amy. My name is Hunter Shi'Lan. Do you mind if I come inside and speak with you for a few minutes. I'm sure you have many questions you'd like answered."

Several moments passed without an answer. Just as he began to believe she'd deny his request, he heard a breathy sigh through the intercom.

"Are you alone?" she asked, her voice sounding both wary and resigned.

"Yes, *moya*. I'm alone. If you'd like to have Eve here with you, if you'd feel more comfortable with another woman with you, I can arrange it for you. I

live only to please you, *moya*."

Another pause, this one shorter, then, "No. No, you can come in."

Hunter shrugged his shoulders and rolled his neck, trying to ease the tension that gathered there as he awaited her answer. After once again entering his access code into the security keypad, Hunter slowly entered their quarters, keeping his hands by his sides in full view. He would do nothing to alarm her if he could help it. Though, by the confident way she held his sword in front of her, maybe he should be worried about his own safety. Both pride and humor swept through him at the thought of his very willful mate brandishing his own sword at him in his own quarters. It struck him as very ironic.

"Is there a reason that you feel the need of a sword in your hands, *moya*?" he asked, trying to keep the smile from his face. If she only knew how much more enticing she looked standing there, her hair still in wild disarray as she held his sword pointed at his chest.

"I hear you have a prisoner aboard this ship."

She kept looking at the door behind him as though she expected an army to follow him through. Hunter reached back and pressed the button to close the door, perhaps that would settle her nerves a bit. Then again perhaps not.

"Yes, *moya*, we have a prisoner here. We are waiting for the healers to announce that the rebel is

well enough for interrogation." He frowned, wondering what her interest was. He wouldn't blame her if she wanted the rebel dead, but they needed information. With luck, they would find at least one more of the Black Rose's outposts.

"I want to talk to the prisoner." She licked her lips, her gaze darting around the room. "I need to talk to the prisoner." Tears began to trickle down her face. "I have to see him. I have to know why they're doing this." Her breath hitched on a sob and the sword wavered in her hands. It grew heavy, no doubt, she was still weak from her injuries and malnutrition.

Hunter glanced over at the tray of food next to the bed. It was untouched, even the glass of water was still full.

"Is there a reason you haven't eaten, *moya*?"

She stiffened at that, as though his words made her wary. "What does it matter? Will you beat me if I don't eat? Will you force your drugs on me, your potions, to ensure I'll want to do as you say?"

Hunter moved over to the tray. The disappointment he felt was sharp. He'd hoped that Eve's visit would have proven to her that they had no intention of harming her.

Picking up a slice of the meat on her tray, he took a bite and drank down a good portion of the water. "See? Nothing in there that will harm you." Turning back, he gave her a sad smile. "I'm sorry for what you suffered, *moya*. I cannot change what

they have done to you. I can only show you that you will never be treated that way here. I wish there was some way to prove to you that you can trust us."

She thinned her lips. "Then take me to your prisoner. I want to talk to the rebel. I *need* to talk to the rebel."

He thought it was more that she needed to take the sword she held and run the rebel through with it, but he kept his thoughts to himself.

"If that is what it takes to begin your healing, *moya*, I will gladly take you to the rebel we captured. But, be forewarned. You will not find any satisfaction in revenge upon this one. This one is merely a pawn. One that, when healed, will see the harm they caused."

"You'll take me now? Before I eat. Before I do anything you wish of me?"

"If that is your wish, *moya*. I only want your happiness."

"Then take me to the rebel scum. I can't wait to show him my wrath."

* * * *

The only thing that could have surprised Amy more when they walked into the prisoner's cell was if her father materialized in front of her.

"Why?" she asked, her heart breaking as she watched the woman pace the cell they'd put her in.

Tears streamed down Amy's face as she stared at her best friend. Or, at least, the woman she'd though was her best friend. "You told them when I didn't eat, Chrissie. You told them when I cycled so they would better know when to come to me." She slammed her fists against the nearest wall. "Only you knew I could mask the scent of my cycle. I should have known when they allowed you to visit those first few weeks after I woke up in that frozen hellhole."

Amy stared coldly at the woman she once called friend. How could she face this betrayal? How would she ever know who spoke her the truth and who didn't? If she couldn't trust her best friend, someone from her own pride back home on earth, whom could she trust? No matter the circumstances, she would never have sold herself out for another. She'd die before putting another woman through what she'd been through—through the pain, the humiliation, the shame.

She continued to stare at the woman with hate-filled eyes, rage filling her mind as the need for revenge filled her heart. Behind her, she could feel Hunter's surprise then his anger as she'd spelled out Chrissie's crimes against her.

Tired of waiting for Chrissie's answer, Amy turned toward Hunter. "If she refuses to answer your questions, terminate her. I have no desire to waste my time or anyone else's on someone who refuses to answer for her crimes."

Hunter nodded. "If that's your wish, *moya*, I'll see it done."

Amy forced herself to walk away from her one time friend and toward the cell door. She put one foot in front of the other, praying she wouldn't collapse until after she'd made it off this level of the ship. She wanted no one to witness her breakdown. As Hunter stepped away from the door to let her pass, Chrissie's shaky voice echoed through the cell. "Please," she whispered. "Please, wait."

Amy stopped, keeping her back toward the woman. She couldn't look her in the eye, not knowing how she'd betrayed her to her captors. Fisting her hands by her sides, Amy kept her voice even as she said, "Answer my question, Chrissie. Why would you betray me this way? Why?"

Behind her, Chrissie sobbed and Amy stiffened her back in reaction. "I had no choice. They have my baby brother. Unless I do as they say, report to them, they'll kill Donny."

Amy whipped around, needing to see Chrissie's face, gauge her truthfulness. "They have Donny? How long ago did they take him? How did they get him? Get you? I just assumed Taliff took you and I just never ran into you on the ship before we were attacked."

Chrissie shook her head then dropped onto the metal bunk. With head down and shoulders sagging, she whispered, "No, I guess about a year ago was when two women showed up at the Pride.

One called herself Myra."

Hunter eased away from the wall and headed toward the rebel. "And the other?" he asked. He remembered Taliff telling him that his sister had taken Myra when she took Amy and the others. His brother had been happy when that troublemaker disappeared.

"Haeda. At the time, she went by Haeda. They said they'd been banished by their pride and needed sanctuary."

Hunter gasped and turned away, leaving Amy to finish questioning the traitor. When Chrissie didn't say anything more, Amy walked over toward her, stopping directly in front of her. "And the Elders gave them sanctuary?" Amy prodded.

Nodding, Chrissie lifted her head, finally meeting Amy's gaze. "Yes," she whispered. "We took Myra into our home, while Haeda spent the night with your parents. The next morning, the village was overrun with men. Several of the women were taken while they slept. The villagers that fought back were killed. When we refused to cooperate, they rounded up all the children and told us they'd kill them if we didn't come willingly."

With tears trailing down her cheeks and her shoulders slumped in defeat, Chrissie looked completely broken. She didn't look like the carefree girl she'd grown up with any longer. What could Amy say? That it was all right? It wasn't. That she

forgave her? Right now, when the memories of her captivity were so fresh, she couldn't. That she understood? Maybe.

Then something the other woman said occurred to her. "Did you just say the other woman spent the night with my parents?"

Chrissie bit her lip then lowered her head, nodding. "Yes, she stayed with your family."

Amy's gut tightened. Her hands started to shake and her legs began to quiver. Oh, Goddess. Amy shook her head. She couldn't take any more bad news.

Hunter must have sensed her unease because he moved behind her, placing his hand against her back. Terrified of what Chrissie might say, she didn't have the strength to worry about the fact that a male had his hand on her. "What happened to my family, Chrissie? What happened to my parents, my siblings?"

With head still bowed, Chrissie lifted her knees to her chest and wrapped her arms around her legs as she began to rock back and forth atop the bunk. "They took them. They took them all. They took them all," she repeated.

"Where, Chrissie? Where did they take them?" So worried about her family, she barely noticed when the hand on her back started to move in soothing circles, warming her there, when the cold fear slipped past her defenses and gripped her heart.

"It was so dark there. Always dark there."

Amy's heart pounded against her chest. Her stomach clenched in fear. A part of her wanted to shake the information out of the other woman.

Chrissie snapped her head up, finally met her gaze. "To the Black Rose's home base, of course. Where else could she keep an eye on them?" She looked away, staring at the far wall. "She knew that's where she needed to keep anyone who was of importance to her cause. She wanted leverage against the House of *Chantrea*. That's *all* I know."

"You know where the Black Rose calls home? You know where her base is?"

Hunter moved closer behind Amy, wrapped his arms around her waist as he pulled her against his chest. So caught up in her fear and rage for her family, she didn't protest when he brought her body up against his. She couldn't worry about that now. She only had enough energy left to worry about her parents. What were those beasts doing to her mother, her sisters, her baby brother?

She knew that Hunter had just as much need for revenge against the Black Rose as she did. When he splayed his large hand over her stomach she felt his anger at the Black Rose—his utter disbelief that his sister was capable of such a thing. She could feel the tension running through his frame as he waited for Chrissie's answer, so she didn't try to evade his touch even though being so close to him set her nerves jangling and sent a strange feeling into the

pit of her tummy.

"Tell us, Chrissie, please," Hunter added. "Help us find the others she's taken. The others she's tormented as she has you and Amy. Where does she call home?"

Amy held her breath and waited for Chrissie's answer. Knowing her family needed her, she'd do everything necessary to save them from whatever fate the Black Rose planned for them.

She watched as the other woman sat on her cot, her knees to her chest and rocked back and forth. Her anger at her dissipated a bit as she wondered what she would do—what sort of bargains would she have made—had she known her parents and her siblings were in the clutches of the same animals who had abused her?

CHAPTER FIVE

With his mate held securely in his arms, Hunter waited impatiently for the woman's answer. Did she know where Haeda based her slaving operation or didn't she? He'd much rather spend this time with his mate so close trying to convince her she could trust him than stand here knowing the only reason she allowed his touch was because of the news she'd received.

Once they learned the location of the planet where his sister hid, where Amy's people were hostages, he could tell Mikel. Then he could focus on his mate while they traveled to their destination. Did he wish he could order Amy to stay out of the coming battle? Of course he did. But, as he held his mate's trembling body in his arms, felt her fear through their connection, he knew that no matter the danger involved, his mate needed closure. He wanted her to heal emotionally, and to do that, she needed to feel useful and in control. And, that's something he *could* give her. Even if the thought of

what could happen to her made his heart squeeze in terror. Besides, the followers of the Black Rose would never believe that a *true Chantrean* woman would ever be the warrior he knew his mate to be.

Finally, Chrissie lifted her head, her eyes pleading for understanding. "I know details. Nearby planets, stars in the sky above the prison itself, but I don't know the name of the planet. The rebels called it *The Black Abyss* but I doubt that will help you figure out the planet's true name."

Hunter sighed then flexed his shoulders. Amy tensed at his sudden movement then slowly relaxed against him. He couldn't help but smile. She may not want to trust him, may actively fight trusting him when she felt stronger, but her body, even her subconscious mind already trusted him on some level. He could work with that. It would give him something to hold on to during those times when she was sure to object to his pursuit of her.

"You do know we can't just let you go, don't you?" Amy asked. Hunter could hear the cynicism in his mate's voice. Did she suspect that Chrissie had lied so they'd let her go? Or did she suspect a trap of some kind?

"If this is a trap, Chrissie, you will not escape punishment," Hunter added. He watched as Chrissie swallowed convulsively then nodded.

"If you get my brother out of there, my parents, then no matter what happens to me, it's worth it."

"Fine. But we need more details of the planet you

were on if we have any hope of locating it." Amy remained silent and unnaturally still in his arms. What was going through her mind, he wondered.

As Chrissie closed her eyes, Hunter let his hands slowly run up and down Amy's sides, her hips. Perhaps if she got used to his touch gradually, her fear of him would slowly dissipate. He could hope anyway. Amy stiffened in his arms at first, but when he made no move to touch her anywhere else, the tension in her body eased just a bit. The sound of Chrissie's melancholy voice echoing in the small cell jerked him from his thoughts.

"There was a small window high up on one of the walls in my chamber. Sometimes, when the men came to me, I would stare out that window and try to imagine myself somewhere else. Some place where I was free and didn't have to submit to—" Her voice caught, she swallowed and seemingly shook off the horrifying memory. "A small planet seemed to hover in the distance, a beacon, I guess. Something beautiful." She sighed, a somewhat wistful sound, then continued speaking. "The beauty of it always struck me as ironic. Here I was, a prisoner, raped daily by my guards but the view from that tiny window captivated me, drew me. I wanted to be able to free my soul from my body and fly to that place where no one would ever be able to touch me again."

Chrissie shook her head, grimaced. "Anyway, the planet itself looked sea-foam green. It had rings

around it. Three of them. Pink then silver then a deep dark purple outer ring. The planet always looked like it was shrouded in mist, no matter the time of day." She shrugged. "It's probably planetary gasses but looking up at it, at the mystical beauty of it, gave me a focal point, a place for my mind to escape to, while the guards used my body." She swallowed then wiped away the tears trailing down her cheeks. "Anyway, I did overhear one of the guards say that while half the planet was filled with light and life, the Black Rose chose to make her home on the dark side."

When Chrissie shuddered and began to rock back and forth once more, Hunter decided to halt the questioning. She couldn't escape her cell, so he didn't see any harm in letting her compose herself. They knew where to find her when they needed more answers.

As though Amy could read his mind, his mate slowly stepped out of his arms and placed her hand on Chrissie's bowed head. That simple act of compassion stunned him. He'd doubted he'd be able to offer even that small comfort if their situations were reversed. "Get your rest, Chrissie. I'm sure we'll have more questions soon."

With that said, Amy turned away from the prisoner and made her way toward the cell door. As Hunter turned to follow her, Chrissie lay on her side and drew her knees up against her chest. He watched her for a minute, torn between pity and

cynicism. She looked so lost and alone, laying there, knowing that her future was in another's hands. Again. She'd gone from one prison to another, but at least she had a chance of coming out of this nightmare alive. And no one would abuse her here. Perhaps, in time, she would heal and find that she herself had a mate.

By the time he left the prisoner and sealed her cell closed, Amy had disappeared. Rather than chase her down as the lion inside him demanded, Hunter let her go. He didn't want her to feel trapped or hunted. Letting her go though had to be the hardest decision he ever made. However, just because he wouldn't chase her down didn't mean he had to stay ignorant of her location.

Knowing the *Manruvian* ship had a sentient computer running its systems, Hunter spoke aloud. "Computer?"

"Yes, Prince Shi'Lan?"

"What is the current location of Amy Morgan?"

"Amy Morgan is in the transportation tube on level twenty-three."

"What is her final destination?"

"Final Destination is the private quarters of Princess Eve Shi'Lan and Prince Taliff Shi'Lan."

"Thank you, computer. Open a communication channel to Prince Taliff Shi'Lan's private quarters, please."

"Working. Communication channel open."

A few seconds passed then the sound of Taliff's

voice came through the speakers overhead. "This is Taliff Shi'Lan."

"Hello, brother. I wanted to inform you that my mate is en route to your quarters. The prisoner delivered some disturbing news to Amy and I think she may feel the need to speak with another woman, someone she considers a friend."

"Understood. Is there anything I should know?"

"Maybe. I want to speak with Mikel's navigation officer first. Once I know something definitive, I'll let you know."

"Sounds good."

In the background, Hunter heard a series of chimes then his brother calling out for someone to hold on. "I must go, Hunter. It seems your mate has arrived."

"Thank you, Taliff. If Amy needs me, I'll be in our quarters."

"Of course. I'll let her know."

Knowing that Amy needed to feel safe to speak with Eve freely more than anything else right now, Hunter sighed then made his way to their quarters.

* * * *

Amy stood outside Eve's cabin, unsure whether coming here was the right thing to do. Could she walk through that door, knowing the man who took her from her family, from the only life she'd known, was in there. What choice did she have though? She

needed to talk to someone she trusted and though she wanted to trust Hunter, she knew Eve would never betray her. That was about the only thing she could be certain of, especially after what she'd just learned.

"Well, I can't stay out here all day," she muttered. Shaking off her nervousness, Amy finally pressed the door chime and waited for someone to answer. By the time the door finally slid open, she'd managed to calm her frayed nerves. Just because Taliff was a man, it didn't mean that he'd harm her. *Maybe if I tell myself that often enough, I'll start to believe it.*

"Come in, Amy. Little Delilah and I were about to read a story. Eve's in the bathing chamber overseeing Elijah's bath but she'll be out shortly."

Stunned, Amy just shook her head as she slowly made her way farther into the main sitting room of Eve and Taliff's quarters. "Delilah? Elijah?" she asked, though it was obvious who Delilah was the moment she spotted Taliff sitting on the sofa with a little girl on his lap. She couldn't be more than two. Tiny and delicate, the child seemed almost ethereal compared to her father. Her strawberry blonde hair hung past her shoulders in waves and her amber eyes sparkled with mischief. The boys were going to be all over her when she reached puberty, if not before.

"Our children. Delilah here will be two in just over one of your Earth months and our son, Elijah,

just celebrated his fifth birthday."

"You're going to have your hands full when she gets older. You know that don't you?"

Taliff threw back his head and laughed. "What do you mean when she gets older? She already causes more mischief than her brother ever did."

Dragging her gaze from the child, Amy finally looked at Taliff. Really looked at him. No wonder Hunter seemed familiar to her when she first looked upon him. Taliff and Hunter were nearly identical in looks and build. Taliff's hair was a lighter shade than Hunter's and a good six inches shorter. And, while Taliff's eye color was the same shade of amber as his mate's, Hunter's were green. Other than that, and the aura of power that seemed to surround Hunter, they'd be impossible to tell apart.

As Amy moved closer to the father and daughter, she looked around the room, surprised to see how homey the cabin looked. Taliff sat on a plush brown sofa. It looked like leather but not quite. Several matching chairs were scattered around the room, so she made her way to the one farthest from Taliff. She sat down on the edge of the seat and continued to scan the room. Two end tables flanked the sofa, each covered with plush toys, baby blankets and children's storybooks. There was a small nook off to the right, which had a small table and chairs set. Pictures of the children hung upon the walls along with prints of several

beautiful planetary scenes. Finally, she noticed several closed doors that seemed to branch off the main room.

"You can relax, Amy. Nothing and no one here will harm you, though I don't expect you to take my word for that."

Amy stiffened. Deep inside she knew Taliff wouldn't harm her, especially with a child in the room, but she couldn't seem to help her reactions. "Oh, I'm fine." She prayed he had no idea she wanted to run from the room and find some place to hide from everyone, including Eve. Licking her lips, Amy tried to think of some conversational tidbit to distract her. "How long will Eve be, did you say?"

Taliff chuckled softly and his eyes twinkled in mirth. "She should be walking through the door behind you any second."

Amy nodded then looked down at her lap. A smile twisted her lips when she noticed she had her hands fisted in her tunic. "Oh, I wanted to thank you and Eve for arranging the clothing. It was various generous of her to give me something out of her own wardrobe."

"Those aren't Eve's clothes, Amy. Hunter had her work with a tailor before we left *Chantrea* to make those for you. As soon as he felt the connection with you, he'd started making the arrangements. He insisted Eve not overlook even the tiniest detail."

"Oh." What else could she say? Confused and uncertain she once again glanced around the room. What was taking Eve so long?

Taliff nodded, perhaps seeming to understand her confusion, because he added, "Do you know what a mate bond is, Amy?"

This she could at least answer truthfully. "No, not really."

"Maybe if I explain it, it will help you understand just how safe you are on this ship."

She nodded, knowing that learning all she could about her new situation would only help her in the end. Knowledge was power after all, or so the saying went, anyway. "Okay. What exactly is the mate bond?"

"Let me ask you something. When you're near Hunter can you feel his emotions, catch a quick glimpse of his thoughts at times?"

Amy nodded. At first, she'd thought herself crazy but after a while, she hardly seemed to notice it. "Sometimes," she agreed.

"Well, imagine that a hundred, a thousand times over. Right now, you and Hunter share a connection. A mate connection. Hunter can feel some of what you feel, hear some of your thoughts, just as you can feel his, but right now you're mostly closed off to each other. But, once you actually bond with him, you'll know his every thought, feel everything he feels. One mate cannot lie to the other once they bond."

"You mean, if I bond with him, however that's done, he can't betray me?"

Taliff winced. "Not exactly. What I mean to say is, you'll know if he's going to betray you the moment he thinks it." Shaking his head, Taliff laid his now sleeping daughter next to him on the sofa and after tucking a blanket around her, leaned forward. "I'm not explaining this well. The thing is, Amy, once a *Chantrean* male feels that connection with his mate he has two choices. Complete the bond with her or not. If he completes the mate bond, all his thoughts, all his needs, center on her. She becomes his everything, tied to him in life and death."

He raised his hand when she started to object. "Yes, some men cheat, but that happens with every species, be they human, *Chantrean*, or *Manruvian*. But, those that complete the bonding using the Mate Bonds, do not. It's impossible. Your souls bind together. Your hearts and minds become one. He will never be able to betray you and you him once you bond. Because you share emotions, betraying you would become as abhorrent a thought to him as it would be to you and vice versa. "

Taking a deep breath, Amy tried to digest everything Taliff had said. And not said in his brief summation. She had a lot to think about. Getting to her feet, Amy quickly glanced over at the sleeping child. She looked so peaceful lying there. If only Amy could find such peacefulness in her dreams.

Shaking herself out of her thoughts, Amy looked to Taliff. "Tell Eve I shall return later. I have much to think about."

"Of course. Any time you need to talk—to either of us—we'll be here. Finding you has eased something inside Eve's heart, and thus mine, as well. It's very good to have you back."

Amy looked away, swallowed past the lump that seemed lodged in her throat then nodded. She needed to get out of here before she did something stupid. Like cry.

When she turned to walk away, Taliff called her name.

"Yes?" she asked, her voice just above a whisper in deference to the sleeping child.

"Just so you know, Hunter called earlier to say he was returning to your quarters."

Amy nodded then headed for the door. Yes, she had a lot to think about.

CHAPTER SIX

As Amy wandered aimlessly through the corridors of the *Manruvian* ship, her mind kept running over everything Taliff said. She just didn't know what to do or what to believe. What would it be like to know absolutely that you could trust another? To know that you'd never have to fear that person's betrayal...to know that, above all, there was one person in existence that you could trust implicitly. What a relief it would be to know, beyond a shadow of a doubt that the person you spoke with told you the truth. Could something like that really exist? If it did, would she have the courage to face it, to try it?

She had to admit, the idea appealed to her, especially considering the most recent betrayal she'd had to face. But, no matter how appealing the idea, it definitely had one major drawback—Hunter himself. If she agreed to the bonding and it worked, she would be tied to a male. A very strong and, by

the looks of it, very virile male. Did she have the courage to agree to try such a thing?

How could she ever give herself over to another man? She shuddered. Her stomach clenched and bile began to rise in her throat. Just the thought of being intimate with a man—even Hunter, who'd been nothing but kind—nauseated her.

Do not fear so, my child. I would never pair you with a man who'd do you harm. He is a strong man. A man of great honor and personal integrity.

Amy stumbled to a halt, and reached out for the nearest wall as a wave of dizziness washed over her. What the hell? Now she'd begun to hear voices. Well, one anyway.

Tinkling laughter rippled through her mind. *Don't you know who I am, child?*

Closing her eyes, Amy braced herself against the wall and rubbed her forehead. "Should I?" she whispered. She quickly glanced down the hall. Her eyes scanned the corridor in both directions. Thank the Goddess no one stood nearby or they'd hear her talking to herself.

Why would I allow others to witness what passes between us?

"You mean—?"

Just think your thoughts and I shall hear them. And yes, I am Alana, the Mother Goddess of the Chantrean — and others.

Amy hung her head and slid down the wall, unable to continue standing on wobbling legs.

Why? Why speak to me now? Do you know how many times I called out to you, begged you to help me, to let me die?

Great sadness poured through her. She could feel the Goddess's tears as though they were her own. *Each time you shed a tear, child, I shed one, too. Each time a male violated you, they violated me. Each time you begged for help, I listened. I answered.*

Why? Why couldn't you save me, save us all before they raped us, defiled us? You're a goddess.

Even I must follow certain rules, Amy. So, I did what I could. I found the one person who could help you when I could not. I found your life mate, the other half of your soul. I found Hunter.

Why him? Why must I need any man?

My child, you and Hunter were always meant to be together. Only with him by your side will you become the woman you were destined to be.

I'm scared, she confessed. That was the gut-wrenching truth. She was scared—scared to the depths of her soul.

Of course you are, child. Only a fool does not fear the unknown. And you are not a fool. All I ask is that you listen to what Hunter has to say. Listen with your heart not just your mind. It will not lead you astray. Not in this. Now, enough talking. If you continue down this corridor, you'll find the Manruvian people's favorite part of this ship. Let your worries go for now, my child, and enjoy the pleasure found in the Manruvian's home away from home.

Knowing the Goddess spoke true and her worries and fear would still be there later, Amy reluctantly nodded. Pushing herself to her feet, she looked down the hallway to her right. At the very end of the corridor, a single door faced her. A sign hung above it, written in a language she couldn't read.

Oh well. What did she have to lose but a little time?

Exactly, my child.

Just before she reached for the door release, Amy closed her eyes. She had one last thing she needed to say to the Mother Goddess. Concentrating on the Goddess, Amy initiated contact with her. *Thank you for saving me, no matter how you chose to do so.*

I only wish I could have protected you from all that you have suffered. As quickly as the connection began, it ended.

Shoving all thoughts and worries from her mind, Amy pressed her palm against the identification pad. She shook her head, still amazed at the technology the *Manruvians* and *Chantrean Lionese* had at their disposal. The pad grew warm beneath her hand as it identified her and in seconds the door slid open.

She'd only had one foot in the door when she stopped, too stunned to walk any farther into the room. One minute she stood in a spaceship heading toward a new planet she'd call home, the next she'd been transported to a seaside getaway.

Turquoise water crested in waves as far as the

eye could see. Strange creatures she'd originally thought only fodder for children's bedtime stories sat sunning themselves on huge rocks and boulders. The scent of salt water wafted past her, ruffling her hair. Cream-colored sea foam washed against the white sandy beach as the waves thrust forward and receded. One of the mermen looked her way, smiled and dove into the water only to jump back out, his entire body rising at least twenty feet over the water. With a twist of his rainbow-colored glistening tail, he dove straight back down into a cresting wave.

So real, she thought. "It looks so real."

"It's as real as you want it to be." She whipped her head around, surprised to see Mikel standing behind her.

She looked back toward the ocean, shook her head in wonder. "How?"

"Our technology is very advanced, even more so than the *Chantreans*. To tell you the truth, I'm not quite sure how the scientists are able to do most of what they do."

"The mermen, mermaids," she said, pointing out toward the water, "they're real?"

Behind her, Mikel chuckled. "You could say that. I, too, can shift into what you see out there. Our people love the water, though as you can see, it's not necessary for us to live in it."

Amy nodded then turned back toward Mikel too stunned to say anything more about the fantastical

reality of mer-people. "I want to thank you for saving me, for saving all the others. Without you, I never would have gotten out of there—not alive, anyway."

Mikel shook his head. "That's not true. Hunter would have come for you crawling on his stomach if he had to. Nothing would have stopped him. For five years he hunted for those his sister had abducted, determined to find you all. But once you woke, once he connected to you, nothing mattered but getting to you, rescuing you."

Amy swallowed, feeling self-conscious. What exactly could she say to that? "Well, thank you for accompanying him. I am just sorry you were harmed in the rescue."

"I know a way you can make it up to me."

Though nervous about what favor he'd ask, Amy owed him. "What can I do?"

"When Hunter asks you to wear the mate bonds, agree. If you are not truly his mate, nothing will happen. If you were meant to be with him what more could you want than a male who would do anything for you, including die for you?"

"When you put it that way, but I don't know —"

He raised his hand, halting the excuse she already had waiting on the tip of her tongue. "I dream of one day finding my mate. I know what it's like to fantasize about the day I'd finally meet her and know that I'd never be alone again. I know what it's like to wonder if she's even out there. But

now he knows and though he'd never push you for more than you could give, I don't think I'd have the willpower to do the same." His mouth twisted into a sad smile. "Anyway, I am long overdue for a good swim and the water is calling my name."

Amy nodded and watched as he skirted around her and headed down the beach. Yes, she definitely had a lot to think about and what better place than at the beach.

After toeing off her sneakers and rolling up the pant legs on her jeans as high as they would go, Amy headed toward the shoreline, in the opposite direction she'd seen Mikel take. She imagined a lot of people would want to reassure themselves that Mikel was fine, so being anywhere near him would not be conducive to quiet introspection.

Only when she looked behind her and could barely make out the others in the distance did she stop and look out into the ocean. It amazed her, this technology the *Manruvians* possessed. She truly felt as though she were walking along a beach on Earth. Seeing no one nearby, Amy sat down in the surf, letting the waves gently wash over her feet, her calves.

She tilted her head back. Resting back on her elbows, she closed her eyes and let the heat of the sun wash over her skin as the water caressed her flesh. It felt so good, so real.

"And what has put such a beautiful smile on your face?"

Amy yelped, unable to stop herself. She hadn't realized she was no longer alone. Her eyes snapped open and she found herself looking into Hunter's twinkling green eyes. His long golden-red hair hung past his shoulders in loose waves. The muscles in his thighs and chest flexed as he squatted beside her. As her gaze roamed over his body she gasped. Her eyes grew wide.

Hunter didn't have a stitch of clothes on. And he was huge. Everywhere huge.

She turned away, her cheeks burning at the fact that she wasn't afraid of him. In fact, her cheeks burned with mortification because, for once, she wondered if a man truly could bring a woman to pleasure as she'd heard.

Reaching out, he tucked a strand of her own red hair behind her ear. "Do you mind if I join you?"

"You want to sit here? With me?" Though why the idea surprised her she had no idea. Unable to think of anything to say, Amy simply nodded. Now what had she gotten herself into?

* * * *

"The *Manruvians* love this place. Their home world is mostly water. It's quite a bit like your world, actually." He leaned back, resting on his elbows in quite the same way as she was. "This is their way of relaxing. They don't mind if we join them, in fact, they enjoy our company." He grinned. "Personally,

I think they enjoy showing off to other species." He shrugged. "Who wouldn't want to be able to launch themselves into the air like that?" He pointed out to another merman who had jumped high into the air, doing a summersault on the way down.

"I suppose you're right. I would show off if I could do that too, I imagine."

She kept her gaze out over the water. He figured it was much easier than looking at him and dealing with the strange feelings he invoked in her. He felt her attraction through their bond, if only he could convince her that's what it was.

He rolled onto his side. Just a small movement would put his most private part in contact with her hand. She didn't move, she merely stayed stiffly by his side to show she hadn't even noticed what he'd done. Their connection was strong, he just wondered if it was strong enough.

"I have a favor to ask of you."

She turned, careful to keep her gaze above his neck. "Yes?"

"Don't think I want to force you into anything. I'm asking and it's all right for you to say no. It is your right to refuse me."

"Refuse you what?"

He ran his hands through his hair, nervous. "Before I make my request, there is something you must know." By the Goddess, he didn't know how she would take the news he needed to impart.

"What is it, Hunter?"

"When we took to you the medical bay for healing, the doctor's discovered something."

Hunter watched as Amy shuddered and her face paled. "What? What did they find?"

"You were with child when we rescued you, but because of the blood loss during the attack afterward they were unable to save the child."

Amy stilled then slowly sat up. "How far along was I?"

"The healers say that sometime within the last week you ovulated. The embryo was too small to handle your blood loss."

Amy swallowed then turned her head away. "I don't know what I'm supposed to think, supposed to feel. This was my child but instead of grief over its loss, I feel relieved that I will not bear my rapist's child. And I feel guilty that I feel this way."

"You have no reason to feel guilty. I would think all the things you are feeling are normal under the circumstances." Amy nodded but he could tell that she didn't believe him. He could feel the doubt through their connection, yet he had no idea how to comfort her.

"So, what is the favor you'd like to ask?" He knew she'd rather talk about anything other than the child and he wouldn't push her on this. If she ever wanted to discuss it in the future, he'd be there for her. He understood that she'd have to think on it some more before she'd be really ready to face it. At least, that's what Eve had said and he was going

to take his sister-by-marriage's word on it.

When he noticed Amy's patient gaze Hunter realized he'd been silent far too long. It was now or never. "I know you've noticed the bond between us. Sometimes...most times, when a couple has such a bond they know they are meant to be together, or at least they hope they are. The *Manruvians* have a thing called mate bonds. If two people who were meant to be together wear them, they are tied to one another for life and beyond. I would ask you to accompany me to the *Chantrean* garden aboard this ship and agree to wear the mate bonds. This way we would know if we were meant to be together or not. If you are not my mate I will leave you alone. I will still care for you, but as a sister, not a mate. If you are my mate we shall work things out from there."

"What if I'm not your mate? What of my people?"

"I shall still help your people, *moya*. No one deserves the treatment the Black Rose dishes out."

"And if I agree to wear these bonds? What then?"

"Then we will go on as we have. Only when you are ready to consummate our mating will we do so. I respect you and care for you far too much to ever force myself on you."

Amy sighed then turned her gaze toward the water. They sat that way for several minutes as they silently watched the water, each lost in thoughts of

their own. What would he do if she refused? Did he have the strength to let her go if that's what she wanted? Yes, it may kill him to see her leave, but if it helped in Amy's healing, he'd see her on a ship to Earth himself. He loved her too much already to ever cause her misery by keeping her with him when she'd rather be elsewhere.

When Amy finally broke the silence growing between them, he thought he must have misheard her. "What was that?"

"I said okay. I'll let you use the mate bonds, but for right now that's all I'm agreeing to."

Hunter nodded. He could hear the fear in her voice; see the fright in her eyes. Did she fear him or what lay ahead? He just didn't know.

Reaching behind him, Hunter grabbed the uniform he'd been carrying when he spotted her. As he dressed, he watched Amy's reaction to his nakedness. She seemed both enthralled with his body and terrified of it. Until he proved to her he'd never harm her, he had to expect this reaction. He just had to remember not to push her for more than she could give and to step away immediately if she asked it of him.

By the time he'd dressed, Amy had already dusted the sand from her pants, rolled her pant legs down and donned her shoes. He could feel Amy's tension, her nervousness as though it were a living thing, choking her.

"If you don't want to do this, I understand."

Amy shook her head, "No. We both need to know."

The fact that his mate would use the Mate Bonds even though her fear nearly consumed her showed him just how courageous and strong she was—a fitting mate for the next ruler of *Chantrea*.

Reaching down for her hand, Hunter gave it a quick squeeze. "Remember, all you have to say is *stop*, and I'll walk away."

Knowing only once they used the Mate Bonds would she truly understand what he was asking of her, he wasn't about to waste time. With her hand in his, Hunter led her out of the recreation deck. Within minutes, they'd traveled the length of the ship and reached their destination. Before entering his security code, Hunter needed to be sure this is what she wanted. "Are you sure, *moya*? There is still time to say no."

"Have you changed your mind about bonding with me? I'm not whole. I may never be what you want or need."

Hunter shook his head. "That isn't possible, *moya*. After we bond, you'll understand. I promise."

He watched her nervously. What would she do?

"All right. I'm ready if you are."

"I've been ready my entire life, Amy." Knowing that only showing her the truth of his words would convince her, Hunter entered his security code and led her into the *Chantrean* Mating Garden.

"Sit here, *moya*. There is something I must

retrieve first." With nervous apprehension, Hunter went to the base of one of the nearby statues where a secret compartment was located. Earlier today, he'd placed what he'd need there for the bonding, hoping, praying he'd have use for them. Nestled within several layers of *Chantrea* silk for protection, were the *Manruvian* Mate Bonds. The use of the mate bonds ensured the person you wanted to make your mate was indeed the one destined to complete your soul. The men of *Chantrea* traveled with them in hopes that one day they might come across their mate and have the opportunity to use them.

He quickly made his way back to the stone bench where Amy waited for him. Hunter paused before attaching the bond to her wrist. He refused to do anything she didn't want. Even this. When she gave him a slow nod, he took her hands in his and bound her wrists together with the ritual binding straps, hoping that she was truly the one, the one who could complete him.

When the other end began to seek his own wrist and wrapped itself around him, he breathed a sigh of relief. Several seconds later, it suddenly became thinner. It flattened against their skin, burrowing beneath the layers of flesh until it became one with them. Its DNA now blended with theirs, forming an invisible tether between them. Nothing could separate them now, in heart, mind or body. If they were ever separated again, for whatever reason,

she'd not be alone. Never again would either of them be alone.

CHAPTER SEVEN

“**W**hat just happened to me, Hunter?” Amy asked, her eyes widening with fear. She felt something new inside her. Something crawling through her system, locking her to this man. She turned away, rubbing her wrists, trying to remove the thing that had just burrowed into her flesh.

“I feel different.” She looked at him, nervously licked her lips. “Why do I feel so different?” She fought the urge to try to dig the bonds from under her skin. The way they burrowed beneath her flesh like a living thing was the most remarkable and frightening thing she’d ever seen—ever felt—in her life.

Amy couldn’t blame him for the results. He’d warned her. She turned, ready to bolt from the room. He’d told her, yet a part of her hadn’t believed him. That they could be permanently bound, by living cords, was unbelievable, preposterous, yet it seemed as though what he said was true.

She felt him within her. She felt his fear of her rejection, his desire to be what she wanted, his determination to help her overcome her fears and the overwhelming love he already felt for her. Could she trust what she felt through the bond? Should she trust it?

The cord had come to life, wrapping itself around them, before dissolving beneath their skin all on its own. The one small part that remained between them just seemed to disappear into oblivion.

Warmth and love filled her at his look. His expressive eyes told her what he felt. She would know, even without the bonds that he would die for her. Why was this happening? She didn't want this. Her body screamed out for him. Even the atrocities she'd been forced to endure didn't detract from the attraction she felt when he was near.

Through their bonds, she knew he was a good man. She knew that he'd never intentionally harmed a woman or child and that he loved his family almost as much as he loved her.

Her gaze darted around the room. How could he love her when he didn't even know her? Not really. How could she feel these impossible feelings so soon after her ordeal? What kind of woman was she that she could just accept what happened to her and move on as though nothing had happened? Her skin should crawl at the thought that he would want to touch her in the way those other men had.

But something told her it would not be the same with him.

Hunter moved closer and she moved away, pressing her back against the wall. "It is the bonds, *moya*. Since we are *true* mates, we can feel each other's emotions." He moved closer, his breath brushing the side of her face. "If you open your mind you can even read my memories—my hopes and my dreams."

She closed her eyes. Her feelings, her senses frightened her. His very nearness brought her nipples to hard points, heat moved through her. She couldn't read him as thoroughly as he said she would. But she could still feel his need to comfort her, even as his body raged at him to make her his.

"Why do I feel so different?" She couldn't understand it. It was almost as though there had always been a part of her gone—a part of her missing and when he wrapped the strange band around her wrist, it completed her. She'd never felt lacking before now, but with the bonds uniting them together, she noticed the difference.

"The sensation you feel is the bonds tying us together, uniting us in the way that only the *Manruvian* mate bonds can. The longer we are bound to each other, the more of it we will feel. The closer we will get."

He pressed even closer and she fought the sense of panic that rose at his nearness. A centimeter closer and his body would be pressed against hers.

He wouldn't hurt her. Intellectually, she knew he would rather die than harm her. She could feel his need to comfort her through their bond, but she'd suffered so many cruelties it was hard to forget so soon.

"Our connection through the bonds completes us. Makes us one. That is why I said it would be a useful tool when we reach the Black Rose's home base. If you could complete the bonding ritual, we would even be able to communicate telepathically through the bond. Even over long distances."

He reached up and brushed a stray hair from her cheek. She closed her eyes and shivered. Not from fear, or disgust, but from arousal and it shocked her.

"What if I were taken again? If someone stole me away, would that mean you would know where I am?"

Hunter moved that last centimeter closer and pressed his body lightly against hers. "I would be able to find you before they could secret you away. I would like to say I could find you before they could violate you again, but I would not have lies between us. However, I would get there in enough time for you to watch them die."

He leaned down and inhaled deeply. "Have I ever told you how much I love the way you smell?" His body pressed closer and she felt herself stiffen. "All you need to do is tell me to back away, *moya*. If anything I say or do hurts or frightens you, just tell

me and I will stop immediately."

He didn't frighten her. She frightened herself. How could she feel such want, such desire, when only a few days ago she'd been brutally handled by the Black Rose's men? She'd learned the woman was his sister, by his own admission. How could one be so good and the other so evil? It was almost as if every moment she spent in his presence, she were waiting for the other shoe to drop.

"Now that you have seen who I am, will you consent to the mating? Only the true mating will tie us together, bind us to one another in such a way that no one will ever be able to separate us."

His breath fanned her ear and heat rushed though her blood to pool in her middle. Her panties grew moist, a sure sign that her body was willing to mate with him, whatever her thoughts and feelings were on the matter.

She licked her lips, watching as his eyes darkened to a deep jade, so dark they were almost black.

"Will you mate with me, *moya*?" his hands slid down her arms, his fingers tangling with hers. "Will you take the chance and accept my love?"

She gazed down. His erection was so large it threatened to burst the seams of his pants. Yet he still asked her. He kept his touch gentle as his fingers trailed lightly over her skin. She knew he wanted her. She even knew how much. She felt his inner lion raging at him to take her despite her

feelings and still he held back, waiting for her acquiescence.

She looked around the garden he'd taken her to. It was like an indoor greenhouse. It amazed her that the farther they strolled into it, the more beautiful it became. She found herself looking up at the towering trees over their heads, barely realizing when she reached out and took his hand. Their fingers tangled together and she inhaled at the rightness of it. This was right. He was right. If only she could overcome her fears and allow him to do what he wanted.

"I would never hurt you, Amy. I would stop if you said stop. I swear it."

Tears slid down her cheeks and she wondered if she really could have the happiness Eve seemed to have found with Taliff. She glanced over at Hunter, felt his need to have her, his even stronger need to protect her and led him further into the lush green garden.

They'd gone what seemed a long distance when she led him to a clearing dominated by a pool of glimmering turquoise water so clear, she could see the bottom. Surrounding the pool were marble benches that tempted her to sit while she basked in the tranquil setting. Scattered around in an almost haphazard fashion were flowering bushes with pink and orange blossoms. Between the benches were statues of men and women in various sexual poses, all undressed.

Even though the whole clearing screamed it was here for sex, for mating, a sense of peace and tranquility washed over her. It was as though she belonged here and someone, something, was welcoming her home.

Something about the turquoise water of the shimmering pool called to some part of her, something deep within her and she had the overwhelming urge to strip and walk into its soothing depths.

She turned to look at Hunter. "Can I wade into the pool? Something within me needs to wade, to swim in these waters. Can I?"

He took her hands in his, bending to kiss them. "Tonight, *moya*, listen to your instincts in all things. If you wish to bathe, by all means, bathe. If you wish me to join you, you need only to voice your request."

He turned around, facing the other direction. "I shall even look the other way as you undress if it makes you more comfortable. Remove your clothing and let the waters of the Goddess wash your tensions away. This night in the pool is your night. If you wish to complete the bond, you merely need to direct me to your wishes. If there is something you wish do to, do it. If there is something you wish to say, say it. In this pool, you are the one in charge."

Amy nodded, though he couldn't see her with his back turned. Quickly, she stripped from her

clothing and waded into the pool until the water covered her breasts. Something about being in the pool both relaxed and rejuvenated her. Still, something wasn't quite right. It was though a part of her was missing.

Invite him into the pool, Amy. It is your destiny – and his. He will not harm you. In fact he loves you so much already that to harm you would be to harm himself. Invite him into the pool and greet your destiny.

Amy licked her lips, nervous. *What if he hurts me? With the others it always hurt.* Fear gripped her at what she was about to do, about to allow. How do you ignore an instruction from the Goddess herself?

He will not. The mate bonds make it easy to know your fears, your feelings. As soon as you complete the ritual, he will know exactly what to do to please you. Show him he is mated to a strong woman who will face her fears rather than run from them. Reach out to him and offer to wash him, comfort him.

Amy looked away and made her offer, unable to watch as he undressed. "Will you join me in the pool, Hunter?"

It didn't take long to receive his answer. She heard the unmistakable whisper of his zipper as he shrugged out of his uniform and the rustle of the material landing at his feet.

She turned to look at him when she was sure that he was in the water deep enough to cover the part of him that frightened her, then realized she hadn't waited quite long enough.

He was so tall his hips were still above the water. That part of him she'd hoped to miss, jutting up from a nest of red-gold hair, a drop of clear fluid at its tip. She felt his need to be inside her, to feel her lips wrapped around his shaft. Her face burned at the thought. For now, she'd do as the Goddess suggested and offer to wash him.

Strangely, she wanted to bathe him with her own hands, feel his flesh beneath her fingers. She could almost feel the rippling of his muscles beneath her fingertips already.

He moved deeper into the pool, covering that part of him that made her so nervous. For a fleeting moment, she wondered if the waters were drugged some how, but the slight shake of his head told her no. What was happening to her? She actually wanted to seduce this man, to feel his hands and lips on her skin. Why him when so many others had made her shudder with revulsion?

Remembering the TV shows she'd watched on Earth and how the other women seduced their mates, she used that knowledge to bring Hunter closer.

She had no sexual experience barring what she'd endured during her captivity. She couldn't draw from that. According to Eve, that had been an abomination. Sex between two people who loved each other was a beautiful thing, or so she said.

Amy moved closer. Just close enough to take his hand and lead him into the center of the pool. After

reaching the center, she circled him. Stopping behind him, she splashed water on his back, watching as the silver droplets ran down his muscles in rivulets.

She massaged the water into his shoulders, growing bolder by the minute as he stood and accepted her ministrations. Pulling on his shoulders, she dunked his head beneath the water, rubbing his scalp, massaging his head and rinsing the day's perspiration from his hair.

When he turned around, his hair slicked back from his face and the muscles of his chest rippling from her touch, she almost panicked, almost ran from the pool. But, as the Goddess said, she was a strong woman, willing to face that which she feared.

She could barely believe she was really standing here in this pool with a naked man and not running for her life. Hunter stood so still, he could have been one of the statues surrounding the pool. She wondered at his strength of will to not reach out and grab her and sink his cock into her, willing or not. She knew she was young, relatively pretty and standing quite naked in front of him. Either the man had extraordinary self-control or he truly cared about her. Perhaps even both.

She washed his chest and stomach, moving lower and lower, stopping just short of his jerking cock. She stared at it for a moment, wondering how much control it took for a man like him to keep his

hands to himself. She stole a glance beneath the clear water at his clenched fists. His hands clenched so tightly and his heavy breathing were the only indication she even affected him in any way.

She wasn't sure what to do next. She'd washed him, like the Goddess suggested, what was next?

He washes you, Amy. The Goddess had spoken again, giving her instruction and Amy nodded imperceptibly.

Turning her back to him, she lowered her head under the water. When she surfaced, his hands gently massaged her scalp, her shoulders, moving down to her back as he washed every inch of her. During his ministrations, he pressed a quick kiss to her shoulder, before moving away. Another quick kiss pressed to the side of her neck, just behind her ear, sent her pulses racing, but not with fear.

His thumbs found and pressed into the dimples just above her rear, holding her hips in place.

Fear speared through her. She was certain he would impale her now with no other thought to her pleasure—no other thought to her wants or needs. She relaxed in his arms when he bent his head and pressed an opened mouth kiss to her neck. It was all she could do to keep herself from raising her arm and burying her fingers in his hair. His hands moved from her hips to rove over her stomach, spreading tendrils of desire and warmth in their wake. His hands moved up, gently cupped her breasts and she arched her back, leaning into his

gentle kneading. Nothing she'd ever experienced compared to this. Nothing. Hunter may have rough, calloused hands, but they smoothed gently over her skin as he bathed her.

"Turn around, *moya*." Reluctantly, she turned in his arms, part of her waiting for him to laugh at her, another waiting for a rough slap to her face, her breasts. Instead, he surprised her again, by pressing his lips gently to hers, sipping from her mouth as though she were the most fragile of creatures and would break in his arms. "Open for me," he said, pulling his lips from her mouth then sinking his tongue into her moist depth with a groan when she complied.

Nothing prepared her for this. Nothing prepared her for the utter worship Hunter bestowed upon her. He kissed every inch of her flesh, caressed every fading bruise, then laved them with his tongue. Then, finally, when she thought it couldn't get any better, he stroked her nipple with his tongue, pulling the turgid tip into the warmth of his mouth and she cried out. One after the other, he licked, laved and suckled her breasts. His mouth moved between them until she thrashed against him, instinctively knowing there was something more. Something other than pain and degradation and she suddenly wanted Hunter to show her what it was. His mouth moved to hers once again for a long, drugging kiss.

"Please," she begged against his lips, not quite

knowing what she asked for. "Please, Hunter." He pressed one last kiss to her lips. It was so full of his love for her, so full of a promise for a bright future she nearly fell to her knees.

"I offer up my life, and love to you, to do with as you wish. I pledge to worship your body and offer up my own to you to worship and command. I, in turn, accept the same from you. Only to you do I offer my heart and my soul for you to protect or deny. I give all that I am and all that I will ever be to you. Do you accept me and all that I offer, my *moyo*, my mate?" When the words spilled from her lips she almost fainted with fright. What had she just done? What had she said? Had she just tied herself to this man forever?

"I accept your offer and extend one of my own." Hunter reached for her hands and pulled her to the edge of the pool. He looked so happy, how could she even try to take the words back when merely saying them put such a look on his face? She felt his elation and relief that she'd chosen to say the words. Yet, she didn't remember a choice. Not really.

He sat her on the edge of the pool and knelt between her knees. She knew what a vulnerable position she was in. She also knew fighting would get her nothing but another beating. So she sat and waited for him to assault her.

"You really have no trust for me in your heart, do you, *moya*?" He really looked hurt and Amy

almost felt bad for her thoughts.

He took her hands in his larger ones and repeated his part of the vow, "I accept all that you are and all that you offer me, *moya*. I offer my life, and love to you, to do with as you wish. I pledge to worship your body and offer up my own to you to worship and command. I in turn accept the same from you. Only to you do I offer my heart and my soul for you to protect or deny. I give all that I am and all that I will ever be to you. Do you accept me and all that I offer, my *moya*, my mate?"

Amy waited for a minute, waiting for him to drive his hard shaft in to her, to hurt her as so many others did. When he lowered his gaze to the water and began to move away, she knew. That was when she knew she could trust him to never be the way the others were. She laid a trembling hand on his shoulder to stop him from leaving. With a small nod, she accepted his offer and he pulled her into her arms with a groan.

Soon he was kissing her again, his mouth on hers, sipping gently from her lips. Then he moved lower to her breasts. He laid her gently back on the grassy bank on the edge of the pool and caressed her belly button with his tongue, making her squirm.

"I know you were taken against your will, *moya*. I know they didn't see to your pleasure. I want you to see that love can make all the difference in the world. I do love you, with everything in me and I

would prove it to you tonight and every night for the rest of our lives."

Then he grabbed her hips, tipped them forward, and buried his head between her legs. Amy let out a scream that had nothing to do with fear or pain.

Her eyes widened at his sensual assault. Even that was the wrong word. He brought her pleasure beyond belief as his tongue circled her clit. His teeth nibbled gently before he sucked it into his mouth and drew on it with alternating pressure. Thick fingers gently entered her vagina, moving in and out as he suckled her clit.

Tension built within her, her muscles tightened. Her hands found his head, her fingers tightening in his hair. Never, ever, had she felt anything like this. Her head thrashed in the grass, her body tightening even more before it shattered, splintered into a million shards of light as Hunter took her over the edge of her first orgasm. She called his name, breathlessly, shamelessly. She called his name needing him to give her more. She needed more.

Her face burned with mortification when she realized she'd begged for more from him. Amy had never felt such intense pleasure before in her life. Withdrawing his fingers from her channel, he smiled up at her, his understanding reflected on his face.

"You see, *moya*, it can feel good. Let me show you how good, how much better it can be." He kissed his way up her body at her nod. Stopping at

her chest, he took the time to worship her breasts, before moving up to press his lips against hers and slipping his tongue into her mouth.

Nervously, she spread her legs again, for the first time in her life, she willingly let a naked man settle himself between her thighs. Fear swamped her for a moment as he positioned himself at her gate. What if it all changed from here? It was a bit late to worry about that now, wasn't it?

"Ssh...*moya*. What you felt before was only the beginning," Hunter whispered into her ear as he eased the head of his cock into her. "I'll go slowly, I promise. I'll be sure to give you your pleasure." He waited for her body to adjust to him then withdrew and eased forward again, moving his shaft deeper. Reaching down, he pulled her legs up around him.

Knowing what he wanted, she wrapped her legs around his waist.

"No, *moya*. Let me show you." He loosened her legs from around his waist and brought them to her chest. "Don't be frightened, *moya*." He eased back into her, burying himself deep into her channel and she screamed with ecstasy.

He stopped immediately. "Did I hurt you?" he asked, still holding himself deep inside her, unmoving.

She shook her head. "No." She reached up and cupped his face. "For the first time in my life, I want this. I want...I want you, Hunter."

"Then you shall have me," he whispered. As

though he had all the time in the world, he began to move again, slowly thrusting and retreating in long, smooth strokes. He filled her up. The fullness bordered on pain, but he wasn't hurting her, wasn't pounding into her as her rapists had. Never again would she feel the need to compare him with her attackers.

She could feel the difference between those acts and this. She could feel the care Hunter took with her, but it wasn't enough. "Please Hunter, I need more."

"I know exactly what you need and before this night ends you will know it too."

And with those cryptic remarks, Amy stopped thinking all together, allowing herself to feel the pleasure her mate was doing his best to give her.

Before long, an unfamiliar fire began to burn in her womb. Pleasure pain ripped through her as her body clenched and released, preparing for something, something powerful and all encompassing.

"Hunter, I...I..."

"I know, *moya*. Feel. Just let yourself go and feel."

She could feel his shaft growing thicker and longer inside her as his thrusts grew more urgent, more demanding. The pleasure grew so intense she was sure her heart would beat right out of her chest. Her lungs labored as she gasped for air and gifted him with a long groan of sensual gratification.

She clutched his hair, tightened her legs against her chest so he could get that much deeper. She arched her back, doing her best to raise her hips to meet his every thrust. That's when it happened. Every muscle in her body tightened, clenched. Her clit pulsed, throbbed every time his pelvis bumped against it. The muscles of her thighs clenched and the world was forgotten as she tumbled over the edge into oblivion.

As though he had only waited for her to reach her release, Hunter let go. Sweat dripped from his brow as he labored over her, his hips pistoning in and out in an ever-increasing pace. She came again, screaming his name, her nails scoring his back as he pounded into her once, twice, thrice. Then he too was coming. His cock pulsed inside her as his hot seed splashed against her womb. Her entire body quaked as he rested atop her. His arms were braced above her, even now protecting her from harm as he rested above her trying to catch his breath.

But even as her body felt deliciously replete she still sensed that something was missing, something had been left undone. Did Hunter feel the same? Was she somehow lacking? Was he disgusted with her?

You must drink of the Goddess' Tears, Amy, and have Hunter do the same. Find the chalice and complete the binding ritual, only then will you understand just what you are to each other. Only once you drink of my tears and share your worries and concerns will your healing be

complete.

And to heal I must find the chalice and drink?

Yes, my child. I would not steer you wrong in this.

Above her, Hunter grunted. "I must be crushing you, love," he whispered against her temple. His warm breath against her skin sent another tremor of need racing through her.

"Hunter, there is still something I must do. Will you show me where the chalice is?"

Hunter lifted his head, searched her gaze. "Are you sure, *moya*? Once you drink from the chalice we will truly be one in heart, mind, body and soul. Even in death we will be tied together. If one of us should die, the other will follow."

She licked her lips, nervous at taking such a monumental step, even though it felt right to do so. After only a moments more hesitation, she nodded. "Yes, I'm sure."

"Then so be it."

Hunter eased himself out of her channel and stood, holding out his hand to her. "The Goddess' chalice is in the statuary. I shall take you to it."

When they reached the clustered statues, she scanned the clearing. Finally, she spotted the one. She knew exactly what she needed to do. With confidence in herself, she approached the statue where a woman held a golden chalice between her alabaster hands. The sculpture beckoned her to accept the offering as water flowed from the cup and pooled in a basin at the woman's feet in a

continuous stream. Yes... That's what she needed. Exactly what she needed.

Reverently, she approached the statue. She moved silently, almost as though she was approaching the Goddess Alana herself. Once again, the Goddess whispered in her mind. *Drink my tears and purify your hearts. Share my tears and purify your souls.*

Reaching up, she pulled the chalice from the Goddess' hands and backed up a pace, before turning her back and carrying the golden cup to Hunter who sat patiently on one of the marble benches inside the clearing.

When Amy reached her mate's side, she knelt between his outstretched legs and slowly lifted the cup to his lips. "I beseech you to drink of the Goddess' golden chalice. Let her tears cleanse your heart and heal all your inner wounds."

Hunter smiled sweetly at her, love and heat lighting his eyes, then wrapped his hands around hers and tilted his head back. Once he quenched his thirst, he held the cup against her lips.

With gentleness in his voice and love in his eyes, Hunter repeated her request. "I beseech you to drink of the Goddess' golden chalice. Let her tears cleanse your heart and heal all your inner wounds," he whispered. And like he, she tilted her head back and let the cool, clear liquid pour down her throat.

At once, a rush of emotions overwhelmed her. Joy, excitement, loneliness, sadness, worry, angst,

anger. So many emotions and not all of them hers. Tears ran down her face unchecked. Hunter scooted off the bench and knelt in front of her. His strong arms wrapped around her waist before quickly tucking her head beneath his chin. *Sshh, moya. Let your tears flow, let your heart open and your wounds heal. I shall be here, holding you when the storm of emotion passes. Never fear, I will always be here for you.*

Amy closed her eyes, enjoying the sound of Hunter's voice in her mind. She let the pounding of his heart against her cheek soothe her. For the first time in a long, long time, she actually believed in something, in someone. It was a nice feeling to have.

It is nice, isn't it? This is how we can communicate if we are separated by choice or design. We will always know where the other is. What the other is feeling, fear, pain, joy.

She knew what he meant. She could feel his overwhelming joy at their binding. She heard the steady beat of his heart, knew that somehow her heartbeat matched his as well.

She reached out, put her hand on her chest and managed to look into his eyes. "I don't know what I feel here," she put her hand over her heart. "Other than somehow it's taken on the same steady beat of yours."

The high-pitched chime of the ship's intercom interrupted their conversation. "I apologize for interrupting, Your Highness, but you wanted to be

informed if we found a planet matching the description given by our prisoner."

"Thank you, Mikel. Do a long-range scan and we'll take a rendering to our prisoner to identify. If it's the correct planet, how long will it take to reach it?"

"About two days at interstellar light speed, Hunter. Not too long, but still...long enough."

CHAPTER EIGHT

As the pair dressed, Amy reached out for Hunter's hand. "Is there a way we can get a picture of this planet? I'd like to show it to both Chrissie and Maryann."

Hunter grinned, pleased beyond words she now felt comfortable enough with him to reach out and touch him. "That's a great idea. Besides, I know you've worried about Maryann since you woke from your healing sleep."

She blushed and turned away, obviously uncomfortable with his praise. He liked the way her skin pinked when he complimented her. He needed to remember to do it more often.

After clasping her hand in his, Hunter led Amy back through the lush garden and headed toward the exit. By the time they reached the door controls, she'd laced her fingers with his.

"I want to pick up a *compu-pad*. We can download planet images on it and take it to the women."

Amy licked her lips, and gave him a tiny smile. "And where would they hide a computer here in this room?"

Smiling, Hunter approached the control pad. After keying in his access code, a recessed cabinet opened in the wall to the left of the door and out slid a slim tray with a handheld instrument. The matte silver instrument had a glowing green touch screen. He then lifted the thin electronic pad upright, fastening it into the ridges in the tray. "Computer, download planetary images onto the *compu-pad* please."

"Working. Transfer complete."

Amy sidled closer to Hunter. He could feel her desperate desire to see the planet where her family and the others were held captive. He could even feel her confusion over what happened between them, when she'd been certain she would never willingly bear another male's touch again.

He shook his head. With Amy so close, his body couldn't help but respond. His cock, sated minutes before, began to grow hard and ready as her scent enveloped him.

"Wow. Chrissie is right. It does seem to have some sort of mystical veil covering it. And the sea-foam green color is shot with swirls of silver and pink. Definitely a good focal point when you need one. I wish..."

As Amy's voice drifted off and she looked away. He knew exactly what she wished. She wished

she'd had this planet to focus on while her captors raped and tormented her. Hunter could feel her pain twisting through her body, and all he wanted to do was take it into himself, where it could never torture her again.

Looking down, he noticed he held the device so tightly, only a miracle kept it from shattering in his hands. "Shall we go visit our prisoner and see if this is the planet she'd focused on so many times?" He needed to get her mind off what happened to her. He knew she would never forget her ordeal but he needed to know that she would eventually be able to overcome most of her fears.

Hunter couldn't shake the idea that what happened to her was all his fault. If he hadn't sent Taliff out looking for more women, if he hadn't ordered him to bring women home—especially *Lionese* women—the Black Rose wouldn't have had a ship-full of females to steal. She would never have gotten a hold of Myra and subsequently the coordinates of Amy's home planet and returned to steal even more women, either.

His greatest fear was that when his mate finally decided to probe his mind, his memories, she would see what part he'd played in her abduction—what part he'd had in the endless abuse she'd suffered while in the clutches of the beasts who called themselves, 'The New Hope'.

Beside him, Amy tensed. Maybe she sensed his inner turmoil, or maybe the prospect of seeing her

former friend made her edgy, either way, he wanted her at ease. "Yes, let's take this to Chrissie, but I'd like to check on Maryann first."

"The woman you helped rescue?"

"Yes, she's human. Her mother was human, a widow when a male from our pack met Maryann's mother and mated her. So, she couldn't shift on the mountain even if she wanted to. She knows our ways, our customs, and I treat her as I would my own sister, but others in the pack tormented her as she grew and didn't develop the same skills and abilities as her peers."

Hunter ran his hand down his mate's back in soothing strokes. "Then I can do no less than what you've done. She'll be under my protection and that of my family until she decides what she wants to do with her life."

Hunter hung his head as shame filled him. Since taking Amy to the medical bay upon arriving on the ship, all his thoughts, his entire focus, centered on her. And since she woke, he hadn't even thought about the other women they'd rescued. What kind of man did that make him? What kind of leader?

As though she sensed his thoughts, and perhaps she did, Amy reached out and lightly ran her hand down his arm. Goose bumps rose atop his flesh and his body tightened once again in need. Goddess, he'd never get enough of her.

"Yes, Maryann first, then Chrissie." She hesitated, then after quickly licking her lips spoke

again. "Afterward, would you mind if we spent some time alone getting to know each other better?" Amy worried her bottom lip and his cock twitched. He had to focus his attention back on what his mate was saying before he completely lost control of his wayward body and jumped her here and now. "I'd like to learn about the man I've taken to mate."

"Of course." How could he refuse such a simple request of him when he wanted exactly the same thing?

You can't, moyo.

His gaze snapped to her mouth where an impish smile tilted up the corners of her lips. His heart clenched as he realized she'd purposely used their new mate-bond to speak to him.

You honor me – honor us – by using our bond to speak your thoughts and to learn mine. I hope you feel you can trust me once you learn all that you do.

"What do you mean, Hunter?"

Hunter shook his head. "I will not influence you or what you'll see when you look into my memories. All I will say was the decisions I made as High King of *Chantrea* were made to benefit *Chantrea* and our people. I only wish I could have foreseen the consequences my decisions would bring" – and he knew they hadn't seen all of them...yet.

After slowly stroking Amy's back one more time, he slowly stepped away, tucking the compu-pad

inside the inner pocket of his uniform jacket. "Now how about we track down your friend Maryann and see how she's faring?"

Amy nodded then cleared her throat. "Sounds good. I'm ready whenever you are."

"Computer?"

"Yes, Prince Shi'Lan?"

"Where would we find the rescued female called Maryann?"

"Maryann Wilson is in the botanical gardens on deck eighteen."

"Thank you, Computer. If anyone is looking for us, please direct them to that location."

"Understood, Prince Shi'Lan."

After giving his mate a short bow, Hunter held out his elbow, inviting her to take it. Instead, Amy blushed prettily and reached for his hand, twining their fingers together. "Together, let's talk to her together."

Giddier than he could ever remember feeling, Hunter squeezed Amy's hand and led her out of the *Chantrean* Mating Garden, praying the rest of his courtship with his mate continued to go this smoothly.

* * * *

As they walked down the corridor hand-in-hand Amy couldn't help but wonder just how Hunter managed to become so important to her. When she

took the time to think about it, there should be no way that she'd allow his touch, welcome it in fact. But after the bonding ceremony, she couldn't help but crave his touch, desire his closeness.

She felt like two different people. The frail tortured woman Hunter rescued, and now the semi-confident woman that is Hunter's mate. She could actually feel his confidence in her, feel his belief in her strength and courage and it empowered her. His belief in her made her want to prove him right, and gave her the strength to fight her insecurities. She'd need all her courage and strength in the coming days if they were to rescue her people and defeat the Black Rose.

As they rounded the corner, Amy pulled Hunter to a stop. "What is that?" she asked, pointing toward the tiny creature cowering in one of the doorways.

Hunter shook his head and chuckled. "It seems that one of my niece's pets has gotten loose. That's a *Durling*. It's a cross between a cat and a fluff bunny. It's as round and fluffy as an Earth bunny without the long ears but purrs and pounces like a kitten though it has just a tiny nub for a tail."

"I assume it's harmless then?"

Chuckling, Hunter dropped to his knees and slowly crawled toward the frightened creature. *You can say that. The only harm he will do is to your clothes when he's upset. He tends to lose control of his bladder when stressed.*

Amy snorted but kept her gaze focused on Hunter's ass as he continued to crawl down the length of the corridor. His uniform pants pulled tight across his bottom outlining his tight buttocks to perfection. She had to bite her lip to keep from saying something crude. She couldn't believe the change that had come over her in just one day. Could Hunter have put some sort of spell on her, or drugged her compliance in some way? It must have something to do with the mate bonds. Perhaps the mate bonds made her feel that way.

She shook her head. No. No, he couldn't have. Besides, the mate bonds worked both ways. He knew what she was thinking, feeling, just as she knew what he was. She'd feel his duplicity, his sense of guilt, through the bond, and she sensed none of that. All she felt from him was his need for revenge on her behalf and his overwhelming feelings of love and compassion for her. How could she continue to hold herself back from him, knowing how he felt about her? She couldn't.

With that realization, something inside her eased. Instead of waiting for something bad to happen, she'd be proactive. She'd dive into her own psyche. She'd build herself up both mentally and physically by speaking with the healers and working out in the exercise room. She wanted to come to Hunter, to her mate, as whole as she could.

With her decision made, Amy once again focused on Hunter and his determination to capture

the runaway *Durling*. She couldn't help but smile as she watched him babbling to the black ball of fluff. After what seemed forever, the tiny creature slowly approached Hunter. She couldn't make out any of the *Durling's* features except for its bright orange eyes and tiny, white-tipped, pointed ears. As soon as Hunter cuddled it to his chest and rubbed its ears, it let out a rumbling purr. It sounded like a very contented feline.

Amy smiled then cleared her throat. "Should we drop Delilah's pet off at her cabin? I'm sure your niece must be frantic looking for it."

Hunter grinned then slowly stood. "That might be wise. You've not seen Delilah when she's upset about something." Hunter shuddered. "She has a roar that does the *Lionese* proud."

Within minutes they'd reached Eve and Taliff's quarters and dropped off the *Durling* to the precocious toddler who'd misplaced it. Eve and Taliff were seated on the sofa, amusement plastered across their faces.

"But Uncle Hunter, I only let Jazzy out of her cage for a minute so I could get her some water. I don't know how she got out of the cabin."

"Any why didn't you wait until your father could help you, little one?"

With hips cocked to the side, Delilah stuck out her chin and crossed her arms. "I'm a big girl. I don't need Daddy to do everything for me."

Hunter shook his head. "Well, be more careful

next time. You wouldn't want your pet to get lost and hurt aboard ship, would you?"

The little blonde bit her bottom lip and shook her head. "No, Uncle Hunter. I promise that I'll be more careful."

Hunter shook his head again. "The better promise would be to make sure your parents are around when you let her out again."

Delilah pursed her lips and let out a gusty sigh. "All right. I won't let Jazzy out of the cage unless momma or daddy is there with me."

"Good." After nodding once toward Eve and Taliff, Hunter turned toward Amy. "Now, are you ready to speak with Maryann?"

"Yes. I want to make sure she's okay. She probably suffered much more than any of the others the Black Rose captured. Being Human, her body would take longer to heal, the damage inflicted on her nearly impossible to survive. The fact that she's still alive proves that her will to survive must have been tremendous."

Eve patted Taliff's knee then stood and approached them. "If you'd like, I could accompany you."

Even though Amy would like nothing more than to fall back on Eve's strength, she couldn't do it. Amy shook her head, but reached out and squeezed Eve's hand. "That's okay, Eve. I can handle this. Maryann knows me, but she might not be willing to speak in front of strangers."

Eve swallowed then nodded. "Of course. But if you need anything, you know where to find me."

Amy stepped forward and wrapped her arms around Eve, embracing the woman for the first time since her rescue. "I know you'll be there," she whispered. Her voice cracked as she continued to speak. "Even in the frozen hell where I was imprisoned, I knew you wouldn't give up looking for me. It's probably the only thing that kept me going all those months."

As they each wiped tears from their eyes, Hunter cleared his throat and turned to face his brother. "We will bring the image of the planet to Chrissie after our visit with Maryann."

"Sounds good. If you need help interrogating the prisoner, call me. I haven't forgotten what the Black Rose has done to our own family. I'd like a chance to learn exactly where that treacherous bitch calls home."

"Taliff," Eve scolded. "Watch your language in front of your daughter."

"Yes, dear." It was said with some humility and contriteness, Amy couldn't help but laugh. If felt good to laugh, to be a part of something good and healthy, something happy for a change.

"Well, on that note, I better get out of here. I've still got to see our prisoner and confirm the Black Rose's home base. Only then, will I feel like I can relax. At least for a time," she murmured.

As Amy stepped toward the door, Hunter

walked up behind her and placed his hand against her lower back. "Are you alright?" he asked, his voice just above a whisper so the others couldn't overhear. She could love him for that alone.

She stopped. Her heart stuttered. Love him? Could she love him? After only a few days and those spent most unconscious? She just didn't know.

"What is it, *moya*?"

Amy shook her head. "Nothing. It's nothing." Pushing thoughts of love to the back of her mind, Amy left Eve's family quarters, Hunter right behind her. "Computer?"

"Yes, Amy Shi'Lan?" The computer's answer gave her pause. Amy Shi'Lan. It was her name now that she was mated. She supposed she should get used to it. She took a deep breath and shook off the strangeness of it.

"What are the current whereabouts of Maryann Wilson?"

"Maryann Wilson is still in the Botanical Gardens."

"Thank you, Computer."

Amy glanced over at Hunter and found him staring at her. "What? What are you staring at?"

"You, *moya*. I'm staring at you. In the last few days, the rate of healing, both mental and physical, that has taken place within you is phenomenal."

"I just want to be what I should have been all along, strong and secure in my own abilities."

"Then I will do all that I can to help you."

Amy turned toward her mate, reached up and lightly ran her hand down his cheek. "I believe you. I believe you'll do whatever you need to, to make me both happy and healthy. That's not something I could have even imagined a week ago."

Reaching up, Hunter grasped her hand and held it against his cheek. "Well, perhaps after we talk with Maryann and Chrissie, we can spend more time getting to know each other."

Chuckling, Amy pulled her hand away and started walking toward the nearest transport tube. "Perhaps we can. If you think you can sweet talk me into it."

"I'll do my best to convince you."

"You do that." Inside, Amy felt light and carefree for the first time in ages. That in itself was a miracle. Once they stepped inside the transport tube, Hunter punched a few buttons into the control panel.

What did you just do?

Input our destination.

"Oh, I always just tell the computer aloud where I want to go and it takes me there."

Hunter shrugged. "Well, this way, if there are others around, they can't overhear where you're going. It's safer this way."

"Will you show me how to use the interface?"

"Sure. We'll practice tomorrow while we tour the ship."

Before she could thank him, the transport tube

stopped and the doors silently slid open, directly inside the botanical gardens. Hanging plants and climbing vines were everywhere. There were beautiful flowers of every hue everywhere you looked. One plant, a cross between a tulip and a long stemmed rose was a vibrant shade of orange. "What is this one?" she asked Hunter, pointing toward the beautiful orange bloom.

"It's a *Tupa*. It comes in shades of blue, red, orange, purple, white and yellow. Our scientists are trying to create a pink one now though through hybridization."

"Neat. Well, no matter how much I might want to look at the flowers, we're here to find Maryann."

Hunter reached for her hand, squeezed it gently. "You're right, *moya*. Let's find your friend and see how she's faring."

They found Maryann deep inside the garden, seated on a bench while she stared out into space through the large viewport opposite her. Amy made sure to shuffle her feet so she didn't startle her friend. "Maryann?"

Still, even with the warning, her friend tensed before slowly relaxing her posture after quickly double-checking who stood behind her. "Hi, Amy," she whispered.

Stay here, will you, Hunter? I think you make her nervous.

Of course. I'll wait by the entrance. There is another bench just inside the door where I'll wait for you.

Thank you for understanding.

I'd do anything for you, moya. I hope you know that.

I'm beginning to. Amy turned away from her mate and made her way toward Maryann. After sitting on the bench beside Maryann, she decided to wait. She'd speak when she was ready to.

"They have your mom and dad, even your sisters. I thought you should know that."

Amy swallowed past the lump in her throat, battled the tears that threatened to fall. "Do you know if they are still alive? Still being held captive and where?"

"Your mother, the night before we were all taken she'd found out through our healers that she was pregnant. She never got a chance to tell your father."

"My mother's pregnant?"

"Yes, and because of it, she was able to convince her captors early on that their job was done and they left her alone. Your father though, they've enjoyed tormenting your father with the knowledge that she's carrying another man's seed."

"And because they can't speak telepathically she has no way to tell him."

"No, because the women and men are kept completely separate in opposite sides of the camp."

"How long ago were you all taken?"

"Not too long ago. Maybe a year, a little longer maybe. It's hard to keep track of the days, the weeks, the months, when you're a prisoner." Amy

nodded, understanding Maryann completely.

Amy reached out, desperate for answers and squeezed Maryann's hand. "And you've seen the camp? Seen the planet they're held on?"

"Yes. I'd know that planet anywhere. You get me close enough to it and I can point it out."

"I can do one better." *Hunter, bring that compu-pad. Maryann knows what the planet looks like as well and would like a chance to identify it.* "Hunter will be here shortly with an image. Just let us know if it's the planet you remember being held on."

Within moments Hunter arrived, *compu-pad* in hand. "Is this the place where they kept my parents? Is this the place they're being held captive?"

Amy held her breath and waited. Finally, Maryann raised tear-filled eyes. "This isn't it. This isn't the place. We did stay here yes, for a time, but afterward we were moved again. I'm sorry, this isn't where your family is, but Taliff Shi'Lan's mate—her family is here, or was the last I heard."

"Then where is my family? Where are my parents, my siblings?"

As Hunter gathered Amy into his arms, she wondered if she'd ever see her parents again.

CHAPTER NINE

Hunter tensed. He could feel Amy's fear, her worry, through their bond. "Do you know anything about the world you were held on?"

"I would know that planet anywhere. One side was light the other dark. I was kept on the light side. Do you have any idea what it's like to never know when it's day or night, never to have any darkness to help you sleep, to block out the demons? I think I would rather have been kept on the dark side where I could at least escape my nightmares and the monsters who kept entering my room, in the darkness."

"And where was Amy's brother kept?"

"I never saw Ryan once we left the ringed planet, so I can only assume he's still there. The sisters were spilt apart. Tyra had a cell near mine, and Brenna was sent to the dark side of the planet."

"Why wasn't Ryan moved?" Amy asked, her voice more subdued than he'd ever heard it. She feared for his life. He could feel it.

Maryann grimaced then looked away. She was silent for a moment, her fingers twisting in the front of her gown. "They began force-feeding him some drug. They used his body, primed him so he'd fuck whoever, or whatever they put in front of him. He had no free will, no will at all. It was as though he wasn't Ryan anymore. Like all of the human, caring tendencies had been bled out of him. He just became a rutting animal."

"But why?" Amy cried out. "Why would they do such a thing?"

"They weren't sure if it was the females who would produce the females or the males' genes who produced them. They weren't taking any chances. They would use us all. It's like we're all a part of some sick experiment."

Amy screeched, tried to wrench herself out of his arms. He wouldn't have it. Right now she needed him, needed his comfort, his sense of control. With his arms sheltering Amy, Hunter began to plot aloud. "So, we need to plan a three-prong attack, sending raiding teams to not only the camps on both the light and dark side of the moon, but the camp she has set up on the ringed planet, as well."

Maryann frowned. "I don't understand why you would need to attack the other planet. It seems that attacking one planet at a time would work better."

Hunter nodded. "And you're right, if they were far apart. But all three of these planets are in the same system and only the element of surprise will

have the effect we want." He tapped the pocket that held the picture on the pad. "This planet with the rings," he met Maryann's gaze. "It seems it's only visible from the dark side of the planet." He smiled, though it didn't reach his eyes. "Yes, Maryann, had you been on the dark side of the planet you would have seen this above you. But you would have been treated so much worse than you already were. Apparently, the dark side is where those the Black Rose wants brutalized and tortured without mercy to be taken. As a human, you would have never survived."

Hunter watched as Maryann swallowed convulsively, then shuddered. Amy reached out and pulled the frail woman into her arms. "It's going to be all right. We got you out of there and you'll never suffer at her hands or the hands of her followers again."

With the woman distracted by Amy, Hunter moved to sit next to the traumatized Human. "And what happened to your parents, your family, Maryann?"

She shook her head, whimpering as she burrowed her face deeper into the crook of Amy's neck. "Dead. My parents are dead. They never made it aboard the ship the morning her people arrived. They fought and fought to save me and in the end they died and I was still taken."

"Oh, sweetheart," Amy murmured.

"I'm alone. All alone," she cried.

"Never," Hunter and Amy vowed together. "You'll never be alone again."

After a few minutes, Maryann seemed to pull herself together and the three of them found themselves staring out into the blackness of space. It was Maryann who first broke the silence. "So, why don't the three of us go speak with Chrissie? We were taken together, formed a close bond those first few weeks of our kidnapping. I might be able to get some more answers out of her than you two."

What do you think, Amy?

I think she needs this. She needs to take back her life, to feel like she can contribute something to the coming battle. She has to know that as a Human she won't be able to do much physically against her captors. Let her help in this, at least.

You are very wise, moya. It will be as you suggest. "Good idea, Maryann. Let's head on over to her cell now. Afterwards, I thought I'd take you lovely ladies to dinner."

Maryann gave him a shy smile and Amy blushed to the roots of her red blonde hair. Rather than read Amy's mind, he'd rather imagine just what thoughts were running around in there. Maybe, once they were alone, he could convince her to tell him just what she'd imagined that had her blushing so prettily.

She reached out and took his hand. "Let's all go see what she has to say."

Her face said she wasn't sure what she wanted to

do, but her determination to find her family and the families of the others in her community shone through her eyes. His mate wanted retribution for the atrocities levied against her people. Hunter's only fear was what the retribution would be for the part he played in the nightmare her life had become.

* * * *

Chrissie sat in her cell, her knees to her chest, her head buried beneath her arms, rocking back and forth. Amy tried to feel sorry for her. She wanted to understand the reasons Chrissie had done everything she had. For a moment, she tried to put herself in the other woman's situation. What would she have done to protect her family? Would she have given the information they required of her or would she have refused and watched her family die? Would their death be preferable to the torment they found themselves enduring now? The woman before her had been her best friend. Could she ever forgive her for her duplicity? What would she have done? The question kept dancing around inside her head, making her crazy. Did she have so many friends that she could allow herself to just throw them away like this? One thought led to another, until she felt she'd go crazy with unanswered questions.

Finally, with her decision made, she moved to sit

on one end of the bed. She could say one thing for Hunter's people. The cell was clean. The food that sat untouched on the tray in the corner at least looked edible. And the cell smelled fresh—uncontaminated by the horrible scent of the semen and sweat of the rebels. But Amy couldn't blame Chrissie for not trusting the food placed in front of her. From her viewpoint, she was a prisoner again, just with another set of captors.

Maryann moved to kneel in front of the bed, at Chrissie's feet and Hunter stood guard at the door. They'd surrounded Chrissie, and it would remain this way until all their questions were answered.

"Chrissie, do you know how many rebels follow the Black Rose? How many men make up..." she grimaced, "...The New Hope"? Maryann asked. Her voice was soft, soothing, as though they were talking about the latest gossip, not life or death issues.

Chrissie shook her head, but she did scrunch her eyes closed and bite her bottom lip. After what seemed ages, she whispered, "Hundreds. Each planet had at least three dozen guards that rotated shifts.

Plus, that didn't count the Black Rose's personal bodyguards or Myra's. There had to be at least two dozen between them. Then there are the ones who went off world and raided other planets of their women. There could be thousands. I'm sorry," she said, twisting the sheets between her fingers. "I

haven't been much help to you."

"Where did she find so many *Lionese* men to join her army?" Hunter asked.

Surprised, Chrissie jerked up her head. "She didn't. It's not only *Lionese* men, but *Manruvians*, Humans, even wolf shifters. This is so much bigger than you know. They use a drug on the unwilling that turns them into beasts. Once addicted to the substance, they'd do whatever they needed to keep getting the drug and even sell out their own family members to get it. Nice, polite men have become monsters right before our eyes."

Amy licked her lips, nervous now that the time had come for her to identify the planet she could see from her window. Pulling out the compu-pad from her jacket, Amy handed it to Chrissie. "Is this the planet you saw? This planet is called *Drimada*. Is this what you could see from the window in your cell?"

Tears welled up in Chrissie's eyes then spilled down her cheeks. She began to sob into her pillow. She nodded then whimpered as her eyes rolled into the back of her head before fainting dead away.

* * * *

Hunter knew getting any other information out of her would be nearly impossible in Chrissie's current state. Maybe after she calmed down some, she'd remember more details. For now at least, they

had enough rough information to begin formulating a plan.

He walked over toward the women and reached for Amy's hand. "I think we've bothered Chrissie enough for now. How about we leave her alone for a little while? I'm sure she doesn't really want, or need, an audience right now.

Amy nodded but Maryann shook her head. "I'd like to stay here with her a while. I don't think she should be left alone with just her memories for company."

Hunter was torn. Chrissie was a prisoner, not an informant, but as he looked at her he couldn't help but feel compassion for her. If the situations were reversed, he wasn't sure what choice he would have made. Would he give up others to protect his family? He'd like to say he wouldn't but unless faced with that choice in real life all this speculation wouldn't get him anywhere.

You wouldn't have sacrificed others to protect your family. You would have found another way, Hunter.

I hope so.

I know so. Should we leave Maryann here?

I don't see any harm. Place a guard in here if you're worried about her safety. Let Maryann help Chrissie if she can.

Thank you. You are very wise.

Amy snorted then spoke aloud to Maryann. "Go ahead and stay as long as you like, Maryann. We're going to give Mikel this new information then go to

our quarters. You can find us there if you need to talk later."

As Chrissie lay unconscious, Maryann nodded. After pulling Amy to her feet, he guided her out of the room, his thoughts already on Amy and their night ahead. For the last standard hour, it had become increasingly difficult to concentrate on something other than her and the lovemaking he planned on sharing with her this night. He had to get control of this need soon or he'd get naught done.

"You aren't the only one. I feel like I'm about to crawl out of my skin. This isn't normal; especially considering a few days ago I couldn't stand the touch of a male, any male. Craving your touch this much, no matter how wonderful it feels, seems wrong somehow."

"It's the bonding. We've gone too many hours without intimacy. Usually, we celebrate the bonding over the course of an entire day and night—completely naked for the first twenty-four hours. This craving will grow worse until we give into it. After the first day, we'll still feel the need to touch, to be close to each other, but it won't control our rational thoughts as it does now."

Amy let out a gusty sigh. "Thank the goddess. If felt wrong to have thoughts of running my tongue down your tummy while you questioned Chrissie."

"Not as wrong as wishing it was you kneeling at my feet sucking my cock when Maryann knelt

down in front of Chrissie."

Amy snorted then began to chuckle. He couldn't hold back his own laughter. Thank the Goddess Alana, Amy could find humor in this situation.

Before she could respond, Mikel approached them from the other end of the corridor. As they grew closer to him, Mikel stopped, tilted his head to the side, closed his eyes, and inhaled.

"Where have you been recently?" His normally calm voice had grown husky, rough.

"Why?" Amy asked, though Hunter had seen this reaction from a *Manruvian* once before. That man had scented his mate on another and a brawl had ensued. Was Mikel's mate aboard this ship? One of the women, maybe?

Hunter answered his question. He wanted nothing more than for Mikel to find his mate. Mikel had been lonely long enough as he hunted for a mate. "We spent some time in Eve's quarters then visited with Maryann, the woman I carried on my back off the ice planet, *Visara*. Then we went--the three of us--to visit the prisoner, Chrissie."

"That's it?"

Hunter nodded and smiled. "That's it my friend. Happy hunting."

Mikel gave them a distracted nod then took off down the corridor, following their scent trail, Hunter imagined.

Amy just looked confused as she watched Mikel walk away. Her brows were furrowed and she was

frowning. "What just happened here?"

Hunter chuckled. "He smells his mate, and since Eve is taken and Delilah is unlikely since he's been around her before, chances are that either Maryann or Chrissie will soon be the focus of a *Manruvian* mate-hunt."

"Oh, I see. I hope it's Maryann then. She deserves a family of her own and I'm not sure a *Lionese* woman and a *Manruvian* merman can reproduce. But there has to be a greater chance for a Human woman and a *Manruvian*, I would think."

As they continued to head toward the transport tunnel at the end of the corridor, Hunter grunted. "Probably, but the Goddess Alana chooses who our mates will be, genetics aside."

"Oh, I see."

"Now how about we head to our quarters and order in a meal, then spend the evening getting to know each other better?"

"Getting to know each other, or making love?"

Laughing, Hunter shook his head. "Both, my love, both." With that said, and his intentions clear, they entered the transport tube. "Computer, take us to our quarters."

"Yes, High Prince Shi'Lan."

CHAPTER TEN

Within minutes, Amy and Hunter were safely ensconced once again in their quarters. This time she knew exactly how the night would end, and instead of feeling terrified she was impatient to begin. She really did feel like she'd crawl out of her own skin if she didn't get to touch him soon, taste him. What had gotten into her?

Even before her capture, she'd never felt this need for one man, this overwhelming desire to make love to one man and only one man. Hell, she hadn't even played the field as a teenager when all of her other friends seem to have a new lover every other weekend.

She drummed her fingers on the table as she waited for their meal to arrive. She wasn't sure how long she would last, being this close to him and alone. "Where the hell is it?"

"Where is what?"

"Dinner. I'm starving."

Hunter grinned. "Liar. You just wanted

something to do to take up the time. I can feel your need to jump my bones from here."

Amy put her hands to her burning face. "I'm going to take a bath. You wait here for dinner." She stomped from the room amidst his laughter.

She entered the bathroom and started the water running. She wished she had some bubble bath, but had no idea where to find anything like it. Besides, it was the hot water that relaxed her, the bubbles were a luxury. After stripping, she stepped into the steaming water and groaned. The water felt so wonderful, she leaned back against the edge of the tub and closed her eyes. Only a few minutes had passed when the water splashed and her eyes flew open.

Covering herself with her hands, her face burned as Hunter settled next to her and pulled her into his lap. "I'm sorry if I frightened you. Do you wish me to leave?"

Forgetting about their mind link, she shook her head, mortified that she wanted him to stay, yet wasn't sure what she should do. Should she be the one to initiate sex, or leave it up to him?

"Just relax, *moya*." He wrapped his arms around her, letting them rest just under her breasts.

Leaning her head back against his shoulder, she allowed him to pour the warm water over her shoulders, relaxing her even more. He pressed a kiss to her shoulder, moving his mouth to her neck and she groaned.

"This is your night, *moya*. You need only relax and allow me to please you or you may take the lead. Your wish is my command."

Amy sat up, pulling away from him. She felt his disappointment as he watched the water sluice down her skin as she stood and moved away. He watched her hungrily, partially filled with hope and disappointment.

Grinning, she moved closer and sat back onto his lap, facing him. He pulled her closer, wrapped his arms around her and brought her mouth to his. He sucked her bottom lip into his mouth, ravenous for a taste of her. She felt his arousal, could hear his thoughts. He could smell her arousal, taste it on her skin and he would never get enough of her.

Her hands moved up over his shoulders and fisted in his hair, pulling him closer. If she could have crawled inside him she would have. She groaned when his hands slid down over her sides to cup her rear, gently kneading the full globes. His fingers brushed over her plump labia and she groaned into his mouth, grinding herself down onto his lap. She needed this. She needed more, so much more, and she wasn't sure how to tell him.

She nearly screamed her pleasure when his fingers slipped though her wetness and found her clit, circling it with his fingers as his thumb found the entrance to her channel. His hard cock pressed against her gate and she groaned, moved closer. She didn't know how she could need a man so much, so

quickly but she knew there would be no rest, no comfort for either of them if they didn't finish this soon.

Taking the lead, she sucked his tongue into her mouth. He tasted of a hint of the wine he'd ordered for their dinner. "Started dinner without me, did you?" she said against his lips before sliding her tongue back into his mouth. Their tongues moved together as she ground herself onto his lap, waiting for his inevitable penetration.

The head of his cock moved past her gate and she arched back in an attempt to take him deeper inside her. Breaking their kiss, his lips traveled down to her neck, suckling her shoulder before his mouth closed over her nipple. Tunneling her fingers through his hair, she cried out her pleasure as his tongue circled the light pink bud he stroked into pebbled readiness.

Lifting herself from his lap, she dropped down on his cock, driving him deep, all the way inside deep. His hands molded her rear. The thumb of his right hand moved over her thigh to between her legs. He unerringly found her clit, circling it, taking her over the edge of a massive climax. Arching her back, she pressed her chest harder against him, rubbing her breasts against the stubble of his face as he continued to suckle her breast.

Grabbing his hair, she continued to ride him and couldn't believe what she was about to say. "Fuck me. Please, Hunter, I can't go slowly now. Now I

need you pounding deep inside me. Fuck me, please!"

* * * *

The delight of hearing the words he never thought to hear her say, nearly made him lose control as he brought her down onto him and raised his hips to deepen his thrust.

"Yes!" she screamed as he wrapped her legs around his waist and he stood. The water sluiced down over his legs as he continued to raise and lower her over his hard cock. It had grown impossibly larger when she begged him to fuck her, more immense than he'd even thought possible. His size had grown to that of a *Lionese* male mating with his lioness. She screamed again, her nails digging into his shoulders and he stopped. Sweat poured from his brow, droplets of water and sweat ran down his shoulders and legs. His chest heaved as he stopped and asked the question that could very well kill him—and she knew it.

"Have I hurt you, *moya*?" He gritted his teeth, trying to regain control over his raging hormones. "I'll stop if I'm hurting you. I swear it."

"Only you stopping could possibly hurt me now."

"That's not going to happen, Amy. There is no way I'd stop now unless you asked, not after such a bold request, nay, demand, for me to fuck you."

"Then stop talking and start moving already."

Hunter grinned. How could he not? She couldn't be more perfect. Even after the tremendous emotional and physical trauma she suffered at the hands of her rapists, she was growing, changing into the woman he knew her to be inside. And he couldn't be more proud of her.

When her woman's cream began to slide down the length of his cock, he tenderly took her clit between his fingers and pressed. Amy screamed her pleasure, wrapping her legs around him even tighter. Her body shook with pent-up need. One more good tug on her clit and she'd explode. Hunter held back, waiting...waiting.

When she almost pulled a clump of his hair from his head and screamed, '*NOW*', at the top of her lungs, he couldn't make her wait any longer. With one sharp pull on her turgid clit and one hard deep thrust into her channel, Amy exploded. He could feel her channel clasp his cock, tightening around it until he had no choice but to spill his seed. With one last thrust, he lodged his cock at the mouth of her womb and bathed it with his life-giving fluid. With the Lady Goddess' blessing, a cub would be born of this union. A cub made in love and raised in love.

He placed a tender kiss against her temple and held her as the trembling in her body subsided. Before he could gently raise her and pull out of her well-sexed channel, the ships breach alarms began

to blast through every nook and cranny of the ship, from personal quarters, to transport tubes. Everyone had been given notice that there was a hull breach.

"Hunter, Hunter, what's going on?" She tried to unwrap her arms and legs so he'd let her down but there was no time. No time at all.

"Trust me, Amy. When the hidden compartment opens—and there is one in every room on every ship in the *Manruvian* Fleet—find a gray bodysuit that seems closest to your size and put it on. We may only have seconds before we lose all air pressure and environmental controls onboard."

Amy nodded. The fear in her eyes replaced the hazy afterglow of lovemaking she'd just worn. He quickly eased out of his mate, and without even putting her down raced toward their closets. He stopped halfway between the "his and hers" closets, not approaching either of them but the empty wall space between them.

After pressing a hidden release switch in one of the seams along the wall, a huge double hanging rack of uniforms and *Manruvian* pressure suits came sliding out of the wall. The pressure suits needed to be donned immediately in case of a loss of atmosphere or air contamination. Let's just hope they both managed to get into them on time.

After selecting a suit for himself he looked up over at his mate. A look of grim determination was all he could see as she slipped her legs into the form

fitting material. The material was the same as that of the mate bonds.

Hunter snorted.

What's so funny?

I'm just thankful we completed the mating before this happened.

Why's that?

Because once Manruvians scent their future mate, they go into mating heat. If this happens while wearing the suit, it becomes a part of them and can't be taken off. The suits begin to affect the two mates and their libidos. It also works on other shifters. His gaze became thoughtful. I don't know about full humans though.

What do you mean?

If one or both fights the union, the suits will make any unmated pair sexually frustrated to the point of pain before allowing the suits to dissolve just enough that intercourse can happen. And that can only happen if there is no danger to their bodies and both people are mentally accepting of the mating. Until then, all that'll happen is an extreme case of sexual need and no release in sight – for either of them. Only once the male is lodged in the woman's channel, the mating heat begins to subside and only when all danger has passed in the atmosphere will the suits completely dissolve into the mates' skin as with the mate bonds.

Amy's eyes widened. Oh crap, I sure hope Mikel either has already started bonding with whoever his mate is, or doesn't fully catch her scent until the danger is past then.

Hunter nodded. He couldn't agree more.

They were both pulling the fitted masks over their faces when Mikel burst through the door of his cabin. He'd already donned his pressurized suit. In fact, now that he thought about it, the title of the suit and what it was used for compared to what it looked like might be cause for explanation.

Because, Mikel fully adorned in the *Manruvian* pressure suit looked like he was about to go diving in an ocean. The only thing missing from the suits were an air tank and those were unnecessary as the material converted the outside, polluted air into breathable, oxygenated air.

"We've got to secure the decks. We're putting all the non-warrior trained women and children in one central location so they're easier to protect. All the other men and women with training will be searching the ship, one level at a time until we find whoever is causing trouble on this ship,"

Amy looked from him to Mikel then lifted her head proudly. "Do you have an Empath on board? It would be helpful to have several who could catch someone lying about why they are where they are."

"I have about half a dozen, Amy Shi'Lan. What do you suggest?"

"Then I suggest each team or each level have one Empath put in place that can question stragglers on the levels, those that don't seem in any hurry to be somewhere."

Hunter nodded. "That is a very wise idea."

"And I'll be on one of the teams. I've always hidden my abilities." She paused. "Among my people on Earth, I would be considered a freak so I've always suppressed them, but I think it's time I used them how they were meant to be used," Amy added.

How could Hunter refuse her? Not only was it a sound idea, but his mate needed to be needed, to discover her own self-worth.

Decision reached, Hunter nodded. "Fine, let's go. Taliff will guard Eve as well as all the women and children along with his security team. You and I, along with Mikel here and his warriors will search the ship."

He turned to Mikel. "Is that alright with you?"

Mikel smiled. "It's more of a plan than I had. Let me organize the teams. Meet me outside the Rec. Room. It's the closest area of the ship to where the damage was done."

Hunter didn't want to ask Mikel this, but somebody had to say it. "Sabotage?"

Mikel grimaced. "Looks like it. The fuel cell was tampered with. The environmental and gravitational systems are going haywire. And worst of all, the ship's shielding has been completely disabled."

"Well," Hunter said, "let's not waste any more time finding the culprit or culprits. You can never be too careful."

Mikel clasped Hunter's forearm in a warrior's

embrace. "Agreed."

Amy adjusted her facemask one last time then said, "I suggest we check the prisoner level first. The Black Rose has a habit of killing her compatriots when they've outgrown their usefulness."

Grimacing, Hunter placed the palm of his hand against her lower back. "If it's alright with Mikel, we'll check there on our way to the Recreation Room."

"No, that's fine and it saves us from wasting time waiting. You and Amy and your royal bodyguards head down to the prison level. When it's all clear there, head to the rendezvous location."

Hunter and Amy, and his two bodyguards, Andre and Meric, made quick time getting to the prisoner level. Unfortunately, it looked like someone else got to it first. Laser scorches pit marked the walls. Cell doors had been blasted off their hinges. And when they reached Chrissie's cell it looked like a small battle had occurred there. Blood splattered the walls, bedding was shredded. Furniture and clothes had been tossed every which way. Even the metal ledge that was her bed looked partially melted.

Beside him, Amy trembled. "Where's Chrissie? Where the hell is Chrissie?"

His guards searched the room. Finally, after nearly five minutes of searching the tiny cell, Meric approached Hunter, a piece of paper in his hand.

"What is it? Hunter, what is it?" Amy cried.

Hunter turned toward his mate, knowing she could see the pain in his eyes. "It's a letter from the Black Rose."

"What does it say? Please, you're worrying me. What does it say?"

CHAPTER ELEVEN

“Which of my traitors do I kill, dear brother? Those who would only help my cause because I hold their families or should I kill their families themselves? I hear you have found your mate. Did you know that her brother is the only male born to her pride in the last nineteen years?”

Should we kill him or should we continue to torture him with the drugs that make him the animal he has now become? You choose, dear brother, who shall live and who shall die? You will never find us. The Black Rose will forever be out of your reach.”

Amy fell to her knees. “Nineteen? He’s nineteen now?” Somehow the passage of years hadn’t reached to her brother. He’d remained the loveable teenager he’d always been in her mind. “How can so many years be lost? How does one woman feel that she has the right to do this?” She fisted her hands, her anger finally showing in the changing color of her skintight pressure suit. “What gives her the right? What makes her think she has the right to

interfere, to torture and dictate other's lives the way she does?"

Hunter took her by the arm and practically dragged her from the area to the rendezvous point. On their way, they found a severely injured Chrissie. Her arms were bent at odd angles. Her face was battered and bruised, barely recognizable. Cuts, some minor, some inches deep, ran up and down her entire body.

Amy searched her mind ruthlessly to see if she'd been left as a spy or for dead. Apparently it was the latter as the woman knew nothing and was near death. They quickly transported her into medical stasis and headed toward the recreation room. As soon as they reached Mikel, they found him directing his people.

"Did you find any traitors on board?"

He nodded. "A few. Some were influenced by drugs. Others were just fanatics, following The Black Rose. But your mate's suggestion of taking Empaths along was a wonderful idea. There were several spies. It was a good thing they weren't in areas where they were privy to any sensitive information. She still knows nothing of our plan. This was just another raid to gather single females. By the looks of it, she has no idea about our impending raid."

"Hull breach now repaired, recommend removal of environmental suits," the computer announced as Maryann walked into the room tugging on the

facemask.

"Why the hell can't I take this thing off and what the hell is that I feel crawling up my aiieeee!"

"Uh oh," Amy muttered as she slid her own face mask off. Behind her she heard a muttered, "By the Goddess, not now." She whipped her head around to find Mikel on his knees, quaking. His gray pressure suit was quickly changing colors and within seconds had turned vibrantly red.

Amy turned her head and looked back to Maryann. Her suit had changed colors too and now matched Mikel's. Maryann had her eyes squeezed tight as she panted.

"Well, Hunter, it seems these two need a few minutes alone. Why don't we go back to the medical bay and check on Chrissie while the computer counts personnel and finds out just how many people the Black Rose seized this time."

Hunter smiled at Mikel who had begun to groan. Beneath his facemask sweat pooled and heated hunger filled Mikel's gaze. "I think that's an excellent idea, Amy. I think these two have some serious talking to do."

Amy watched Hunter's shoulders shake as they made their way out of the Recreation Room. He may like Mikel but he was certainly finding this situation humorous.

You think Mikel's situation is funny, do you?

Well, yes, actually, I do. Mikel has been searching for his mate as long as I have. The fact that the suit won't

free him until she commits to him, I find incredibly ironic.

Well how do you think Maryann feels? Her body is being used against her again, but this time she has nothing and no one to fight but her own fears. She's going to feel helpless, then angry that her body is betraying her. I don't think anything about this is funny.

Hunter shook his head and sighed. Put that way, I must agree.

Amy smiled then elbowed him in the ribs. Tell you what, when all the danger has passed, let's see who can withstand the pressure in the suit better, you or me? Can they be programmed to work like that on a mated couple?

It would work if we abstain long enough before putting them on – especially if you're in heat. Hunter quirked an eyebrow and smiled as though the bet had already been won. I'll have to take you up on that when we have the time. But right now, we need to question Chrissie then head to our targets. We aren't going to let this latest attack change our plans, no matter what my sister thinks.

Amy squeezed his hand in comfort then went silent. She couldn't imagine what it must feel like for Hunter knowing his sister was the Black Rose and was responsible for the horrendous acts of slavery and sexual torture of others. When she opened herself to the bond she could feel his sense of guilt. It was eating him alive.

She stopped dead in her tracks. Faced her mate.

"Hunter," she said, lifting her hand to caress his cheek, "what your sister has done as the Black Rose is not your fault. The fact that she's still free is not your fault. Eventually, she will get caught. She will pay for her crimes. And in the meantime, we're going to continue doing just what we are – rescuing those she's captured."

Hunter smiled slightly then closed his eyes as he leaned into her hand as though savoring her touch. "You are too good for me, love. I don't think I'll ever deserve you. I'll pray to the Goddess everyday, thanking her for blessing me with you for a mate."

Amy could feel the heat flooding her cheeks, could feel Hunter's sincerity blasting through their bond. He truly felt she was the greatest blessing of his life and she couldn't quite believe it. Her life, her psyche, was so messed up, she might never be whole yet he thought she was a blessing.

And you are, my mate. I will never, ever regret that you are mine. The Goddess blessed me and that's all there is to it. Get used to it. You're mine and I'm never letting you get away from me.

Amy licked her lips nervously then searched his gaze. Was it the right time to tell him what she was feeling? What if something happened to her during the coming battle? And that thought was all it took for her to make her decision. After taking a deep breath, she laid her other hand against his heart, once again caressed his cheek, as she looked deep into his eyes. *I think I love you, Hunter. I'm not sure I*

could live my life without you. Not anymore. You're my blessing.

Amy's heart clenched when she noticed the tears filling her mate's eyes. He didn't even try to hide them from her. When he let them flow freely down his cheeks even though they stood in the middle of a busy corridor, she knew she loved this man. If it was the last thing she did, she'd show him just how much his love for her, his faith in her strengths, and his belief in her courage meant to her.

Wrapping her hand around the nape of his neck, she slowly pulled his head down. She stood on her tiptoes, leaned in and lightly skimmed his lips with her tongue. When he gasped, surprised more than likely by her boldness, she took full advantage. She kissed him, tangling her tongue with his, lingering and savoring his taste. Only when her knees began to quake and threaten to buckle did she slowly draw the kiss to an end.

She turned her face into his neck, doing her best to control her wildly beating heart. She heard Hunter clear his throat just before he tipped her face up to his. This time he searched her gaze, seeming to look for something.

"What was that all about, *moya*?"

She met his gaze without flinching and spoke from the heart. "I don't think I love you. I know I do. It felt the right time to show you, that's all."

"Oh, *Moya*, the gift of your love will be treasured all the days of my life and beyond."

Now, tears filled her eyes, and she too let them fall. She didn't care what the others in the corridor watching them thought. All that mattered to her was that Hunter loved her and she loved him. That's it. That's all that mattered.

Amy looked around the crowded corridor and smiled. "Haven't you all seen a mated pair in love before?" she said, shaking her head in amusement. She turned back to Hunter. "I think we better get to Chrissie. She should awaken soon from the healing chamber."

Hunter dropped a kiss on the tip of her nose then stepped back. "You're right. Let's get things figured out, speak to the navigator on this ship, and see about destroying the Black Rose and rescuing all their hostages. After that, you and I are going to spend some time exploring just how much we love each other," he whispered, following that brazen statement with a wink.

Amy couldn't help but chuckle as she reached for Hunter's hand. "Sounds like a plan to me." Taking her at her word apparently, Hunter made no stops on his way to the medical bay.

Tears filled Amy's eyes as they entered the medical bay. Chrissie still lay beneath a healing force field, one that kept her vital signs at normal levels while she stayed within its protective barrier. Amy swiped her hand over her face. How could someone be so cruel as to leave someone as sweet and kind as Chrissie for dead? How could they do

that to her? Her rage for the Black Rose grew as she watched the last of the bruises heal and Chrissie opened her eyes.

The golden field around her lowered and she turned to Amy. "Why didn't you just let me die? Dead I can no longer be used as a weapon against you. Against my family."

"That wouldn't have been fair to your mate, Chrissie," Amy said, gently helping the woman from the table.

"I don't want a mate! I—I couldn't bear to have another man touch me the way these men have."

Amy looked to Hunter, then toward the door. *Do you mind leaving us, for a moment? I don't mind that you hear what is said, but I'm sure that Chrissie isn't comfortable with you here.*

I agree, moya. She looks rather lost and alone. Aloud he said, "I'll just be outside in the corridor, *moya*. I think perhaps you two need some time alone together."

* * * *

Hunter moved out into the corridor and paced while trying not to listen to the women's whispers. Chrissie had her right to her privacy and he would not do his mate any favors by listening in to her fears and proving that males couldn't be trusted.

He strode to the nearest console and punched a series of buttons. "Taliff Shi'Lan's quarters, please."

After a moment's pause, what sounded like sheer chaos answered from the other end of their connection. After a bout of laughter and a few girlish squeals, Eve answered, "Yes? This is Eve."

Hunter leaned against the wall, wondering if he would ever have a home-life like his brother's. He may be crown prince of their people, but he would give every bit of it up for a life like his brother's—one filled with the comfort and laughter of his own children.

"Eve, this is Hunter. Chrissie has just woken and Amy is with her. I thought you might like to join them. Chrissie is having a crisis."

"I'll be right there." Silence from the other end told him she'd ended their transmission. Now there was nothing to do, but stand with his hands in his pockets and wait. Perhaps he should hunt down Mikel and see how he fared in his new predicament. It surely couldn't be a good thing to be stuck in a pressure suit with one's unwilling mate wandering about. Maybe he could help take his mind off matters for a bit.

With that in mind, Hunter called out, "Computer, send me to Mikel's location, please."

"Working."

"By the way, what do they call you?" he asked as he found himself watching Mikel beating the crap out of a training bot.

"I am Skalldari."

"Thank you, Skalldari. I see you brought me

straight to Prince Logann as I asked." And not a moment too soon, he thought to himself. "I should be fine. If Amy Shi'Lan requests my presence, please notify me at once."

"Yes, High Prince Shi'Lan."

Hunter continued to watch Mikel pound the robotic sparring partner for a few more minutes. It always amazed Hunter how the *Manruvians* created a training bot that looked perfectly humanoid. If you didn't know it was an AI training bot, you'd never guess by looking at it.

When it looked like his friend had finally started to slow down, he cleared his throat to announce his presence.

Mikel grunted. "Stop training program." As the training bot headed back toward its storage room, Mikel walked over toward one of the benches scattered throughout the gym. After sitting down, he finally looked up and met Hunter's gaze. "I heard you come in. I'm surprised you didn't just jump in. It wouldn't be the first time we sparred."

Hunter walked up to his friend and sat down beside him then snickered. "No thanks. I'm not in the mood to get bruised and battered. I'd bet, in the mood you're in, you'd beat the crap out of me. I figured, maybe you needed to talk with someone more."

He looked at Mikel, saw the strain on his face. His pressure suit had turned a lighter shade of red, so at least his libido had calmed a bit though one

whiff of his mate's scent and he'd be right back where he was before his impromptu workout. "How are you? Really? It's difficult to know your mate fears your touch, your presence, through no fault of your own. Believe me. I know. It's hard to look at her and know that she was out there, unprotected and countless others forced themselves on her while you would have cherished the very ground where she walks."

Mikel hung his head and let his shoulders droop. "You're right. And now, knowing that my mate is on the same ship, that all I have to do is ask Skalldari her location and be transported to her side makes it difficult if not impossible to do just that. Yet I can't. It is her right to come to me, her choice. I just hope she does it soon. You know how long I've hunted for my mate. Decades, Hunter. It's been decades since I've started my search."

Hunter nodded, knowing full well how much his long-time confidant had wanted to find his mate, to have a companion and life partner to come home to, to build a family with.

"How do I make myself stay away from her?" He punched the bulkhead to his left. "How long must I stay away from her? How much time will she need?"

"You will stay away from her as long as it takes, because you know that right now it's what she needs. Until this battle is fought, getting anywhere near Maryann will endanger you. As the mating

heat takes over, it will distract you both. You must stay away from her to protect her. When it's safe, then you can gently pursue her, help her deal with her fears." He smiled. "Send her small gifts while you must keep your distance. Your scent will not affect her as much. Since she is human you can communicate with her from a distance—court her from a distance."

Mikel nodded but Hunter wasn't through giving his friend advice. "Amy pointed something out to me that I thought you should know. Maryann is going to be frightened at first, which is normal, but Amy thinks that eventually, Maryann will become angry, enraged that her body seems to be betraying her, making the choices for her as her rapists had. My advice, when it happens—and it will—don't take it personally. In effect, because of the pressure suit, it's forcing her to accept a mate, to be intimate with a virtual stranger. Get to know her and let her get to know you, even if it's from a distance."

Sighing, Mikel looked off toward the viewport to his right. "I know you're right, and your words make sense, but that isn't going to make this any easier to deal with."

"Do you really want easy?"

Mikel shook his head, chuckling. "No, I've never taken the easy path. You know that. So, what brings you here besides worrying about my well-being?"

"I think it's time that we head toward *Drimada*. My sister knows I'm not going to just give up, but

Chrissie didn't tell her that we know where she's based her operations, though she and Myra did their best to torture the information out of her. If we hurry, we might be able to get the *Chantrean* and *Manruvian* fleets in position before she even becomes aware that we are there."

"Then what are we waiting for? Skalldari?"

"Yes, Prince Logann?"

"Transport the two of us to the command deck and plot our course to *Drimada*. Also, contact the rest of the *Manruvian* fleet, giving them the coordinates of *Drimada*. They should head there immediately, keeping their ships cloaked. Then, send a coded transmission to King Shi'Lan on *Chantrea* and ask for their assistance. Let him know where our ships will be and tell him to meet us there as soon as possible." He turned to Hunter, his gaze intent now that he had something to focus on. "Anything else?"

"Not that I can think of. I contacted my father while Amy was still unconscious. He's had all our ships readied for battle and is just awaiting our target location."

"Good."

"You have your orders, Skalldari."

"Working."

In less than a second, Hunter and Mikel stood on the command deck. Already he could feel the slight tremble beneath his feet, as the ship made its course corrections, changing directions as it headed

toward *Drimada*, toward the upcoming battle. He could only hope and pray that Amy's family still lived. He didn't want her hurt anymore. Losing her family might be more than she could handle.

Knowing you'll be by my side no matter the outcome of the upcoming battle, will be all the support I'll need, though I too hope that my family still lives, that my father doesn't turn away from my mother because of her pregnancy, that my brother can be saved from your sister and can live with the guilt of what he has done to helpless women because of the drugs they have fed him."

I don't know about your brother and what he can live with when it comes to the acts he's committed but as for your parents, the Manruvian mate bonds will bond your parents as we've bonded. He'll know beyond a doubt that the child she carries is his.

He felt her sigh of relief through their bond and was thankful he could offer her that small comfort. *Is all well with the three of you?*

Yes, we're still in the medical bay but Eve was just about to leave to be with Taliff and her children.

And you? Will you be heading to our quarters soon?

I'll be leaving momentarily. I'm just waiting until I know that Chrissie has fallen into a healing sleep. Oh, and Maryann stopped by. She was agitated so I sent her to the Recreation Room. I thought spending some time on the beach might calm her.

Good idea. We just need to keep them separated until after the battle is over. I'll make sure Mikel stays away from Maryann's quarters and the Recreation Room until

all this is over.

Thank you.

Hunter felt Amy close their connection then focused once again on Mikel. His friend once again seemed to be staring out into space. Knowing that he'd prefer his privacy while he worried over his mate, Hunter said his goodbyes and headed back toward his and Amy's quarters. He wanted to spend as much time with her as he could before they reached *Drimada*. Once there, time alone would be impossible to come by as they battled the Black Rose's forces in their attempt at rescuing as many hostages and victims as they could.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Three days later... Above Drimada, aboard the cloaked Chantrean Warship Vengeance

Amy stared down at the planet below, awed by the beauty of the ringed-planet despite the activities she knew took place there. Soon, they'd move the *Chantrean* fleet into position. Their ship, *The Vengeance* would move to *Drimada's* moon, *Vinusa*, where they were set to raid the dark side. Mikel's fleet had already positioned themselves to target the Black Rose's camp on the light side of *Vinusa*. Taliff along with Taliff and Hunter's father, Brantiff, would stay above *Drimada* and attack the Black Rose's base of operations here.

If all went as planned, within days, possibly hours, most of the Black Rose's hostages would be free and the Black Rose and all her followers would find themselves locked inside the prison levels of the *Manruvian* and *Chantrean* ships. She could only pray to Hunter's Goddess that all went as planned

and that their injuries would be few.

I am your Goddess as well, little one. Have faith in yourself and your man. You have a good plan. Just remember if you get into trouble use the mate bonds to call out to your mate and encourage him to do the same. Good Luck, my child.

Amy swallowed past the thickness that seemed to lodge in her throat and sighed. *Thank you, my Goddess for your well wishes. We'll need them, I fear.* Even now, Hunter was making last minute plans with his father and brother. Both Mikel's father and Hunter's insisted he have both *Chantrean* and *Manruvian* guards to protect him when he goes into battle, since neither man would be with him to protect him. Only when Amy agreed that it was the right decision did Hunter finally relent and give permission for bodyguards to accompany him when the time comes.

As though her thoughts had conjured the man himself, she knew the moment he entered their quarters. She didn't leave her post at the view port, taking these last few seconds to prepare herself for what lay ahead.

Do not worry so, moya. We'll protect each other in the coming battle, and no matter what happens in the coming hours you need to know that I won't leave your side.

Amy turned and faced Hunter as he quickly closed the distance between them. When he reached out to pull her into his arms, she didn't resist,

laying her head on his chest just over his steadily beating heart. "I know you won't leave me, I just have this horrible sense of doom riding me. I don't even know if it has to do with the mission itself or what we'll find on the dark side of *Drimada's* moon, on *Vinusa*."

Hunter ran his hands through her hair, gently stroking its silken length until she began to purr against his chest. His rumbling laughter didn't even faze her. As far as she was concerned, this might be the last peaceful moments they'd have for the foreseeable future and she would enjoy them while she could.

After a few more moments passed, she felt Hunter's sigh. "It's time to put on your fighting leathers, *moya*. I'll have your back and all those guards you insisted on will have mine. The three-pronged attack is scheduled to commence in less than an hour."

Amy nodded and with one last gusty breath, pulled out of her mate's arms. "Okay. Give me a few minutes to suit up and I'll be ready to accompany you to the debarkation chamber."

Suiting actions to words in less than five minutes she was dressed for battle in the tan and brown fighting leathers Hunter had presented her with this morning. As she turned to tell Hunter she was ready, she found him holding a woman's sword and not just any sword but one identical to his own, only smaller in size.

Nothing Hunter could have done would have made her happier. He truly wasn't going to keep her in a safe place as he fought her battles for her but was instead going to let her stand up to her rapists, her tormenters. Not only that, but he was giving her the means to truly fight by his side.

She didn't even have the words to thank him properly. Nothing she could say would be enough, would mean enough.

Words are unnecessary, moya. I know you can wield this with as much skill as you showed when you held me off with my own sword. "Happy hunting, mate," he said as he handed her the weapon he had crafted for her.

Amy nodded, took the weapon from her mate then repeated the warrior's phrase. "Happy hunting."

Together, Amy and Hunter left their quarters and headed toward the debarkation chamber. They had a battle to fight and to win. She'd allow no other thoughts or worries to intrude. There would be time enough to worry later.

* * * *

Team One, check in, Hunter demanded. He was ready to kick some rebel ass. He just hoped he ran into his sister at this base. Sister or not, she'd die by his sword or by one of his compatriots. He'd not allow her to hunt women down and subjugate them

to rape and torture ever again. Transporting her to *Chantrea* for trial would just give her another chance at escape. That he couldn't allow.

Team One, in place, Taliff answered, speaking telepathically using their blood-bond. Hunter sighed in relief, knowing that right now, Taliff and his father along with three squadrons of warriors were positioned to attack the Black Rose's supposed main base of operations on the ringed-planet of *Drimada*.

Pressing the mini-microphone button embedded in the sleeve of his leathers, Hunter spoke to Team Two. "Team Two, report."

The gruff voice of Mikel whispered through Hunter's nearly invisible earpiece. "Team Two, in place. There is some movement. It looks like they are preparing to take off. I've seen several male prisoners dragged toward a transport ship, in chains, since our arrival an hour ago."

"Then we're out of time. On my mark, all teams attack."

Amy, who sat crouched beside him behind one of the large black monoliths scattered throughout the dark side of *Vinusa* reached out and gripped his arm, nodded, a fierce expression on her face.

After giving her cheek one last caress, Hunter returned her nod. It was time to take back what was theirs.

"Three."

"Two."

"One."

"All teams converge on targets. Converge on targets."

As the sound of battle began to transmit through his headset, Hunter's own adrenaline started to increase. He could even feel Amy's impatience to begin. Using their night vision goggles, Hunter, Amy and their team, quickly but soundlessly approached the base camp the Black Rose had built inside of a mountain. First they crossed a murky lake then climbed a set of steps carved into the mountain itself. Only at the top of the steps did they finally find access to the hidden tunnels where the hostages and victims were stashed.

This whole side of the moon felt spooky to Hunter. He could only imagine the hell his mate now faced knowing that she might run into her rapists and tormentors. He couldn't forget about Chrissie who had lived here and had to tell him and the others about her time here while giving them the general layout of the tunnels within the mountain. Without reliving her painful memories, they wouldn't have a plan to put into action. Even Maryann relived her captivity on the light side of the moon, so that Mikel's team was armed with enough knowledge to rescue anyone still held there. The Earther women had more courage and strength of any race of people he'd seen to date. They continually impressed him and his comrades.

With one last glance at his mate to reassure

himself that she still remained by his side, Hunter led the squad into the belly of the mountain. He'd gone no more than three meters when he began to hear static through his communications unit. "Say again, Mikel. Say again."

"Shit. My woman transported down here when she recognized one of the men being dragged to the transport. She's threatening to hijack one of our ships to follow it if I don't let her go willingly."

"Why that ship? Who's on it?" Hunter asked, fully aware everyone around him was listening in on their conversation.

"She just spotted Amy's brother and the Black Rose get on that ship, so she had Skalldari send her down her to plead her case."

Hunter didn't need to think about it. He reached out and squeezed his mate's hand in reassurance. "You and your mate go after that ship. Take your warship, *Victory*, with you. Leave the rest of your team to continue the raid. We'll make sure they all have quarters."

"But, the hostages, the rebels, what if—"

"You have your orders, Mikel. My sister must be stopped. And recovering my mate's brother would be appreciated. I trust you to carry out those directives where I'd trust few others."

"Understood. Skaldari? Two to transport up to the command deck of *Victory*." Hunter heard a little bit of a scuffle then nothing as Mikel and Maryann were transported to Mikel's ship.

Amy closed her eyes then sighed. "Be careful, my friends," she whispered. "Be careful."

Before they could once again begin moving down the darkened tunnels, Hunter stopped as a telepathic message was coming through from Taliff.

What is it, Tal?

There's nothing here. Nothing at all. This place looks completely abandoned. Eve's parents aren't here and neither are Amy's. There is no one here at all, though it looks like this place was just abandoned, maybe only hours ago. I think she's abandoning all three of these bases, so be on the lookout.

Understood, get back aboard your ship, the Adventurer and await word. We may need you down here before this is through. And while you're up there having a rest, see what kind of scans Shoshoni can perform on Drimada and Vinusa. Perhaps the rebels are gone but some of the hostages could be trapped somewhere we can't see.

Understood.

Hunter raised his sword as he and his team continued down the tunnels, following the directions Chrissie had given him for the locations of the cells. He hoped to find some survivors at least, but if the rebels got in the way, he and Amy and the others would cut their way through them. They would not be stopped. Not by fear of the unknown. And not by the rebels.

* * * *

The deeper they moved into the tunnels, the more Amy's stomach began to cramp up. Something was going to happen, something bad. Before she could even shove that thought away, a feline growl ripped through the tunnels.

A shiver ran down her spine. She'd recognize that particular growl anywhere. Apparently, this is the hellhole Myra had chosen to heal in. Well, it would be the last mistake she ever made.

The feline shriek sounded closer, eerie in the enclosed darkness. Back to back, she and Hunter searched the tunnels, while the others spread out, looking for the one tunnel in which she planned to attack them from.

But Amy knew Myra, remembered her treachery. She wouldn't fall for her tricks again. She'd go after the Alphas on this mission, meaning her and her mate, Hunter. For now, everyone else would be safe.

Be on your toes, Hunter. It's you or me she'll go after, not the others. Eve bested her once, and I nearly killed her the last time we met. She'll be after blood.

I remember. I've got your back and you've got mine. The others can take care of themselves.

Amy grinned, even knowing that in just a few moments she'd have to kill another being. She could give Myra no mercy.

Amy didn't have long to wait. Without any warning, the huge lioness jumped out of a corridor

and straight for Hunter. *Hunter! Duck!*

As Hunter rolled out of the way, Amy drew up her sword. The cat was just getting to her feet, made more difficult by only having three paws thanks to Eve's taking one of them in the first challenge aboard Taliff's ship.

As Myra made to tackle Amy, she stood her ground, raised her sword. Just as the gaping jaws of the lion began to descend toward Amy's neck, she twisted out of the way, making sure to swipe the blade across the lioness' neck. In one smooth motion, she severed its head from its body.

Hunter rushed to her side, grabbed the sword from her and handed it to one of the bodyguards he'd assigned. "Thank the Goddess Alana that you're alright." Hunter roughly pulled Amy into his arms but she wasn't about to complain. Already her knees were beginning to quake.

As she rested against Hunter, the ear bud in her own ear began to pick up static before Eve's voice filtered through the noise. "Amy, good news. Shoshoni has been hard at work over here on the *Adventurer*. She managed to pick up scattered life signs on both *Drimada* and *Vinusa*. The life signs are weak, but she was able to transport all the weak and wounded hostages off both surfaces. Both your parents are on your ship, *Vengeance*, with a lovely baby boy of perhaps six months, and your sisters were sent here to the *Adventurer*. They've also recovered nearly everyone from my own pride.

Your brother is among the missing and there are still several women from your pride unaccounted for according to your parents."

"What about the two women they took from Skalldari the other day?"

"They were found too, injured, but alive."

"That is very good news indeed. It could have been so much worse. And we'll continue to search for the others. I'll be spending a few days with my parents and siblings before Hunter and I head out to follow Mikel. He's got a lead on the Black Rose and my brother."

"Eve," Hunter interrupted. "Tell Taliff to assure Amy's parents and her siblings that we'll be together as we search for their son and any others that my sister may have taken with her from these stone prisons. We'll spend the next couple of days with them to allow for the family to have some private healing time, but then we must follow Mikel who is following the Black Rose's trail."

"Understood. Standby for transport to your ship. Amy's family is already healing in the medical bay."

Amy laughed in pure joy. They may be scarred, but they were alive. That was all that mattered, and after she assured herself that they were truly going to be okay, she and her mate would search for her brother, Ryan. Deep in the pit of her belly, she knew—just knew—that when the time came, they'd find him alive as well.

EPILOGUE

Five days later... Aboard the Chantrean Warship Vengeance, trailing the Manruvian Warship Victory by two days

“Ready to give up yet?” Amy asked, rubbing herself sinuously over Hunter. If he didn’t give up soon, she would. This suit was driving her mad. She went for the big guns, literally. Reaching down, she grabbed his hard cock and squeezed.

“You only need say the word,” he said with a grin, pressing her hand tighter against his cock. “Can you not stand the pressure anymore?”

“The suit I can stand,” she said with a grin. “It’s the underhanded pressure you’re using you big jerk,” she said with a giggle as he slipped his hand between her legs. Their suits turned from orange to crimson and Hunter cupped the cheek of her ass,

drawing her closer against him.

"Give up?" He breathed against her ear. "Have you given much thought to how all this anticipation is going to affect us when we do finally remove them? What it's going to feel like with my cock pressed into your tight pussy? How will it feel, *moya*? Think about it." He pulled her closer, moved them until her back was pressed against the wall and her front against him. All of him. The bulge of his shaft pressed against the lower half of her stomach and she almost gave in. Almost.

"No," she nearly panted. "You give in. Tell me how much you want me. Tell me how long you've already waited for me. Tell me you need to bury yourself inside me or you'll die."

"I will die, *moya*. I can't wait to bury my cock deep in your tight little cunt. I need to feel the cream slide from your channel and coat my shaft as I slide into you." He pressed his face tight against the mask. "Wrap your legs around me and we'll give in at the same time, *moya*. It will end both our suffering. The suits will disappear and we'll soon be allowed to wallow in each other's touch."

As soon as Amy wrapped her legs around his waist, the suits melded into their bodies. Hunter slid his cock into her already streaming channel and their mouths couldn't find each other fast enough. They both groaned when he pulled out and slammed into her. His cock teased her to the point of pain. It had grown beyond that of the usual male

mating heat. If she wasn't already pregnant, she would become so this night. His seed, so potent from the waiting would quickly find her ripened ovum and her belly would soon grow round with his cub.

Her eyes widened at his size, as she screamed her first orgasm, surprised at the speed and strength in which she'd reached her peak. Pulling his mouth from hers, he laved her nipples, suckling and biting, causing the pleasure pain of a true *Chantrean* mating as he slammed her against the wall with each thrust. Finally, he sank his teeth into her shoulder, marking her as his mate.

Her incisors elongated and she did the same. Sinking her teeth into the strong muscles of his shoulder, she held him to her. He climaxed, emptying his essence into her tight channel, and bathing her womb with his powerful seed.

Exhausted, Hunter carried her back to their bed and laid them both on the soft covering, too tired to even pull the blankets over them. Pulling her into his arms, they fell into a deep, exhausted slumber with the words, "I love you," on both their lips.

* * * *

*Aboard the Manruvian Warship Victory... a half-day
behind the Black Rose's Transport Ship, Subjugator*

Mikel glanced through *transomani* at the planet

below, his hands fisted at his sides. He tried to be as gentle with Maryann as he could, under the circumstances. "The planet is devoid of life. Either they have left no survivors or they have taken everyone and moved to another planet. Do we waste our time looking for the bodies of the dead, or worry about the living?"

He knew her people had strange customs and in his state, he could barely think, let alone make informed decisions. He needed to get away from her but the blasted woman followed him everywhere bitching about their situation. Did she want him to force himself on her? Was that it? Did she want the choice taken from her so she could cry abuse in the end?

He turned around, his suit a blazing red and faced his mate. She had her arms crossed, her face turned away from him so he couldn't see her expression. Too bad. This time he'd have his say, whether she looked him in the eye or not. "I will leave this room once again, Maryann, because I know you think it is my fault we are in this situation and you are angry that your body is making demands upon you that you do not like. But I warn you—One. Last. Time." He turned to face the door. "If you follow me again, I will *not* be held responsible for my actions. If you follow me from this room and into my quarters, I *will* take it as your consent to start my seduction. And if you think your suit is painful now, wait until I begin to

touch you.”

With that, he turned and left his mate to her thoughts.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Hi there. My name is Bonnie Rose Leigh and I've been writing since I was just a tyke. I live in a small town in Upstate, New York and spend most of my time on the computer either writing, or visiting with my friends. If I'm not busy on the computer, I spend my free time reading. It doesn't matter what genre the book is either, though I am partial to romance novels. If I'm not in my office, I can be found sprawled in a chair with a book clutched in my hand and a cup of cocoa sitting nearby.

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