

The book cover features a dramatic illustration of a warrior with long blonde hair riding a large white eagle with dark wings. The eagle is in flight against a vibrant, reddish-pink sky with a full moon and stars. In the lower-left background, a stone castle is visible on a hill. The overall style is painterly and evocative of a fantasy or historical adventure.

Loose Id

MORE THAN A WARRIOR

CJ England

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Chapter One

The sound of *thon-dols* shattered the evening quiet of the courtyard. The fighting sticks smashed together with enough force to send the chartreuse *meilas* birds that were roosting quietly in the branches of the nearby trees flocking into the sky with a flurry of protest.

Sweat gleamed from bronzed torsos. Chest muscles rippled and strained, bare buttocks clenched, and legs braced as first one and then the other man dominated the fight. Healthy and in their prime, the darker male had seen twenty-six sun-turns, the lighter man, a few less. Small clusters of whispering women watched, their flirtatious eyes filled with a gentle hunger as their gazes raked over the warriors' naked bodies. Hands smoothed colorful robes and patted elegant coiffures just in case the males deigned to look their way.

But neither man paid attention to the fluttering females. They ignored the beauty of the green mountains and plunging waterfalls surrounding them. The battle was all they focused on, and even the sound of the bell calling them to the evening meal went unheard. Instead, they whirled and feinted, their long hair flowing around them as they enjoyed the exercise.

Prince Dyas Kyl laughed as he ducked the swinging stick of his guest and friend, Jhoral. His sand brown eyes sparkled in triumph when he knocked his competitor back several feet. White teeth flashed in a grin, and he pushed his long blond hair back from his sculptured face. "Give it up, fly-boy. You'll never beat me. I've been waiting two moon-cycles to introduce you to defeat."

Crown Prince Jhoral Farsae, visiting royalty from a neighboring continent, narrowed his pale, slanted eyes. Generations of unprotected flight in the outer atmosphere had genetically altered them, giving the irises an otherworldly silver look, a fact Jhoral knew well and used to his advantage against those easily frightened. Staring fiercely at the other man, he blocked the younger prince's blow.

"I'd barely stepped off my Skyhawk before you attacked me, my friend. Are you in such a rush to be knocked on your ass?"

Dyas's eyes flashed in challenge. "You taught me to take every advantage. After all your fine talk of the strength of Farsaeen Sky-flyers, do you fear me then?"

Jhoral's face showed his amusement. "I could beat you blindfolded and standing on my head," he mocked. His hair, so black it carried purple highlights, trailed down his back in the traditional warrior braid of his people. Sensuous lips turned up in an irreverent grin. "In fact, I bet my sister could take you even if she were weaponless and completely naked."

The image of the red-haired woman he often thought about, naked, made Dyas bobble his stick. That was all it took for Jhoral to go in for the kill. His thon-dol slashed and dipped. Before Dyas could retaliate, he was knocked off his feet, and the sharp end of Jhoral's fighting stick was pressed to his throat.

Balefully, Dyas stared up at the dark man. "You cheated."

Jhoral smiled down at him, his slightly pointed teeth making his rugged face look even more dangerous. "You were distracted." He helped his friend to his feet. "Should I not take advantage of that?"

Dyas brushed himself off. "You had to mention Jhara," he grumbled.

"First rule in fighting. When you know an opponent's weakness, use it to your advantage."

"I suppose you know I'm going to spend the rest of the night thinking of her naked."

Elbowing the younger prince in the side, Jhoral groaned. "Please...I don't care how much you desire her, she is my sister and only seventeen sun-turns old."

"Your Highness?"

"Yes?" Both men answered and then grinned at each other.

Dyas motioned his father's aide up from his deep bow. "What is it, Eldin?"

"You have missed the evening feast, and the king wanted me to remind you of the ceremony this night."

"Ceremony?" Finally noticing the hovering women, Jhoral picked up his long tunic and shrugged it over his nakedness. He wiped his sweaty face with his arm. "What ceremony?"

"*Shdok!*" Dyas shook his head. "I was so intent on fighting you, I totally forgot. You've arrived just in time. There's a Melding Ceremony tonight. My father thought you'd be interested in watching it. No outsider before has had the opportunity."

"Melding?" Jhoral handed the other prince his fallen thon-dol. "What's that?"

"It's hard to describe, but it is one of our most honored rituals. It is the melding of minds between a receptor and her empath."

Jhoral tossed him an impatient look. "Empaths? Those are stories for silly women and impressionable children."

Laughing, Dyas clapped the other man on the back. "You Sky-flyers are too practical. That is why this cultural and military exchange between our peoples is such a good idea. We will learn much from each other."

"I don't know if legends and myths are quite what my father had in mind when he first put the idea forward." Jhoral frowned at his friend. "I may not properly understand such a ceremony. Perhaps another of my family would be more open to these types of tall tales."

"They are *not* tall tales, and it's too late to bring in anyone else," Dyas argued. "The rest of your family is still by the outer-city wall enjoying themselves."

"Not just enjoying themselves." Jhoral lifted an eyebrow. "They are deploying our troops to help train your fighting men."

Dyas nodded. "Yes. And we are thankful for your help. I know your people are warriors, but I truly believe seeing the more scientific side of my society might benefit you as well. And it is a great honor to be invited."

Sighing loudly in reluctance, Jhoral finally nodded his agreement. "Put like that, how can I refuse? All right, my friend. I'm not sure I'll understand any of it, but it will be my privilege to attend."

* * * * *

Later that evening, Jhoral was bathed and dressed in his formal best. He tugged at the hem of his silver-edged tunic and adjusted his sword, much more comfortable in the soft leathers he used in battle flight than his royal robes. He had little patience for the political side of his duties—he was first and foremost a man of action. Taking a sip of *japela* wine, he rubbed his eyes, almost wishing he hadn't come early to visit with Dyas. Now he had to pretend interest in a rite that sounded boring and cerebral. He wasn't an alchemist or scholar; he was a warrior. But no matter how war-ready his people were, being a royal meant being diplomatic.

And, he had to admit, a ceremony no outsider had ever seen did whet his curiosity a little. Even if he didn't trust in psychic gifts such as empathy—his people had long ago abandoned such thinking—it would be good to see what the Kylians believed. It would help him understand his friend's society and that would aid in their efforts to work out a treaty.

The two peoples had been brought together when Jhoral and Dyas met during a chance encounter in the faraway land of Galladore. Dyas, ever impetuous, had said the wrong thing about a man's mate, and Jhoral stepped in to help him battle his way out. The two had become fast friends, and over the last five years often visited each other's countries.

Jhoral enjoyed the lush forests and moisture-rich land the Kylians ruled, finding it completely different from the rocky crags and breathtaking views seen from the spears of his mountain kingdom. After many such visits, Jhoral's father, Jhonen, Sovereign Lord of the Farsaeon, asked his son to put forth the idea of an alliance. King Freyan, Dyas's father, had been intrigued, and after several months of negotiations, the two families decided to meet.

So, for the first time, the Farsaeon royal family, along with several legions of soldiers, were on Kylian land. Jhoral had flown ahead to the capital city of Audera to see Dyas. But his father, mother, brother, and sister had stopped to rest in the walled city of Orelia, the gateway to the Kylian kingdom. His mother, Jhdeara, was several months pregnant, and the journey had tired her. Stopping for a few days to regain her strength and take pleasure in the open markets and interesting attractions of the city was a decision the whole family could enjoy.

A brisk knock sounded on his door, and putting down his drink, Jhoral went to answer it. Dyas stood on the other side, his ornate royal robes looking much more comfortable on him than Jhoral could ever manage.

"Ready?" his friend inquired with a cocky grin.

"As I'll ever be."

The two men left Jhoral's room and set off down the softly lit corridor. The air was fragrant with the white *shobat* blossoms placed on tables all along the hall. Idly, Jhoral plucked one from its vase, twirling it in his fingers as he thought about the upcoming ceremony. He glanced over at his friend. "So, tell me more about this ritual. Will I have to take part? Do anything?"

Dyas shook his head. "No. We will only watch. Father said there were twelve empathes available this night and over three dozen receptors for matching."

"Explain."

"Empaths have been a part of the Kylian people for centuries. In other cultures they can be called sensitives, psy-readers, or physic-listeners. Simply put, they are beings who can sense the emotions in others. But because of this, they are very delicate creatures. Too much emotion can be overwhelming. After years of study, my people discovered if they are joined with a non-empath, or receptor, they can control their gift and use it for good."

"How?"

"They are born, bred, and trained for the sole purpose of someday melding with a suitable receptor. In the ceremony, each empath, one by one, searches through those available to them. When they find the proper match, their minds meld and they are forever joined together."

Jhoral chewed on that as they walked. "What exactly is a mind-meld?"

"No one really knows. Apparently, it is too private and intense to speak of. Once a melding occurs, the empath is given over to the receptor to care for. What happened between them remains a mystery."

"Given over?" Jhoral stared at his friend. "Forgive me, but it almost sounds like they are...owned by the receptor."

"In a way they are," Dyas agreed. "Empaths are under their receptor's protection...their care. They exist for only one reason. To help the one they meld with in their duties."

The description made Jhoral uncomfortable. To him it smacked of slavery, something every Farsaeon found despicable. "But the empaths are people, are they not? Sentient beings. Do they not have a choice?"

"Of course." Dyas opened a door and led the way across another flower-filled courtyard. "But you must understand, Jhoral. They are like children, innocent and ignorant of life around them. They need to be directed, first by their trainers, and then once melded, by their receptors. Otherwise they would be lost, unable to function." They stopped in front of a large domed building. Built out of sacred stones and glass, it gleamed in the rose-colored moonlight. Pure white walls hummed with an energy even Jhoral could feel.

"Here we are." Dyas's voice was hushed as he opened the semitranslucent doors. "This is the Melding Sphere. Once inside, we must be very quiet. Nothing can disturb the ceremony after it starts."

Jhoral followed his friend into a Spartan white room. The only signs of luxury were the plush, cream-draped chairs that sat in front of a railing overlooking a larger, even-plainer room. Painted in stark white, the glare was almost painful on his eyes. A sandy floor, the same color of the snow that dotted the mountain peaks of home, blended in perfectly with the walls. He wanted to shudder. The room felt completely sterile, even emotionless. Suddenly he longed for the heated passion of a good bar fight.

Sitting in two of the comfortable chairs were the king and his lady. King Freyan was an older version of Dyas, but without the irreverent twinkle in his eyes. That trait belonged to Queen Castila, whose gentle face and tiny body disguised her often mischievous nature. Jhoral made his way closer and bowed deeply. "Your Highnesses."

Freyan smiled benevolently. "I am pleased you could attend, Jhoral. Sit down and be comfortable. I believe you'll find it most interesting."

He sat as requested, Dyas taking his place between him and the king. "I must admit, sir, I am not sure what to expect. My people are disbelieving of such things as this."

Queen Castila inclined her head. "It does seem to be a mix of magick and science. When I first came here, I too had doubts."

"But the sea people where my wife came from," the king remarked, "did use telepathy with their ocean beasts. Believing in empathy was not a huge step."

Shaking his head, Jhoral accepted a crystal glass of wine from a steward. "My society believes in what we see, hear, and feel. If I cannot touch it, it isn't there."

Dyas laughed. "That's the truth. You are the most stubborn man I know."

"I believe you may think differently after watching this ceremony," King Freyan said with a wise smile. "I have known you long enough, Prince Jhoral, to see how curious you are. I knew you would question everything. Because of that, I have arranged to have someone here to answer any query you have about what you see."

Jhoral was surprised. "My thanks, Highness. But I thought the ceremony had to be done in silence."

The ruler waved a hand. "As long we are quiet and speak with reverence, the empathths will be able to do what they need. It is in their blood to find their receptor. Nothing will stop them once the search is begun."

"Then I accept, with much gratitude."

"This is Mistress Aleris. She was the *Kedi*. In your tongue, mentor, for this group of empathths. It was her responsibility to train them and prepare them for the melding."

Jhoral rose and bowed to the tall woman who stood nearby. Thin and austere-looking, she was dressed in a pale gray robe that hid the fact she was female. Her head was covered by a tight matching hood. She gave him a stiff smile, and her severe eyes met his. He had the sudden impression of one of his tutors as a child and suppressed a shudder. The Mistress Aleris looked to have the same nonexistent sense of humor. "Good lady...I thank you for the opportunity to learn more of your people."

"Prince Jhoral."

Dyas cleared his throat when the mentor said nothing more. "I too look forward to seeing the ritual. It has been many years since I've had the chance."

"I am at your service, Prince Dyas."

Having the overwhelming feeling the mentor wasn't happy with him being here, Jhoral hid a grin. "So do you have anything to tell me about the ceremony?"

Mistress Aleris turned her gray-eyed gaze on him. "Do you have a specific question?"

He didn't, not really, but he wanted to prick the haughtiness the woman wore around her like a cold veil. "How do you know a person is an empath? Do you test them?"

Thin lips tightened. "Each Kylian family is tested. If the gene for empathy or any other psychic gift such as telepathy, telekinesis, or precognition is present, then the children are taken and raised by mentors of that discipline."

"They are taken from their family?" Jhoral had trouble hiding the horror he felt. Farsaeans were extremely family oriented. They would rather die than give up their children...for any reason.

"It is an honor to have your child selected," the woman said, oblivious to the slight rise in his voice. "They are well compensated, both by the government and then later by whatever receptor melds with the empath."

To him, it sounded as if they were making a purchase. "And if the child doesn't wish to go?"

"You don't understand." Dyas touched his arm, obviously perceiving his friend's dismay. "Empaths and other psychics don't feel as you and I do. They are born with the need to use their gift, but even more, they must find someone to guide them and show them how. They are happy to be in a place where they can do that."

"The prince is correct." Mistress Aleris nodded in agreement. "And as they mature, the need to learn is replaced by the desire to find their perfect mind-mate. It drives them until the day comes where their mentor knows they are ready. Then and only then will they be given a chance to meld."

Jhoral shook his head, still uncomfortable. "It is very different from my people."

"We would probably find some of your traditions equally unfathomable, Jhoral," Queen Castila murmured. "It is, perhaps, why this exchange of ideas will be so interesting...and difficult. It is hard not to judge something so alien to your way of thinking."

Warmth touched his high cheekbones. She was right. He had been judging. "I apologize. You are right. It is just a very alien concept to me."

The glacial eyes of Mistress Aleris warmed a little. "It shows intelligence to know when you are wrong, good prince. Perhaps you are not as warlike as we thought."

Jhoral's lips quirked into a smile. "No. We are. But we also are very curious and enjoy learning. I am grateful for the opportunity."

A soft chiming bell sounded. Mistress Aleris turned to look over the balcony. "It is time."

Sipping at his wine, Jhoral watched with interest as a line of people filed into the room. A quick count showed there were over three dozen. His eyebrows went up when he realized they were all women.

"No men?" he asked in a hushed voice.

The mentor shook her head. "No. Receptors are *always* women. We have discovered even the most sensitive and learned man cannot meld with an empath. A male's primitive nature seems to preclude any pure emotional joining."

Feeling as if his gender had somehow been insulted, he frowned. "I know a lot of emotional men. You should meet my father."

"It is something inherent in males, Prince Jhoral." Mistress Aleris gave a slightly smug smile. "It just cannot be."

"Here they come." Dyas's excited voice broke into the conversation.

Jhoral turned back to the ceremony, still feeling irritated by the slight on his manhood. He saw the receptors had all lined up in a semicircle around three walls of the circular room. They stood facing inward, about an arm's length apart. All were wearing severe white robes, their hair covered by an equally white transparent scarf. Only the back wall was empty, and it was here the first empath appeared.

It was a female, dressed in the same ugly gray robe Mistress Aleris wore. The hood was so tight you could see where it cut into her face. Jhoral hid another grin. His

sister would be horrified by the fashions she saw here. Jhara loved to dress in colorful, flowing robes that accentuated her femininity, and she often looked like one of the exotic *trili* birds she kept as pets. He loved to tease her that by aping their bright plumage and chattering voices, she acted like one of the dizzy birds.

His attention was drawn back to the empath when she lifted her hands, her palms facing outward. Her eyes opened, and Jhoral was taken aback by the deep intensity he saw there. It was as if a flame burned inside them, and he suddenly understood what the mentor had been talking about.

This was need, pure and simple.

He watched as the empath walked over to the nearest receptor. She placed her hands on either side of the woman's head and then leaned close, touching their foreheads together. They stood that way for several long minutes before, with a sigh that seemed to come from the bottom of her soul, she leaned back and shook her head.

"They are not a match." Mistress Aleris spoke the obvious. "She will try again."

As if hearing her mentor's words, the empath stepped to the next woman in line. The same touching of hands and forehead occurred. The same silent communication went on. But this too ended in disappointment.

"What are they doing exactly?" Jhoral put his wine down and leaned forward, his curiosity aroused. "I mean...why the hands and the head?"

"An empath must touch to know whether she has found her true mind-mate. She wants to be able to sense the emotions, feel the connection. She could do it with a stroke of her hand, but for the ceremony, we've found it is quicker and more intimate to do it in this manner."

The empath moved on to another receptor, her eyes still on fire with need, but the serenity on her face was unchanged. Jhoral pulled his gaze away to look at the mentor.

"You keep saying she. Are you saying all empaths are women as well? That these pairings are always female to female?"

Mistress Aleris nodded. "No male empath has ever been found. When we first started bringing empaths and receptors together, we searched, but it seems the psychic gene is only found in women."

"We do have the better instincts," Queen Castila whispered to her husband. His admonishing look only made her giggle.

"That may well be," the mentor said starchily. "Men have other gifts."

There was a sudden gasp and then a collective murmur of awe went around the circular room. Jhoral turned back in time to see the receptor who was being tested smile widely, and then her hands also went to the empath's head. They pressed closer, and soon a glimmer of tears could be seen on both women's cheeks.

"She has been accepted," Mistress Aleris murmured. "The empath has found her perfect mind-mate."

"What are they doing now?" Jhoral's voice was muted, understanding without words the importance of the moment.

"They are melding. No one knows exactly what happens during this time. Empaths and receptors alike refuse to speak of it. We do know it is an exhausting procedure, and it will be several days before the two recover their strength. But the most important thing we've learned is during this time their minds are joined irrevocably. Once melded, it is almost impossible to separate the two. They are as one. And will be until one of them passes to the next life."

Jhoral watched as the newly melded pair staggered out of the room. The rest of the receptors seemed to shake themselves and then go still as another empath entered the room. The second empath lifted her hands, and the search began anew. The ceremony continued as one by one the empaths found their mind-mates.

"What happens now?" Jhoral inquired as he watched the latest two leave the room. "I mean...they're melded. So now what?"

"Each empath will help the receptor in whatever line of commerce they have chosen. That one" – the mentor pointed to the disappearing pair – "will now be used to diagnose patients at the local med-facility. Her receptor is a prominent doctor, and her skills will be much improved now that she is melded with an empath."

"You make it sound like they are a tool. Like a knife or a scope."

"In a way they are." Mistress Aleris smiled. "One of the best tools we Kylians have. Empaths are used in medicine – both human and animal – as well as in law and art."

"Law?" Dyas asked.

"Would you want to testify untruthfully if an empath stood nearby to give witness to your lies?"

"I see your point." The two princes exchanged glances. There had been plenty of times in the past an empath would have crimped their style.

"I was told there are only twelve empaths tonight." Jhoral sipped again at his wine. "What happens with the receptors not chosen? Isn't it hard on them?"

Mistress Aleris shook her head. "They may be disappointed; after all, melding with an empath can only make their work more successful. But their emotions are not involved. It is not like the empath, who feels as if she must find her mind-mate or die."

"It's that strong?"

"Yes." The mentor watched as the latest pairing struggled from the room. "The need is so strong they have to comply. We don't know what would happen if they didn't."

"And every empath finds her mind-mate? Performs the melding?"

"We have a one hundred percent success rate." There was pride in the Mistress Aleris's voice. "The empath always finds her perfect mate."

"This is the last one," King Freyan said quietly.

It was immediately apparent this empath was different from the others. She was smaller, and even as she tried to hold herself immobile to prepare, her tiny body wriggled with suppressed emotion. She was too far away for Jhoral to see the color of her eyes, but the need was there, coupled with an excitement that seemed almost palatable.

He watched as one by one she made her way around the waiting receptors. With her, she brought a wave of colorful energy that even Jhoral could sense. It seemed so out of place in the stark white room, he almost remarked on it, but Mistress Aleris and the others didn't seem bothered, so he pushed the feeling away.

His heart actually started to pound when she tested the woman directly below him. She was so close he had to quash the desire to reach out and touch her. The lack of control wasn't a feeling he was used to, and he was positive he didn't like it. Leaning back in his chair, he crossed his arms across his chest, wishing it were all over.

But his detachment was short-lived. The empath soon finished testing all in the circle. The anguish on her face was easy to see, and the excitement surrounding her winked out.

She had failed.

Chapter Two

"What will she do?" Jhoral asked hoarsely. His hands clenched at his sides. "It can't be over, can it?"

Mistress Aleris shook her head. "No. She will try again." Giving a sigh that seemed to come from her toes, she watched the empath stumble back to the head of the line. "I cannot say I am surprised. Although I knew she was ready for melding, I worried she might not be able to settle at first. She is very excitable."

"She has much energy about her."

The mentor looked surprised at his observation. "She does. And while she is a good girl, she's one we've had some trouble with. Her bloodline is impeccable, but she never quite fit in with the others. She has a tendency to question everything. Definitely not as malleable as a normal empath."

"If she was so much trouble, why was she not dealt with?" King Freyan asked. His brows drew together as he watched the empath make a second round of the receptors. Jhoral wondered suddenly just what was meant by the words *dealt with*.

"Because, Your Highness," the austere woman replied, "of all the empaths we've ever had...of all I've trained, Lanai is the strongest."

"Lanai?" Jhoral repeated hoarsely. "Her name is Lanai?"

Mistress Aleris's cheeks reddened. "Her name is to be kept private. I should not have said it."

"No one in this room is in the habit of sharing secrets," Dyas said with royal arrogance. "You should know that."

"Of course, Prince Dyas." But the mentor's gaze strayed worriedly to the other prince as she spoke. "My apologies."

Jhoral wasn't really listening. His whole focus was on the empath who moved shakily around the small circle of waiting receptors. She was a beautiful woman, with

high cheekbones, fine skin, and a wide, intelligent brow, but her face was haunted by fear. Her pink lips trembled, and a worry line appeared between her eyes, the color of which he was still unsure. Green, blue, gold...every time he thought he had it figured out, they would change again.

It was obvious the search was taking a lot from her. Each time she touched one of the women, she strained, as if trying to force a melding. When it wouldn't work, she'd flinch, and her arms would drop. Her shoulders would droop in exhaustion, but after a moment, she'd take a deep breath and move on to the next one. It was unbearable watching her. Jhoral wanted to help...to push everyone aside and find the person she needed. His chest ached with painful sensation, and he'd never felt so helpless. This was one time his strength on the battlefield would do no good.

"What will happen if she doesn't find one?" Dyas asked the question everyone was thinking. "Will she die?"

"She can't die!" In spite himself, Jhoral's voice rose. He immediately cleared his throat. "I mean...she will have another chance, won't she?"

Mistress Aleris nodded, but her face was no longer serene. "It could be her perfect mind-mate isn't in the circle. It is difficult to believe, but there may be other receptors out there we missed."

"How do you find the receptors?" Jhoral kept his eyes on Lanai as she touched yet another receptor. A single tear appeared on her cheek, and he wanted to howl out his own frustration. He wanted to leap down into the room and rip her away from all that was hurting her. He wanted to protect her.

"They come to us to be examined. It is voluntary, so I suppose it's possible this empath's perfect match has not yet been found. But those who can be receptors are usually glad to be tested. Having an empath increases status in our society. Everyone wants one."

"You make it sound like the latest fashion or newest toy," Jhoral growled, forgetting diplomacy in his disgust. "Surely, she is more than that."

"Of course, Your Highness," Mistress Aleris said quietly, as if sensing his annoyance. She glanced apologetically at the other royals. "The empaths are an important part of our people."

"She's made it around the circle again," Dyas interrupted with a sigh. "I guess that's it then. No mind-mate here."

Jhoral flinched at his friend's matter-of-fact tone. "There must be more we can do."

Mistress Aleris shook her head. "No. It is the first time such a thing has happened, but if she hasn't found her mate by now, she is not here." The mentor walked over to the railing and signaled the two gray-robed women standing off to the side. "She will be returned to the training house until other receptors are found."

Jhoral watched, his stomach in knots as the empath was taken by the arms to be led out. He badly wanted to leap over the railing and go to her. To gather her in his

arms and give her comfort. It took everything he had in him to just sit and watch. It didn't make sense. By the gods, he didn't even know her. But the desire to push everyone aside and go to her aid was so strong, he could barely contain himself.

She was so bent over from despair, she stumbled, leaning heavily on the helpers for support. But, just as she got to the door, she gave a whimpering cry and jerked away from the women. The colorful rainbow of energy surrounded her once more as she turned and raced back to the line of receptors.

Jhoral found himself on his feet as she threw her arms around the receptor nearest her and tried to find a meld. Her courage and strength of will made him want to cheer her on. The empath's stubbornness may be abhorrent to the Kylians, but to Jhoral it was a most attractive trait. His people equated persistence with strength, and if he was any judge, Lanai was not one to give up easily. He prayed to the moon gods she would find the mate she was seeking.

Beside him, Mistress Aleris sighed. "I thought she might be difficult. Lanai never knows when to give up."

"Farsaeans find such strength admirable."

"Admirable, perhaps," the older woman agreed. "But unfortunately, this time it is unfeasible. Her receptor is not here."

That fact didn't seem to deter Lanai. She jerked away from the hands that tried to restrain her, moving to yet another receptor to try again. Jhoral's heart pounded with empathy, and he thought it ironic, since he still wasn't sure he believed in the emotion. The perfectly ordered ceremony dissolved into a wrestling match as the two gray-robed women tried to force the smaller empath to leave. He watched as she fought them, stumbling from woman to woman, tears coursing down her face. His whole body tensed as if it were him fighting down there in the cold white room.

"They must catch her." The mentor spoke softly, her voice gritty with sadness. "She *will* kill herself if she continues this way."

Suddenly terrified she might do just that, Jhoral leaned over the railing. His hands clenched at the barrier so hard they hurt. "Come on, little one," he whispered to himself. "You can do it. Don't give up, Lanai."

The empath went abruptly still. Complete silence filled the room as everyone froze with her. She whirled around, jerking her head up, and those ever-changing eyes met Jhoral's. He felt the impact of her gaze like a punch in the stomach, almost reeling back from the power of it. His fingers tightened on the balustrade, his fingernails leaving marks in the soft wood. His mind felt like a mighty wind was ripping it open. The astonishment of sharing his head with another swept through him, and he groaned in shock and surprise. He didn't even notice Dyas leap to his feet. He wasn't aware of the appalled look on Mistress Aleris's face. All he could see...all he could focus on was the woman who held him in her sway.

Her eyes lit up so bright he thought he would be blinded. Her smile reached out to him. Pushing away from the two women who held her, she staggered toward him, her arms outstretched.

"Finally..." Her sobbing mind-voice penetrated his thoughts. *"Finally, I've found you."*

Nothing could have prepared Jhoral for the tumult of emotions that enveloped him. He could barely think, he could only feel, and when Lanai pushed through the women standing below the railing, he didn't hesitate. He reached down and took her hand.

At her touch, colors, lights, and sounds rushed at him, bombarding him with such beauty, his silver eyes widened into rainbow pools of ecstasy. The outside world fell away, and without a thought for anyone around him, he lifted her up out of the lower room and into his waiting arms.

He didn't hear her mentor's cries to stop. He couldn't feel Dyas's hand on his arm. Falling back into the comfortable chair, he pulled Lanai into his lap. Her tight robe prevented her from straddling his hips, and with a feral growl, he ripped one side of the ugly gown to midthigh. Then he pulled her close, so her slender legs were astride him, their bodies pressed together. Her gorgeous eyes never blinked as she placed her hands on both sides of his head, the thumbs below each ear. Fingertips touched him lightly, and slowly she lowered her forehead to his.

Time stood still.

He couldn't breathe, couldn't speak. The feelings swelling inside him were no longer his, but hers as well. He sensed her absolute joy that she'd found him, mingled with the fear she'd be punished—why, he didn't know. Memories of her childhood, both good and bad, rushed through him, and he found himself reliving her years right along with her.

He watched the testing she went through when she was only a toddler. The pain and pride on her parents' faces as they handed her over to a much-younger Mistress Aleris. The fear and confusion in tiny Lanai's eyes when she stared back at her family as she was carried away. How could such a young child...a baby really, exist without a mother's love?

She showed him the years she'd spent training to be an empath. The lessons, the uncertainty, and the loneliness. As she matured, he could sense the need burning inside her, coupled with a restlessness that made her unique among her kind. Her hopes and dreams—things he was told an empath couldn't have—raced through his astonished mind.

He wanted to soothe and comfort. He wanted to protect her with a passion he'd never before felt, not even with his family. But before he could reconcile himself to that, he was stunned to see *his* entire existence revealed next. His life became hers, and he was unable to move as the knowledge shot through him that he would never be alone

again. Nothing was hidden. Every thought, every action he'd ever done, played through their minds with utter clarity.

It was painful. Each misdeed, each less-than-admirable thought, she saw as if it had just happened. Jhoral groaned, wishing he could go back and do everything again to make himself worthy of the beauty he now held in his arms.

But to his complete surprise, when he looked into those eyes that saw him so clearly, there was no condemnation. No disapproval or censure. All he saw was pride. All he felt was the sheer joy she knew in belonging to him. It mattered not, the bad behavior of the past. Those were trifles, done by a boy learning to be a man. Her pleasure, her absolute delight in her choice of mind-mate, filled him to the bursting and made him feel as if he were soaring through the skies. Emotion choked him as he lifted his hands and held her head as she did his.

Acceptance.

They both gasped aloud as a brand-new emotion shot through them. Jhoral stared at her, unable to look away. His shaking fingers reached down and undid the tie at her chin. With a sharp tug, he pulled the gray cap off her head. His body tightened when hair the same color as his eyes tumbled over her shoulders down to her waist. Her lips trembled as he threaded his fingers through the silvery mass...touching...caressing. His eyes glowed and his hands tightened. Instinctively he lowered his head and covered her mouth with his.

If there had been closeness before, it was eclipsed by the sudden knowing of how right this kiss was. His thoughts were swept away by a desire so strong it made him shudder. Lanai came with him as he was taken up and away in a whirling cloud of sensation. Without even knowing how it happened, he found himself in his aerie room within his castle home of Skyros. They were both lying naked on his soft bed, the vision so real he could smell the scent of the *baruna* flowers outside his window. He heard the soft music of the wind as it sang through the mountain peaks all around them.

He saw everything through a swirling mist as he looked down at her, his heart beating so fast it hurt. "How can this be?" Jhoral whispered. "How did this happen?"

Her slow smile made him burn, but she said nothing, only put her arms around him, invitation in every line of her body.

Shaking his head, he ran a finger down her soft cheek. He wanted to drown in her eyes. So bottomless, so rich in color, a man could look into them and lose himself forever. Bending, he traced his lips up her jaw. He tested the curve of her throat, and the wildness of the pulse beating there told him all he needed to know.

She was his.

He captured her mouth again, and this time there was heat mixed in with the reverence. He nibbled, and at her surprised gasp, he slipped inside to tease and explore the honeyed recesses of her mouth. Her hesitant tongue caressed his, and they dueled, until he caught hers in his sharp teeth and held it captive.

Lanai trembled beside him, but he soothed her with his lips. He tasted her mouth, her eyelids, and the line of her small straight nose, before moving down to nibble at the shell of her ear. Her gasping breaths pulled at his control, but he only held her closer, his hand smoothing down her body to cup her small breast in his hand.

Her eyes flew open; yet when he gently tweaked her nipple, they softened, going shadowy with yearning. He used one hand to caress her, while his head bent to suckle the other dark crown. She cried out and arched up against him. Her hands caught at his shoulders to first push him away, then draw him close. Writhing against him, she moaned softly.

He continued tasting her, moving from her breasts up to her sweet mouth and back down again until they were both so drugged with desire they could barely breathe. She touched him as well, running her small hands over his shoulders and chest, moving in rhythmic circles to tease his nipples into hard, dark nubs. He could sense her curiosity...her admiration, and the knowledge she wanted him as much as he wanted her made him burn with a desire he'd never before felt.

Heat poured through him, and reaching up, he took her hand. Dragging it down his hard body, he wrapped her fingers around his pulsing erection. Their minds exploded in a passion so hot and heavy, he had to fight to control himself. Alone their desires were strong, but together, they were beyond powerful. He felt what she felt. His need became hers. The connection was so strong, so perfect, it was beyond anything he could have ever dreamed of.

When they were both ready for more, his lips covered hers again. Sliding over the top of her soft, warm body, he fit himself between her slender thighs. Threading his fingers through hers, he held their hands on each side of her head. He kept their gazes locked as he eased inside her welcoming body. The warmth of her made him groan; then her mind accepted his pleasure, magnified it, and tumbled it back to him tenfold. His strong body shook with exquisite enjoyment as his desire and hers mixed to become one, spiraling out of control.

He began to thrust, in and out, and her colorful eyes widened. Her passion and pleasure reverberated through him and licked at the tenuous hold on his control. He fought it, not wanting to hurt her, but her smile, what he saw in her eyes and then felt in his own mind, sent him over the edge. She freed him to do what he needed. And in so giving, his pleasure became hers.

They mated. Light, color, and sound filled them, and once again they were transported into another world and time. He couldn't take any more. His body ached with the need to climax, and when her mind finally melded with his in a burst of rainbow energy, he shouted out her name and exploded, bringing her with him into a maelstrom of passion and desire stronger than he'd ever known.

* * * * *

Jhoral had no idea how long he was out, but his heart still pounded and body shook with the aftermath of what he'd felt. He had Lanai cradled against him, and for a long, horrifying moment, he thought they were both naked and entwined. But when he opened his eyes, he saw she still wore the dull, ceremonial robes, and he, his uncomfortable formal wear. His eyes closed again in relief, thankful the entire lovemaking had taken place in his — their — minds.

He finally became aware of Dyas shouting his name.

"Jhoral! Come out of it. For the gods' sake, wake up!"

Pushing his friend's hand away irritably, he frowned. "Leave me be. I'm tired."

"I can't." The younger prince's voice was filled with urgency. "You have to get up. You have to let go of the empath."

Jhoral's eyes flew open at that. He stared around him, seeing Dyas's concerned face, along with the Mistress Aleris's infuriated expression, as well as the shocked visages of the king and queen. Instinctively, he held Lanai tighter. "What are you talking about?"

"You have to let her go. Whatever happened is over." His friend touched his shoulder. "Let them have her. I'll take you back to your room."

Mentally shaking the last remnants of the melding fog from his brain, he glanced down at Lanai's pale face. She was shivering slightly, and concerned, he touched his fingers to her cheek. She was unconscious and cool to the touch. He glanced over at one of the servants who stood in shocked silence. "Fetch me a blanket, immediately!"

As the servant scurried to obey, he turned back to Dyas, flashing his sharp teeth in a feral growl. "I'm not giving her to anyone. She now belongs to me."

There was a flurry of excited conversation, and two of the royal guard stepped closer. The king sprang to his feet. "Jhoral. I'm sorry. We aren't sure what has happened, but obviously a mistake has been made. She cannot be yours. You are no receptor."

Anger flashed in Jhoral's silver eyes, making him look even more forbidding. His hand went instinctively to his sword. "I will not allow anyone to take her from me. Receptor or not, she has chosen me. I have melded with this empath."

"It cannot be!" Mistress Aleris's fists were tightly clenched together at her sides. "You are male. And an outsider. No! You have not melded. It is impossible!"

"How is it impossible? I know what I felt." He smoothed a hand over Lanai's flowing hair and hunched over her, his big body shielding her protectively. "It wasn't something I looked for, but you can believe me, it happened. We are melded."

"Perhaps you are mistaken," Queen Castila murmured, her gentle face worried. "After all, it was so unusual you might have gotten caught up in something you don't really understand."

Jhoral shook his head. "I may not understand about being an empath or a receptor, but I know what took place." He turned and looked at the angry mentor, his

glowing eyes resolute. "The others are right. It is impossible to describe what just happened to me...to us. It is too private, too intimate." His cheeks reddened at the full memory, wondering briefly if all meldings were like that. He tore his thoughts away from the satisfying lovemaking and forced them back to the infuriated Mistress Aleris.

"But I will tell you this. We shared each other's mind. I have touched Lanai's soul, and she has touched mine. I have no idea why she chose me, but she did, and it was no mistake. She and I are one. I am her mind-mate. I don't give a damn that I am an outsider, and I care even less that I am a male. I will kill anyone who tries to separate us."

His ringing declaration took everyone aback, making them frown and stir uneasily, but there was no way Jhoral could be diplomatic about this. The feeling was as overwhelming and primitive as he'd ever known. With everything in him, he knew this mating was more than just mind to mind. It was spirit to spirit...flesh to flesh...unique and wonderful. He was exhausted by what he'd just been through, but he would battle the very gods themselves before he allowed anyone to rip her from his arms.

"I will not allow it," shouted Mistress Aleris, breaking the sudden silence. She stepped forward and glared at Jhoral. "She has always been contrary. Choosing you was the act of a desperate child, nothing more."

He swore aloud. "Do your people not believe in fate? Look at what occurred here. None of the receptors were for her. You said so yourself. But I, the first outsider to ever be given a chance to watch this ceremony, just *happens* to come on the one night where an empath doesn't find a mate in the circle. You think that a coincidence? You cannot be so foolish!"

"I am not the one who is foolish," the mentor spat back at him, her eyes black with anger. "We cannot pollute our people with an outsider...one of uncertain blood. It goes against everything we have been taught. Everything we believe. Disgusting...loathsome. It cannot be!"

"Jhoral," King Freyan said in a firm voice, stepping closer. "I understand that you believe what you are saying is true, but the odds... I'm sorry. The empath cannot be given to someone who isn't prepared to protect her. You must give her back."

Fury sliced through Jhoral's mind like a summer lightning storm, and he staggered to his feet. Tucking Lanai in one arm, he put his back to the wall and pulled his sword. "You'll forgive me, King Freyan," the dark prince growled as he brandished his weapon. "But I cannot and will not comply."

At the flash of steel, everyone froze in their tracks. Jhoral's icy silver eyes were filled with such rage, every mouth went dry. They all took an instinctive step back, seeing firsthand why Farsaeon warriors were so feared.

Mistress Aleris's mouth dropped open in shock. "You dare draw your sword against the king? Against us all?"

"To keep Lanai with me," Jhoral snarled menacingly, "I will dare anything." He switched his gaze back to the Kylian king. "Will we go to war over this, Your Highness?"

Has it come to that? Or will you listen without prejudice? For know this: I will not change my mind."

Dyas glanced between his friend and his father. "Jhoral...please. We do not want war with you, but what you are asking is impossible. A male receptor? An outsider? It is too much to fathom."

Jhoral held Lanai closer as he fought to stay on his feet. He was so damn tired. "Impossible is *not* a word I use. I suggest you take it out of your vocabulary as well."

His friend's face reddened. "Damn it, Jhoral. You can't do this. I am your friend."

"Then as my friend, listen to me! Back away. Because if you don't, I *will* fight to keep her."

There was a long silence in the room as the three powerful men stared at one another. Dyas knew from experience that once Jhoral had made up his mind, he wouldn't change it. And it looked as if the dark prince was going to stand firm. It didn't matter to the Farsaeen that he wasn't a proper receptor. Whatever had happened between the empath and his friend was more important than the delicate diplomacy between their two nations.

He stared at Jhoral, noting the tired look around his eyes as well as the slight shake of his hands. He frowned as he was filled with sudden misgiving. Everyone knew that a melding took a lot out of those participating. Could the other prince's obvious exhaustion be because he truly had melded with the empath?

Heaving a sigh, Dyas looked at his father. "Remember when I told you he was stubborn?"

The king lifted an eyebrow. "Yes?"

"Well, I wasn't joking." The younger prince motioned to Jhoral. "I think you should listen to him. Really listen. I don't know that we have a choice."

"You have a choice," Jhoral disagreed, his eyes still flashing. "But now you know the consequences."

"I do not like to be threatened," King Freyan growled.

Jhoral cocked his head. "I am not threatening, Your Highness. I am making a promise."

"Your Highness," Mistress Aleris squeaked angrily. "You can't listen to him. He is not Kylian. He has no right to Lanai."

"I have *every* right!" Jhoral shouted. "Have you forgotten? She chose me!"

The queen's sudden indrawn breath made everyone look her way. Her usually mischievous eyes were serious as she laid her hand on her husband's arm. "My love, haven't we forgotten one important thing?" She glanced around at each of them. "We are worrying so much about Jhoral being an outsider, we forgot the one who chose him *is* a Kylian. Shouldn't we hear her out first?"

"Lanai is just a child," Mistress Aleris objected. "She just turned twenty-one sun-turns."

"She is old enough to know her mind," Jhoral rejoined. "If you trusted her to meld, you must have believed so."

The servant finally returned and hesitantly offered a blanket. Loath to release Lanai, Jhoral reluctantly sheathed his sword. Accepting the heavy cloth with a nod, he tucked it around her, hoping the warmth of his body and the cover would counteract the chill of shock. Once finished, he looked not at the mentor, but to the king.

"Your Highness. This is no joke. I am not brainsick, nor am I swept away by emotion. You asked to me watch this ceremony to learn more about your people. I didn't even believe in psychic gifts. My people think it foolish. In fact, everything in me still wants to deny what has happened."

He shook his dark head, and his gaze dropped to Lanai. "But something did. And it was more wondrous than I can ever explain. She and I are bound together more securely than any alliance, any marriage, or any promise could do. Emotionally, spiritually, you must understand...it is as was said. She and I are as one. I believe the melding is forever. You said earlier if an empath is separated from her receptor, she will slowly perish. And while I admit I am no expert in this, I know I cannot allow anything to happen to Lanai. She is mine in every way."

His silver eyes darkened as he dropped his forehead to the unconscious empath's. "I make this vow before all who can hear me. No matter what it takes, I will keep her safe and protected. Even if it costs me my own life."

Chapter Three

The sound of a growly male voice pulled Lanai back to consciousness. Any man's voice was a reason to pause, but this one seemed familiar, although she couldn't figure out how that could be. There were no men allowed in the empath training house, so why would one be waking her from her slumbers?

She stretched and then immediately froze as a pair of strong arms tightened around her. Her eyes popped open, her heart skipping a beat when she found herself gazing into a face that was tight with remnants of desire and emotion. Memory returned in a flood of heat as her cheeks went pink and her mind whirled.

She had melded with a male!

How could it be? Who was this man...this stranger? With his odd eyes that gleamed solid silver, he looked foreign to her, almost alien. Why had she been driven to choose him over any other? Her hand lifted to touch his rugged jaw while trickles of joy, shock, and wonder rippled through her. But as surprising and confusing as it was, he was the one who she'd needed...who she'd longed for. He was all male, and he was hers.

Mind-mate.

"Are you all right?" he whispered, grabbing her hand and pressing it to his lips. A voice standing near them murmured disapprovingly.

Lanai nodded slowly.

"Do...you remember?" His tone was uncertain, with a vulnerability that pulled at her heart.

"How could I forget?" she mind-spoke him, a shy smile forming when his eyes flared with surprised pleasure. "We have melded. I don't know how it could be, but you are my mind-mate."

His mind-speech was hesitant, as if unsure how to speak to her. "*Are you...telling me...this was a normal mind-meld?*"

She blushed as the memory of what they'd done filled her. She hadn't any idea if their melding was normal or not. She'd only known it was supposed to be wonderful. But what she and this male had shared surpassed anything she'd ever dreamed of in her lonely life. And the physical aspect? Well, she had a feeling that wasn't typical at all.

Her curious gaze met his, taking in the strength in his face and the intelligence in his eyes. After all the years of being untouchable, it felt odd being so close to another human. And to be held in a male's arms was the most surprising part of all. She felt a mixture of embarrassment and longing. Without thinking, Lanai rubbed her thumb over his lips and answered him. "*I do not know, but I have never been called normal.*"

"Stop that!" Mistress Aleris shrieked the words, making Lanai cringe away from the strident voice. Obediently, she started to pull her hand from his, but at the last moment stopped, realizing her mentor had no rights to her anymore. Because of the melding—normal or not—she now belonged to this handsome male whose arms held her so tightly. She no longer must obey anyone but him. The thought made her quiver with nerves and excitement.

Ignoring the furious woman, Lanai stared again at the man who held her. He was very different from the Kylian men she'd seen before. Darker-skinned, with high cheekbones and strong, sensual lips, he was handsome in a rugged, almost predatory way. Those odd, slightly tilted silver eyes seemed to bore right through her. His long black hair was mussed but held back in a stylish braid she envied. She hated having to pile her long hair up on top of her head and wear a hood, as was the empath style. It always gave her a headache.

His lips parted, and she suddenly remembered him kissing her during the melding. He'd tasted like spicy *charo* root, and...had she felt...? Curious, she reached out to touch one of his teeth. She blinked. They *were* sharper than her own. Like small, even daggers.

"I said stop it!" Her mentor wrung her hands in obvious displeasure. Lanai smothered a sigh. Mistress Aleris seemed to always be wringing her hands when she spoke to her.

"Why?" her mate asked, continuing to stare into Lanai's eyes. "We are getting to know each other. Perhaps we are still melding."

"I repeat. You are a male." The older woman's protest was accompanied by a snort of derision. "You can't be a mind-mate. It is not to be."

"Why?" he asked again.

Her mentor's lips tightened. "Take my word for it. Whatever you are feeling is not a mind-meld. You are *not* a proper receptor. You are *not* in the proper discipline. Not a scientist, lawyer, or artist. You are a man of war. Your duties deal with blood and pain and fear. That type of strong emotion would destroy an empath. She would never choose one such as you."

Lanai's eyes widened as she thought about their melding. He wasn't a normal receptor, that was obvious, but she'd not only chosen a male, she'd picked one who didn't even practice the skills she'd been trained for.

She sensed his worry, and even though she didn't understand everything herself, she soothed him the best she could. "*She is wrong. I did choose you. I don't know why it is so, but it happened.*"

He relaxed slightly and then took a deep breath as he turned back to the mentor. "You are correct," he admitted after a moment. "I *am* a warrior. But there are truths in war that must be discovered as well. An empath could be of great use. Perhaps down deep she knew that and chose me for that purpose."

Mistress Aleris shook her head in disgust. "That is foolishness and shows again just how ignorant you are about this matter. She would never survive that kind of situation. Lanai has been trained to find her perfect mate, and you can't be it." Her gray eyes met his, and she sniffed lightly. "Perhaps it is attraction on your part, but that too is impossible for her. Empaths are asexual."

A rumble of laughter shook him, and Lanai felt his shock at her mentor's inaccurate statement. She shushed him in mind-speak, too embarrassed to contemplate what they'd done together physically, but he ignored her.

"You are wrong about that, lady. Lanai and I are very attracted to each other, but that isn't the only reason we are together. You can argue all you want, but she is now mine. All the warriors in your kingdom cannot stop me. I will *never* give her up."

Warmth filled Lanai at his words. She knew there was no precedent for a male-and-female mating, and they still might be judged an unacceptable pairing, but Lanai knew in her soul she'd chosen her perfect mate. She'd been so frightened, so frantic, when she hadn't found anyone in the circle of receptors. Terrified, she'd refused to give up, choosing death over the humiliation of failure. But then she'd heard him call her name, and the moment their eyes met, she'd known. She'd waited her whole life for him, and it was only better because what she'd found was so unexpected. The fact he felt the same magical connection made her want to weep with joy.

And knowing he was a warrior, she felt even safer. He wouldn't let her go easily. If he had to, he would fight to keep her. Snuggling back against him, she noted the strength of his body. He was large and solid and real. She blushed again. The vision she'd experienced during their melding hadn't lied.

He was just like the man of her dreams. So many nights she'd lain awake in her bed, wishing she were free to do what she wanted. She loved being an empath; the gifting was a part of her, and she would die if she weren't allowed to use it. But there was so much more. The other empaths couldn't understand her reluctance. They had but one goal...to find a receptor and do their bidding. Lanai wanted that too, but her very soul cried out for something different. What about a life-mate? A family? Why couldn't she have that and still do her duties?

The more questions she asked, the less information she was given. Finally, she understood there were no “what ifs” for her. It was just the way it was. An empath’s life was regimented from the time she was taken from her family.

So she dreamed, of adventures and love, and one of those dreams was of a handsome stranger who came and saved her from her life of mediocrity. Thinking about it now, Lanai smiled. Perhaps she had the gifting of precognition too.

“Your Highness.” Mistress Aleris lifted her chin and appealed again to the king. “I know the prince is visiting royalty, but I must protest. As I’ve said before, this melding is not possible. It will be hard enough to find a mate for Lanai since she broke the circle. I must get her back to the training house immediately. It is the only way I can undo the damage that has been done.”

Lanai shivered at her words, frightened all over again. Would he let her go after all? She did not want to be taken from him. Not even for a moment. Then, everything else the woman had said filtered through. A prince? Her mate was royalty? She suddenly realized she didn’t even know his name. If it had been given during the melding, everything else had pushed it out of her mind.

“I don’t even know who you are,” she mind-whispered.

His pale eyes turned to hers. Anger still swirled in them, but he smiled. “I am Jhoral,” he said aloud. “Crown Prince of Farsaea. You have chosen your mind-mate well, little one.”

“You are not mind-mated,” Mistress Aleris insisted. “You must give her back this instant.”

Lanai felt his fury as he stepped forward. “I tell you for the last time. She belongs to me. I will do whatever it takes to protect her.”

“Enough!” The king’s deep voice filled the room. There was still misgiving on his face as he turned to Jhoral. “I do not know if this melding is real, but I do know that it seems this empath—”

“Lanai,” Jhoral reminded him fiercely.

King Freyan sighed. “Receptor or not, it seems *Lanai* has chosen you. And since an empath will waste away if she is removed from her receptor’s presence, I must err to caution. So I believe the best thing to do is to keep you two together until we can determine the truth of this matter.”

“But Your Highness...” Mistress Aleris’s voice filled with a mixture of fury and horror. “You are sentencing her to a life alone if you allow this. A false melding may prevent a true one. She will believe she is melded and refuse any other. The only way to prevent that is to separate them now.”

Jhoral’s eyes flashed again. His hand went once again to his sword. “Try,” he invited.

None of the guards looked happy at the thought of fighting the dangerous prince. Even obviously exhausted from his experience he looked too strong for them.

"I will take your concern under advisement," King Freyan stated as he gazed at Mistress Aleris, his eyes narrowed in displeasure. "But for now I'll allow them to stay together."

The mentor's lips thinned, but she bowed in submission.

Jhoral inclined his head. "My thanks, good king."

"I am still not convinced," Freyan informed him. "But I know you are an honest man and you believe what you say. And if I ask you to stay until all is settled, you will. Now we must do what we can to find what exactly has happened."

"And how will we do that, Father?" Dyas gazed at Lanai curiously. She gave him a hesitant smile and felt Jhoral's arms tighten. "No one knows how a melding works."

"I will tell you what I can," her mate said quietly, "but only with Lanai's permission."

That brought another squawk of surprise from Mistress Aleris that was echoed in Lanai's mind. "See? This just shows how impossible it is. You do not ask an empath for permission. She is to obey you!"

Jhoral smiled silkily. He pounced on the woman's words. "Obey *me*? Does that mean you've changed your mind, Mistress?"

The mentor's face went sun red, and the others in the room coughed to hide their laughter. Lanai buried her face in Jhoral's chest to hide her smile. It was very amusing to see her old mentor so nonplussed.

"This is new ground for all of us," the king mused as he watched the pair thoughtfully. "We will all have to work together to find the answer."

"I will help in any way I can," Jhoral agreed with a nod. "Stay as long as I am able. I know this is unexpected, and it may change many things. I hope it will not affect our treaty, but I will be clear about this, my king. I will not give Lanai up."

The king sighed. "So you have said. You are nothing if not straightforward, Prince Jhoral."

Dyas smiled, relief appearing in his eyes. "Nope. Not much subtlety with a Farsaeon. What you see is what you get."

"And what I see," Queen Castila murmured as she reached out and touched Jhoral's shoulder, "is if you don't lie down, you might fall down. You look fatigued, young prince, and so does Lanai. I think any other conversation on this matter should wait until the morrow."

Suddenly, it was all Jhoral could do to keep standing. His arms shook as if he had a fever. "I *am* very tired. I think I should go back to my room."

"I'll go with you." When Jhoral's eyes narrowed, Dyas hurriedly continued, "Just to make sure you get there all right."

"I must insist you bring Lanai back to the training center tomorrow for further study." Mistress Aleris spoke sharply. "I can then show this is no true mating."

"I will take it under consideration." Jhoral's silver gaze trapped the mentor's. "But you have no right to insist on anything. What I do...what Lanai does, is no longer up to you. Do *you* understand *that*? You are no longer in charge of her."

The anger in his face needed no explanation, and the older woman shifted uncomfortably in obvious fear. She tried unsuccessfully to look away. "I-I understand."

"Good." Sketching a short bow to the king and his lady, Jhoral smiled. "I must thank you for a most interesting evening, Your Highnesses. Perhaps someday I can return the pleasure. I think you would all be interested in watching a Skyhawk flying competition. At least there you would have little opportunity to find yourself unexpectedly joined with one of the great birds."

King Freyan gave a bark of laughter. "I can only hope. Why, the feed alone for one of those creatures would break my royal treasury."

"Not so, Father," Dyas disagreed with a mischievous glint in his eye. "Didn't you know? Skyhawkls are hunters. They stalk and catch their own food."

"Oh dear." The queen sank back down into her cream-colored chair. "Meat eaters?"

Jhoral grinned tiredly. The Kylians were primarily vegetarians. Very little, if any, meat passed their lips. It was one of the difficulties he'd learned to put up with when he came to visit.

His attention was drawn to Lanai as she yawned and snuggled closer to him. Shadows had bloomed under her eyes, and he knew she had to be as worn-out as he, and he was fast sinking into a bottomless exhaustion. Turning back to the royals, he bowed again. "I will leave you now. Tomorrow we can talk again."

"Sleep well, Prince Jhoral. All will look better in the morning."

He smiled at the king's words and ran his thumb caressingly over Lanai's soft lips. "I don't know, Highness. Things look pretty damn good to me right now."

Ten minutes later, he found himself back in the big, airy room he'd been given as his own. Dyas, as promised, had seen him to his door and warned him that if indeed Jhoral had melded with Lanai, neither would be able to stay conscious for much longer. They would need rest to be able to function tomorrow. Then, with one quick, worried look at the empath, he'd excused himself.

His friend was right. Jhoral kept himself on his feet by willpower alone. The collapse Dyas warned him about was coming fast. He just had to get to a bed to enjoy it. Staggering across the chamber, he groaned at the sight of the soft mattress waiting for him. Clumsily, he laid Lanai down on the cover and, as quickly as possible, removed the stark gray clothes she wore, swearing he'd burn them before he allowed her to wear such ugly things again. Her underslip was thin and serviceable, but it was clean, so he left that on her.

Shrugging, he stripped off his own clothes and then, lifting Lanai, pulled back the covers and slipped naked into the warm, welcoming bed. Cradling her in his arms, he had the quick thought that if the Mistress Aleris could see them now, she'd have a heart attack. He grinned into the darkness as drowsiness overtook him. His whole life had changed in an instant, but who would have thought he'd have the most desirable woman he'd ever met in his arms, and all he'd want to do was sleep.

* * * * *

Lanai woke with the most marvelous sense of well-being she'd ever had. She was warm and comfortable and had just experienced the best dream about a tall, dark prince, with eyes the color of the wind, who had taken her away from her boring existence into a world of spectacular adventures. It had been such a wonderful, vivid dream she didn't want to wake up. She wanted to cuddle back down into her soft, warm pillow and allow her dreams to carry her away again.

But when she snuggled against the mattress, it moved and a long arm snaked out to wrap around her. Her heart raced as memory returned in a rush of heartfelt joy. "It wasn't a dream," she said aloud, her voice a surprised croak that made her wince.

A deep chuckle sounded behind her, and a man's hard body spooned against hers. A hand smoothed down her side and then up under her light slip to stroke her naked hip. "You're talking. Or at least you're trying. I was beginning to think I'd never hear your actual voice."

"Jhoral?" she whispered, recognizing his touch. "It was real, wasn't it?"

She felt him move, and he gently pulled her over on her back. His warm silver eyes met hers. "It is real, little one. We are mind-mated."

Daringly, her hand shaking with nerves, she reached up and touched his chin. It was covered in short, stiff hairs that poked her fingertips. She explored his face, so intent on what she was doing, she didn't notice his heartbeat increase or his breath becoming shallow. "I know I am smaller than normal," she said with a pout. "But you don't need to make fun."

He bit her questing fingers with his sharp teeth, then kissed them before allowing her to continue her investigations. "My people use it as a term of endearment, but if it bothers you, I won't do it anymore. Instead, I will call you...*telaer*."

"What does that mean?"

His fingers traced across her lips, up her nose, and across her long-lashed eyelids. "It means rainbow eyes."

Lanai smiled, pleased. "I like that. It makes my eyes sound beautiful instead of odd."

He frowned. "Odd?"

"Mistress Aleris said my eyes were a primitive throwback. When I use my power, they turn colors. She said it was unattractive and some receptors would not like it."

He shook his head. "Strange. I found watching your power swirl around you most exciting. Even before we melded."

Lanai froze. "You saw my power *before* we mind-mated?"

"Of course. Couldn't everyone?"

Her heart skipped a beat in happiness. "No. No one sees it. They can see my eyes change, but no one has ever seen the energy that surrounds me. I've asked, but I always got a strange look. After a while I just gave up. But if you saw it before I called you, then it means we were fated to be with each other. They cannot say differently. They will not take me away."

He pulled her closer. "Are you still worried about that?" Reaching down, he cupped her breast in his hand. She gasped as a wave of pleasure coursed through her. "I told you before. No one will take you away. You belong to me. I will kill anyone who tries."

Instead of frightening her as such speech might have done in the past, his words made her feel safe. And his hand on her made her experience things she didn't understand. "I want to belong to you, but we are so different. I'm afraid they'll say we're not suited."

"I don't want you to concern yourself with that anymore," he declared, his tone arrogant. "I give you my oath. I will not allow anyone to separate us. I kept you with me last night, did I not? No one dared to take you away."

She looked up at him, her eyes reflecting her worry. "What we did...what we have together. There are those who will try to divide us. No matter what you say."

He shook his head. "I am Jhoral, Crown Prince of Farsaea. My rank, my power, and my skills will protect you. Do not concern yourself."

Lanai bit back her natural inclination to argue. How many times had Mistress Aleris told her receptors would not approve of such speaking. She swallowed...hard. "As you wish, Prince Jhoral."

A slow, seductive smile touched his lips. His hand moved again to caress her hip. "Prince Jhoral? After what we've been through together, I think just Jhoral is fine, don't you?"

Color painted her cheeks. "I-I have never been around royalty. I don't know how to act. My receptor is supposed to tell me."

He grinned wider. "And I am your receptor, correct?"

"Y-yes."

"Then when I tell you something is fine, even if it is about me, you can take that to the royal treasury."

She stared at him blankly.

"It means you can count on it," he explained, amusement in his silver eyes. "It's a promise."

"I will try." She buried her face in his strong chest. "But you don't know...you can't. My choosing you will bring you much difficulty."

"I understood *that* last night." He put a finger under her chin and forced her to look at him. "But you have to remember, telaer, you may have chosen me, but I accepted you. We are in this together."

She blinked at that and then gave him a shy smile. "I never thought of it that way."

"I am always right, Lanai. You will do well to remember that."

Unsure as to if he was kidding or not, she only shook her head. "We've rested well, although I am told it will take many days to return to our normal strength." She stretched like a comfortable feline. "I don't know when I've slept so well. I am not used to sleeping with anyone."

"I'm glad you're finally awake."

"Do we need to see King Freyan?" Lanai made to rise. "I'll need to bathe. I must be present —"

Her words were cut off when Jhorai's mouth came down on hers. Immediately, her mind went blank. His fingers crept to the nape of her neck to hold her closer as his kiss teased her into full submission. She warred for a moment between tradition and curiosity. What was he doing? Was this proper? Worry stabbed her, but she couldn't help but shiver with longing as his lips found all the most sensitive areas of her mouth and caressed them with skillful tongue and teeth.

The hand that had been holding her breast began to stroke her, just as he'd done in the melding vision. Spears of pleasure shot through her trembling body, and her hands clutched at his arms. He rolled her nipples between his fingers, so slowly her breasts began to tingle with feeling. Her body moved restlessly, unused to the intimacy, and he slipped one of his legs between hers to hold her still. Lanai felt covered, protected...possessed.

She moaned in disappointment when his hand left her breasts. But a moment later, she felt his fingers at her hip as he eased the underslip she was wearing up her body and over her head. Embarrassment colored her naked body pink, and he smiled.

"You are the most beautiful creature I've ever seen."

Her heart literally skipped a beat, but before she could say anything, he was touching her again, those teasing fingers sliding over her skin, making her writhe beneath him. Her breasts ached with a longing she couldn't put into words, and whenever he stopped kissing her, all she could do was moan.

When his hand slipped down her belly to play in the pale curls between her legs, she gasped. Their eyes met. Hers with fear, his with a passion that held the memory of their previous lovemaking.

"We have been here once before, you and I," he whispered, his fingers moving between her moist folds to tease and caress. "You drive me mad. I can remember how

you made me feel. And now? The feel, the taste, the scent of you. Your body cries out for my touch." His fingers, slick with her juices, circled gently until he found the small piece of flesh that begged for his attention.

She instinctively spread her legs wider as she cried out his name.

"Feel this?" Jhoral growled. "Your clit throbs with need. When I touch it..." He put action to his words and a sweet streak of heat shot from her breasts to where his fingers tickled. "What do you feel?"

Lanai moaned, her head moving restlessly. "Hot. I feel hot. I want you to keep doing it. But...I am your mind-mate. Are we supposed —"

His kiss stopped her fearful words. "We are more than mind-mates," he growled once he'd lifted his head. He pressed himself even closer. For the first time that morning, she felt the heat of his erection against her thigh. "We became more the moment we touched each other in that vision. I want it again, Lanai. I want it here...now...in the physical."

Those gentle fingers touched her again, rubbing and caressing until the heat inside her burned out of control. "I remember," she gasped as her eyes went a brilliant violet. "What magick is this?"

Jhoral nipped at her chin. "I am giving you pleasure, telaer. Don't fight it. Just feel how good it is to share this part of yourself."

The heat filled her to bursting. She wanted him closer, and when she told him so, he groaned. "Soon, I will be closer. For now, allow me to do this for you."

He kept up the smooth, rhythmic movements of his hand, and it wasn't long until she was moving with him, her body striving toward a goal it couldn't even comprehend. His mouth captured hers, and without warning, he slid two fingers down to the entrance of her heated quim and slowly pushed them inside.

The roughness of his skin against her delicate inner flesh sent a wave of sensation through her. She cried out and bucked against him, but his fingers kept stroking as his thumb circled her clit, bringing her closer and closer to rapture.

Instinctively, she lifted both hands and grasped his head, holding him tightly. Like a door being slammed open by the wind, their minds unlocked and they were one once more.

All the passion and need he was feeling flooded into her. It pushed her over the edge, and she imploded in a fiery ball of desire that only grew stronger the longer her climax went on. Her body shivered with streaks of sensation and an awareness she was just beginning to understand. All she could do was hold him closer as she spiraled into the sky.

Chapter Four

Jhoral held on as long as he could, but the second Lanai climaxed, her pleasure was so great, her need for him so huge, it destroyed any control he had. His body took over, knowing this female was his; the primitive need to mark her as his, and his alone, could not be denied.

Sliding over the top of her, he fit himself between her thighs. Struggling to remember this would be her first time, he guided himself slowly into her hot, tight quim.

Glorious.

She fit like she'd been selected for him by the gods. She was wet and so snug he had to force himself not to move too quickly. Her lashes lifted, and his heart pounded at the awestruck look on her face. Inch, by slow, delicious inch, he slid deeper, pausing when her breath would catch or pain would flare in those marvelous eyes.

He could feel her excitement, sense her slow realization of the mating they were doing, not just with their minds as they had before, but this time with their bodies.

Jhoral thrust deeper until he pushed against her maiden flesh. Sliding a hand between their bodies, he slowly pulled back out, purposely stroking her clit with his free hand. Heat shot through her and into him and he struggled not to just plunge deep. But he couldn't...wouldn't hurt her. He thrust back in, his own orgasm threatening as he teased her into joining him.

Again and again he moved, holding on to the tiny bit of control he had left. Then, just as he wondered if he were going to die from a mixture of overwhelming emotional awareness and deep physical delight, he felt Lanai's channel contract around him. Her eyes went blind as she arched up against him and cried out her passion.

He allowed her body to draw him deeper, and just as she was at the peak of her climax, he thrust through the fragile barrier and made her his.

Mind and now body...mated.

Her gasping cry and the pain that reverberated through them both made him hesitate, but after a moment, she shivered and arched up against him again. Finally freed to love her as he'd done in their vision, Jhoral drove himself into her welcoming body. The heated clenching of her quim milked his cock with every pleasurable thrust. Again and again he moved, the softness of her body calling to his. Her soft cries and trembling lips as she moved with him made his passion burn even stronger.

But their need for each other was too great, and it wasn't long before he felt the burning that signaled his release. Hiding his face in the curve of her neck, he grasped her hips and buried himself as deep as he could in her warm body. They both cried out, feeling each other's pleasure as if it were their own. Lanai was pulled back into the inferno with him, and he controlled his desire so it wasn't until she climbed the peak and climaxed a second time that he finally gave up, shuddered, and fell into the whirling pool of their mingled passion. And following an instinct as old as time, as his orgasm overtook him, Jhoral used his teeth and marked her, making her undeniably his.

"You still only want to be mind-mates?"

A long time later Lanai opened her eyes to see Jhoral gazing down at her, his face filled with a mixture of amusement and very male satisfaction. She blushed rosily as the shock of what she'd done raced through her. "I-I'm sure empaths and their receptors do not behave in such a familiar manner."

"More fool them," he drawled, dropping a kiss on the end of her nose. "If this is the type of gratification they're missing, they should reconsider using only female receptors."

She snuggled against him, breathing in the scent of their lovemaking. The feel of him made her shiver, and the pleasure they'd just experienced was more than she'd ever expected to have in her life, yet she was still half in shock from their behavior. "I think I'm v-very glad I didn't find my receptor in the circle of females."

"That makes two of us."

Sensing the beat of his heart beneath her cheek, she closed her eyes. "I cannot believe this is happening to me. I feel like I'm in the middle of one of my most treasured dreams. I longed to find adventure with my receptor, but I expected to wind up sitting in an office for the rest of my life listening as patients recited symptoms of their latest disease."

"Instead, you have melded with a male from another country. A warrior who knows nothing of how to treat you." He grinned and dropped a kiss on her nose. "But you have to admit, the perks are grand."

Lanai giggled. "It is not supposed to be like this. This is more than I could ever imagine."

He pulled himself gently from her body, and the sudden emptiness made her gasp. She missed his warmth immediately. His hand soothed her as he rolled to his back and tucked her against his shoulder. "I'm sorry. Did I hurt you?"

Her cheeks warmed as she understood what he was really asking. "A little. But the pleasure soon took away the pain. In fact, I think Mistress Aleris is wrong. I don't believe empaths are asexual at all."

He gave a shout of laughter and hugged her to him. "I do believe you're right. I think your mentor still has much to learn...at least about us."

She gazed up at him, suddenly worried. "As do we. Neither of us were prepared for this melding, Jhoral. You aren't trained. It won't be easy."

His eyes narrowed. "Do you want to give up?"

"No!" Lanai shook her head furiously. "I am yours. But we have much to learn about each other. If we're not careful, our differences may overwhelm us."

Her mate lifted his chin stubbornly. "We'll be fine. The decision was made for us, Lanai. The second our eyes met, remember?"

Worry still niggled at her, but she nodded. "I remember. And I'm not sorry. But I can't help being afraid. This...this is nothing like what I expected."

He brushed her hair back from her face. "And I'll try to remember that."

She relaxed at his words. Then her eyes darkened as she glanced down his hard body. "Will...we do this again?"

His sharp teeth flashed in a knowing smile. "Do you want to?"

"Oh yes."

He chuckled again and rolled her on her back, looming over her possessively. "We are mated, Lanai. Not just by mind-meld, but by sharing our bodies. I don't care what the *normal* relationship is between an empath and her receptor. I don't care that sex usually isn't part of a melding. What you and I have is special, and I will allow no one to come between us." He touched the mark on her neck he'd made in his passion. "Do you understand?"

Lanai's heart pounded with a mixture of fear and hope. Perhaps he wanted more than a mind-mate. Perhaps someday he could see her as a life-mate too. "I am yours," she whispered, knowing it was true in every way.

Her words inflamed Jhoral a second time. "I can't believe it." His voice was awed. "I've just had you, and I want you again."

She blinked and touched his chest with a hesitant hand. "Is that wrong?"

"Gods, no." Jhoral bent and brushed his mouth over hers. A streak of passionate heat raced through him, combining with her more subdued, curious one. "Nothing we could do together is wrong. In fact," he said as he moved between her legs and then kissed the tip of each breast, "I find it very interesting I can feel your emotions as well as my own. Can you do the same?"

Nodding, she smiled again. "It is part of being melded...feeling each other's emotions. But no one told me about...about this."

He laughed out loud. "I suppose they thought it was unnecessary. I am the first male to ever meld with an empath. Before that I don't guess they needed to teach much sex education."

"Our training didn't include this, to be sure." Lanai glanced out from under her lashes in an unmistakably flirtatious manner. "So I assume you'll teach me all I need to know?"

A dark possessiveness rose inside him, surprising him with its intensity. He bent and kissed her...hard. "I am the only one who will teach you. Is that clear?"

Instead of being frightened, she seemed pleased with his fervor. "Only you, my mind-mate. Why would I want to make love to anyone else?"

"Why indeed?" he murmured. "Allow me to show you why it will be only me."

Gathering her closer, he forced back the primitive need to plunge deep and hard inside her. Lanai was still an innocent and wasn't ready to do half of what he wanted. But he swore to himself the new things he would teach her would give him the same joy he would receive from pleasuring her. But to do that, he had to be careful. He couldn't shock or frighten her. And the great thing about sharing her mind was he knew exactly what she felt almost before she did.

"Trust me, telaer," he whispered against her soft lips. "Let me show you another way to make love."

She gave a little gasp as his hand slid down to cup her mound. "Teach me, Jhoral. I want you to teach me everything."

Her permission burned through his brain, and he gritted his teeth as his cock throbbed in sudden need. Counting to ten and praying for control, he bent and kissed her, starting with her parted lips and then moving down to suckle gently on her aroused nipples. Her swift intake of breath almost made him explode, but he ignored the boiling in his blood and concentrated only on her.

Threading their fingers together, he held their hands at her sides. Then slowly, taking his time, he kissed down her body, making sure he caressed every inch of her silky flesh. His tongue teased and tasted, swirling in tiny circles before he gently nipped and sucked at her. Every gasp he heard was a turn-on, every moan a delight as he stoked the fire in her higher and higher.

It was unbelievable the way he felt all her emotions. Each lick made her desire soar, and when he touched her, her pleasure became his own. His passion and hers, both intertwined, made him so hungry for her he could barely take the intensity of the emotions bombarding him.

She stiffened when he nuzzled gently at the curly hair that covered the most sensitive part of her. He sensed her fear and embarrassment war with the need she was experiencing. He sent soothing thoughts to her, gleeful that he could speak without stopping what he was doing.

Carefully, he edged open the folds of flesh and blew gently on her already swollen clitoris. He felt her shiver – both in body and in her mind. It made him ache even more.

“Jhoral,” she gasped as she moved beneath him. “This cannot be right. Should you...?” Her voice trailed into a moan when he licked unerringly at the quivering nubbin of flesh. She cried out, and although she tried to pull away, he held her tightly, never stopping his arousing love play. They wrestled for several moments before she finally capitulated with another soft gasp. Her legs parted, and he knew she’d accepted his claim on her.

“*Tia shaeria, tia saestaer.*” Mind-whispering sexy words in Farsaeen that fanned the fire in both their bodies, he feasted, lapping and sucking gently at her exposed clit, enjoying her trembles, reveling in the taste and scent of her arousal. When he sensed her mind begin to dissolve...her inner cries becoming incoherent, he carefully inserted two fingers into her quim and began to thrust rhythmically.

Her mind-scream nearly sent him over the edge, as did her sudden climax. It took him by surprise. His body jerked as if it had been struck. Giving a loud oath, he pulled out his fingers, moved up her body, and with one hard stab, buried himself deep within her.

Lanai only knew that she had been whirled into a maelstrom of such heat and passion, she couldn’t breathe. His mouth...his fingers, and then finally that hard male part of him, acted together to send her soaring, this orgasm even more intense than the last. She screamed out his name and bucked against him as her mind splintered into a thousand pieces. Her mind filled with so many sensations and emotions, she couldn’t even name them. When Jhoral stiffened and then cried out, his climax sent her over the edge again into a multicolored vortex of indescribable ecstasy. Oblivion beckoned, and she fell into it with pleased abandon.

It was several hours later when she awoke again. This time she knew it was Jhoral’s body behind her, his arm resting over her side, his hand cupping her breast possessively. She blushed again at what they’d done together. It was so unexpected, yet so right. Even though she’d been hesitant at first, her inexperience obvious, as soon as he’d touched her, she’d known she belonged to him in every way. She thanked the moon gods that she’d been given him as her receptor. He was hers and she his...in ways she would never have looked for.

Surely no empath was luckier than she.

“You need to learn to think quieter,” came an amused grumble from her mind-mate.

Lanai smiled and glanced over her shoulder at him. Her heart actually skipped a beat as she took in his tousled hair and sleepy eyes. For a moment she was again awestruck. What had happened to her? Her life would never be the same. She was lying in bed with her mind-mate. He was a male and a foreigner. He was her lover. It boggled the mind.

"As long as you don't care, why worry?" he muttered as he spooned closer. He yawned in her ear before nuzzling her neck. "We are what we are."

She giggled at the goose bumps that rose at his touch. "I *don't* care, but I can't help but marvel. You have no idea how I feel."

"Ridiculous," he stated as he yawned again. "I know exactly how you feel." His hand reached down and cupped her rear. "If you want, I can start here and describe it to you."

Her lips quirked into a pleased grin. "You know that's not what I mean."

He chuckled deeply. "Yes. I do. But the same applies. I do know how you feel, telaer. I can't help it."

Serious now, she turned so they faced each other. "You may be able to sense the emotions I'm having, but that's not what I mean. How I feel...what I'm thinking..." She shook her head. "It's more complicated than that."

Lifting himself up on one elbow, his silver eyes searched hers. "Explain it to me then. I want to understand."

She was silent for a moment, marshaling her thoughts. "You have a family? Right? I did see that in the meld?"

He nodded. "The usual. Father, mother, brother, and a sister."

"And you love them? Spend time with them? See them often?"

"Of course."

She sighed. "That is wonderful. You are very lucky."

Jhoral lifted an inquiring brow. "You weren't hatched from an egg, telaer. You have parents too."

"Parents I haven't seen since I was three."

The tenseness of his body gave away his surprise. "I knew you were given to Mistress Aleris for training, but are you saying your parents never tried to communicate with you?"

She nodded. "When a psychic is removed from her family, she ceases to exist for them. She belongs only to the house where she is given her training."

"That's insane! Every child needs a family."

The horror in his voice made her sigh. She eased her arms around him, offering comfort instinctively. "My family was my sister empaths and those who trained me. It was not a normal life by any means. You must understand. I have never had the chance to be close to another person before. In the compound, we are kept separate. It is easier for us."

"Easier?" he scoffed. "How can it be easier?"

How to explain? "I'm not like you," she began. "I—"

He interrupted her explanation with a throaty laugh. "Thank the gods for that."

Shaking her head in amusement, she went on. "I am an empath, Jhoral. I feel differently about things. It's hard for a normal to understand. But how I was treated, how I expressed myself to others... It is remarkably different from everything you may believe in." His expression told her he didn't understand, and she sighed. It was so difficult to put in plain words. "Do you know how many people have touched me with kindness and caring since I began my training...including you?"

He shrugged. "How many?"

"One."

His eyes widened, and she felt his shock all the way to her toes. He shook his head. "I can't believe that. Are you saying...I'm the first to...to care for you?"

Nodding her head, she gazed seriously into his bemused face. "Yes. Other than a few times when I was a child and out of control, and yesterday during the ceremony when they tried to stop me, no one has ever laid a hand on me. *Period*. You were the first to touch me with any type of positive emotion. I have lived in a kind of a vacuum all my life. Because of my gift, touching others can be painful and is always confusing. Empaths are trained never to have contact with another being. That way when our receptors are found, their touch is even more special."

Jhoral could only stare at her in amazement. The thought of never being touched appalled him. "No good night kisses? No hugs? No spanks on the rear when you were disobedient?"

"No, no, and" — Lanai looked astonished at the thought — "absolutely not. No touching. Not at all."

He shook his head, his stomach rolling in disgust. How could a child survive? "I can't believe it. No one can go without the touch of another. It's monstrous."

"It is our way," she responded gently. "But it was hard. And very lonely. Other empaths seemed to take it in stride, but I hated it. I always longed to be able to hug someone. To kiss them and share my feelings. But I knew it wasn't to be. Even with a receptor, I wouldn't be able to express myself freely. I wasn't to be their friend or family. I was an instrument for them to use for good. Nothing more."

"Then I am even gladder that you chose me." He wrapped his arms around her fiercely. The horror he felt at how she'd been treated flowed through him and into her. "I can't imagine you being treated in such a manner. My people would find it despicable...abhorrent. I refuse to do that to you. No matter what they say. It will be different for us, I swear. Never will you go without my touch. If you wish a hug, you have my permission to give me one. And if you want a kiss" — he wagged his dark eyebrows at her — "then you may do so anytime."

She gave a watery giggle that made his heart ache. How could the Kylians treat their people in such a cold way? It made no sense. Dyas was such a demonstrative man. Why would a part of their population be treated with such cruelty?

He remembered the queen's remark about the differences in their peoples and not judging, but for him, this was more than he could fathom. Family, affection,

protection...to him all were a part of the whole. He was utterly glad that Lanai would never again feel that loneliness he could sense in her memories.

"Jhoral?"

Realizing he was squeezing her in his anger, he immediately loosened his grip. "Forgive me, little one. What you're telling me is very hard to understand. To know you went through such a childhood angers me."

"I...I think it was me," she confessed softly. "I never saw the other empaths react the way I did. They seemed content, even happy. It was only me who questioned and longed for more."

"Well you got it." His tone was so rough, her eyes widened. "You got me, and I have no intention of *not* touching you." He smiled slowly as the memory of their shared passion once again stirred his blood. After hearing her story, he was overjoyed that she'd taken to it so easily. If she'd never been touched... Well, *that* was over for good. "In fact, if it were up to me, I'd never stop touching you."

She giggled again and buried her face in his chest. The absolute joy he sensed in her mind made him want her all over again. He kissed the mark he'd put on her neck. "And I can show you, if you like?"

Her eyes glowed a bright, passionate violet as she slid her arms around his neck. "Will you teach me something else?"

"I will teach you everything," he vowed hoarsely. Lowering his body to hers, he began to do exactly that.

* * * * *

It was late afternoon when they awoke from their nap. After another completely satisfying bout of sex and then a quick bath, they both felt somewhat normal. Now, Jhoral was close to losing his patience trying to make Lanai see reason about her clothes.

"I don't want you wearing that grim robe," he repeated. "It is ugly and uncomfortable."

Lanai just shook her head. "I must. It is what all empaths wear. That way normals know what we are. It is the law."

"I don't give a damn about the law. You're my empath, and I'll tell you if you have to wear something. And you don't."

Her eyes turned a dark hazel. "I can't disobey. If I do, they will have more reasons to take me away from you."

He ground his teeth as irritation filled him. She just couldn't seem to understand she was safe. He wouldn't allow anyone to take her. Didn't she believe him? "Don't you trust me?" he asked aloud. "I have told you not to worry about that. No one will touch you without my permission."

Lanai's lip trembled. "I want to...I swear I do. I am sorry, mind-mate. I told you I wasn't a normal empath. I can't help but worry."

He bit back a sharp remark. He had to remember that they'd only known each other for a day. Why *should* she believe him? Just because she had trusted him with her body didn't mean she could trust him about everything else. Trust wasn't given; it was earned. He couldn't just command it of her. Sighing deeply, he said only, "I want you to try."

Nodding her head, she plucked at the tunic she wore. It was his, something he'd given her to wear when she climbed out of the tub. He wouldn't have cared if she walked around naked, but she was still too modest to allow him to see her like that. She wouldn't even let him bathe with her. She'd gone as pink as the moon when he'd offered to scrub her back. The melding...the physical relationship, it was all very new to her.

It was for him as well, but Jhoral was used to making decisions quickly and then standing up for what he wanted. Lanai was not the first thing he'd fought for, though he was beginning to believe she *was* by far the most important.

And because of that, he took a deep breath and tried to calm the male arrogance that demanded she believe everything he said without hesitation. But stubbornly, he tried one last time to get her to wear what he wanted. "I tore the robe you wore yesterday. You can wear my tunic until you get it replaced."

Her gaze lifted to his. "Please, Jhoral, let me dress normally. I can send for a robe, if you'll allow it. I know my people. It will be better for both of us."

Giving another disgusted sigh, he finally nodded. In a way, she was right. And a hell of a lot more diplomatic. Still, she would have to learn he didn't follow anyone's rules. He was a prince of the house of Farsaea. No one would dare question his will.

He watched as she penned a quick note and then rang for a servant to deliver it. The maid who came in answer to her call was obviously shocked at the sight of an empath in his room. Her plump cheeks reddened, and she looked at him speculatively. Jhoral didn't care. The more Kylians who knew he'd claimed Lanai, the better.

They'd finished their evening meal by the time the clothing arrived. He watched with displeasure as she tugged on the formfitting robe, but he put his foot down when it came to the thin gray skullcap.

"No," he growled, tossing it out a nearby window. "Absolutely not. It cuts into your face. That I will not allow."

Her surprised gaze met his, and even though he was ready for an argument, she shocked him by agreeing. "All right. I don't like the cap either. You're right. It hurts." She reached out slowly and touched his thick, ornately woven braid, stroking it unconsciously as if he were a house feline. "Can you show me how to do this instead? I like it very much."

Jhoral smiled. Although she was hesitant about touching him, he very much wanted her hands on him. He wondered if her timidity was because of being an empath

or just her natural shyness. Either way, he did not intend to let her get away with it for long. Catching her hand, he pressed a warm kiss to her palm. "It is a Farsaeen Sky-flyer's braid. Only those who ride Skyhawkls can wear it." When her face fell in disappointment, he chuckled.

"But since you belong to me, I think an exception can be made. Especially since I think you'll be riding with me quite often."

Her eyes glowed with pleasure. "Thank you."

He kissed her warmly, then winked at her. "You can thank me properly later."

At her blush, he laughed aloud and turned her around. Quickly, he wove her silky hair into a braid matching his. The silver glow of her hair shimmered against the dark cording he wove in and out of the soft tresses. He found himself half-aroused at touching her, and his mouth quirked into a smile. He'd been inside her so many times during their rest period, he'd lost count. That he was still aroused by her nearness amazed him.

"There," he said, just as a knock sounded at the door. "You look like a Sky-flyer now. But more beautiful." He opened the door to find a serious-faced Dyas waiting there. His friend's expression made Jhoral go tense. His adrenaline ran instantly hot.

"What is it?"

Dyas sighed and looked at both Lanai and Jhoral with dark, worried eyes. "You both have been called before the Grand Psychic Council. I'm sorry, my friend. Your mind-melding has been challenged."

Chapter Five

Lanai's heart sank. She'd hoped it wouldn't happen, but she couldn't say it surprised her. Mistress Aleris was angry enough to call a full council meeting. Yet a challenge was almost unheard of. The mentor was pulling out all the stops to separate them. Without thinking, she ran to Jhoral and flung herself against him. "I'm frightened."

His strong arms enfolded her. "I told you. No one will take you from me." He glared at Dyas. "What is this...challenge?"

Dyas looked speculatively at them both before he answered. "It is an archaic way of preventing a melding, usually done immediately after a receptor is chosen. But because you spirited Lanai away last night, the Mistress Aleris couldn't curry support quickly enough." He ran a hand through his hair. "Since you are male and an outsider, the challenge gained momentum with little effort."

"But we are melded," Lanai cried. She blushed as Dyas looked at her in surprise. Being with Jhoral, it was easy to forget only receptors were to do the talking. She needed to be very careful.

"I can't say I disbelieve," the younger prince answered. "You both looked like you'd melded. I've never seen Jhoral so exhausted. But being tired isn't enough. They will make you prove you are mind-mates."

Jhoral snorted. "Is that all?" He shook his head. "I thought you were telling me of a battle."

"It is, my friend. A battle of words." Dyas's concern was mirrored in his eyes. "A sword can't fix everything, Jhoral. This will be something quite different."

Her mate shrugged. "Words matter not. If they try to take her, I will kill them."

The bald statement fell into a pool of shocked silence. Lanai shivered, knowing he meant exactly what he said. His inner surety was absolute. He would fight, and he would kill to keep her.

All the gentleness he'd shown her had disappeared. Now she saw another side of him...the brutal side. The truth shot through her. It was like being stabbed with a flaming-hot sword. Her mate was dangerous. He was fierce, cunning, and warlike. He would take no prisoners and shrugged at the thought of violence.

He was a perfect predator.

Her terrified thoughts must have transmitted themselves to Jhoral, because he squeezed her gently, forcing her chin up so their eyes met. "Are you having second thoughts, telaer? Because I warn you, I will not let you go easily."

Pushing back her instinctive abhorrence of violence, she shook her head. "I am...not used to such strong emotion. But I would never leave you. I can't. We are mind-mates."

He relaxed and smiled, showing his strong, sharp teeth. "My ways are as strange to you as yours are to me. It will take patience and resolve to learn what we are to each other. But we have made our decision. No one will separate us." Turning to Dyas, he clapped the other man on the back, his eyes gleaming in anticipation. "Shall we go? I find myself looking forward to this challenge."

Dyas groaned. "That's what I was afraid of!"

* * * * *

The council chambers were almost as sterile-looking as the Melding Sphere. Stark white walls and dull window coverings made the whole room look depressing. A long wooden table was positioned at the front of the room with six straight-backed wooden chairs behind it. In front of each chair was a placard announcing the name of the person who sat so stiffly in each seat. Off to the side were several other places to sit, even more unwelcoming.

Guards were placed at each end of the table and at the doors. Jhoral gave them a cursory glance as he walked past them, and his lips quirked into a mocking smile. With his skills, he could kill them before they even had time to breathe. No...they weren't important.

His gaze went to the people sitting behind the table. Now these were the Kylians he had to deal with. For a moment he felt disappointed. They were all older men and women, and none of them were battle ready. Dyas was right. These were not warriors. They were—he shuddered—politicians.

Gods! Just what he needed. A bunch of know-it-alls who thought they could tell the son of a king what to do. Well, he'd explain facts to them very quickly. But he'd have to do it carefully. He'd prefer not to go to war. Not after all the trouble he and Dyas had gone to bringing their peoples together.

The door behind him opened again, and he turned to see King Freyan walk in. The ruler nodded to Jhoral and strode over to sit in one of the chairs near the wall. Apparently he was to watch but not actively participate.

"Come before us."

The oldest man's voice echoed in the chamber. Jhoral felt Lanai shiver and soothed her in his mind before he walked up to stand in front of the table. She followed a step behind him. Dyas went with them.

"Your Highness." The old man inclined his head at the Kylian prince. "You may take a seat next to your father."

Dyas shook his head. "Lord Audbere, I stand with my friend."

There were mutters and quiet exclamations. A glance at the king showed him smiling faintly. Lord Audbere looked nonplussed. "This has nothing to do you with, Prince Dyas. It would be best if you stood aside."

"Jhoral is my best friend. It was at my urging he attended the ceremony." The young prince's face was set in implacable lines. "I am responsible for him being here. I will stand with him now."

"You don't need to do this," Jhoral muttered quietly. "I can handle this."

"I know." Dyas smiled and winked at Lanai. "But you would do the same for me."

Jhoral couldn't argue with that, so shrugging, he turned back to the council. "Say what you have to say," he told the group with some impatience. "I have more important things to attend to this evening."

Lord Audbere's face reddened. "There can be nothing more important than what we do here. We are the Psychic Council, and we rule on matters governing all psychics. We have been told of what happened last night. It is our duty to decide whether you are truly melded or not. Our word is law."

Jhoral felt Lanai shiver at the harsh words, and he pulled her closer to him in response. Her hand was chilled, and unconsciously he calmed her, bringing her palm to his lips in a quick caress.

His action did not go unnoticed. One of the women at the table, a Mistress Gastia, pursed her lips. "Remove your hand from the empath. You are not allowed to touch her until our ruling is complete."

"No."

Mistress Gastia blinked, and her eyes widened. "I am a member of the council. You *must* obey me."

Jhoral stepped closer, and his silver eyes gleamed with menace. "And I am Jhoral, Crown Prince of the Farsaeon. I don't take orders from anyone."

Lord Audbere frowned. "You must understand, Prince Jhoral. You are now under our authority. Whatever decision we make, you will abide by."

That made Jhoral burst out laughing. Everyone in the room stared in bewilderment as he shook his head. "No, my lord. It is you who must understand. I am

here only as a courtesy. As far as I'm concerned, the decision has already been made. And I am the one who made it when I accepted Lanai as my own."

More, even-louder mutterings could be heard, but Jhoral only smiled. He wasn't worried about what these politicians might try to do. But for Lanai's sake, he'd be polite...until they pushed him too far.

"Perhaps we should just get started," King Freyan suggested. "Explain to the prince your concerns. He may be able to alleviate them."

Jhoral flashed the king a grin of thanks. At least Freyan didn't seem to want to take Lanai away from him. He glanced back at Lord Audbere. "Speak."

It was obvious the council wasn't used to someone else telling them what to do. Their heads came together, and more whispers could be heard. Then, as one, they all turned and looked at Lanai. Instinctively, Jhoral put his arm around her, shielding her possessively. There was no way he would allow them to frighten her.

A blond man—the placard said his name was Alendar—cleared his throat. "Prince Jhoral, do you understand that males cannot be receptors?"

"I know that is a mistaken belief of yours."

The man's eyebrows came together. "There is no mistake. It has been proven. Centuries of use have taught us this fact."

"Then I have just proved you wrong." Jhoral looked down at Lanai's worried face and smiled. "Because I am a male, and I am Lanai's receptor."

"Impossible. It can't be." Another woman spoke, spitting out the words as if they tasted bad. "You are not Kylian."

"So?" Jhoral shrugged his shoulders and looked at her nameplate. MISTRESS PRUNESS. Fitting moniker for a dried-up old biddy like her. "Why do I have to be Kylian? Dyas told me once that other cultures have empaths. So they could have receptors. Why can't mine?"

"But they cannot cross-meld. That isn't possible."

"Again, I ask you why. You are making assumptions based on what?" Jhoral smoothed his hand over Lanai's bright hair. "Because you've never had one before? I suggest you try being more open-minded about it."

Another council member, this one dressed in dark green robes, pounded on the table. Lord Merin was his name. "We know what we are talking about. Our traditions go back for centuries. We have studied the giftings, and we know what can and cannot be. Do you dare come in here and tell us after aeons of belief, we are wrong?"

Jhoral shrugged again. "Looks like I'm doing just that."

"This is intolerable!" A new voice spoke, and all turned to look at Mistress Aleris.

Sighing, Jhoral turned to face her. She'd been quiet up until now, but obviously the logic he was using wouldn't convince her any more today than it had yesterday.

"He is an outsider and unworthy of being a receptor. He's had no training, and worst of all, he is a man of war." The horror in the woman's voice was very real. "I insist they be separated immediately."

Lord Merin nodded in agreement. "I suggest the empath be taken back to the training house. That will limit the amount of contamination that has occurred. Then the foreigner can prove himself to this council." He motioned to the nearby guards. "See to it."

Fury shot through Jhoral. *They dared?* His hand went to his sword, and his eyes took on an unholy shine. All those in the room sucked in their breath. Save Lanai, who was frozen by his side, and Dyas, who put his hand on his own weapon and shook his head gently at the nearest guard.

For the first time, Kylians were confronted by a Farsaeon warrior in full fury. His hot gaze fastened on the unfortunate Merin. "With respect," he gritted out, his tone low and angry, "I have nothing to prove to you or to anyone else. Lanai is mine. Touch her, and you will deal the consequences."

The silence that followed his words was absolute. Lanai stopped breathing, wondering how the stiff-necked members of the council would react next. Didn't they see their tactics only made it worse? Jhoral was a prince. Even *they* should know you don't order a prince around.

Without thinking, she buried her face in his shoulder, fighting to keep balanced with all the emotion flowing around her. Jhoral wasn't shielding her. He had no idea he was even supposed to. Not for the first time, Lanai thanked the moon gods she was as strong as she was.

"Stop that!" Mistress Pruness broke the quiet and wagged her finger at Lanai. "You may have been a problem, but you always knew your place. Yet look at you now. Draped all over this man...appearing without your head covering. Shame on you!"

She felt Jhoral's anger as if it were a living thing, writhing and twisting around her. Frantically, she clung to his arm. "No," she mind-cried, hoping he would listen. "Do not make it worse."

"She will apologize for that," Jhoral snarled out loud, taking a step toward the table. He drew his sword with an ominous whisper of metal. "Lanai is doing nothing wrong. She is only obeying my wishes."

"You have told her it is all right to be so familiar?" Lord Audbere's eyebrows winged up into his hair. He stared at the shining weapon, his face going white.

"I have."

"But...it isn't proper." Mistress Gastia actually wrung her hands. "You obviously have no knowledge of our ways."

"What you don't seem to recognize, is they are not *your* ways any longer." Jhoral bared his teeth in a fierce smile. "They are *our* ways."

All the council members gaped at him. Lanai sensed the confusion sweeping the room. "Wh-what?" Mistress Aleris whispered. "What are you talking about?"

"Allow me to explain." Jhoral gave Lanai a squeeze, and she held her breath again. She could sense his anger burning steady and strong. "Lanai is a Kylian empath. I am a Farsaeen receptor. Two people, two cultures. One man, one woman. Two different societies brought together through this extraordinary event."

He fixed his unusual eyes on each of the council members. "But you are all acting like this is still only a Kylian matter. I will remind you again. *I am not Kylian*. You cannot expect me to follow your rules or beliefs. Since we are the first of our kind, Lanai and I will discover our own path. But no one will dictate to us. Not Mistress Aleris, and certainly not this council. I will listen to all you have to say, learn what I need to learn to protect and care for her, but in the end, I will make my own decisions...with Lanai as my partner."

The council members stared at him in shock for a long moment; then they all bent their heads and broke into excited and furious whispers.

"And here I thought you were no politician." Dyas's muttered words made Lanai want to break into a hysterical giggle. She bit it back with an effort. It was difficult to control her response to all the anger and confusion going on. The council's feelings were mixed. Horror at their traditions being challenged, and for the first time, concern that perhaps this foreigner really did have a right to her. She held on to that knowledge, praying common sense would win in the long run.

After a few minutes, Lord Alendar stood and held his hands up for quiet. "I think it is time to put our anger aside and look at this objectively." He gazed at Jhoral. "It is difficult for us to believe what you say, good prince. Our ways have been set for a very long time. The traditions you so easily toss aside are what have kept our people safe for centuries. You must understand we question you because of that knowledge."

Jhoral inclined his head. "I understand your concern, my lord. I would feel the same if one of your people suddenly took to flying on one of my Skyhawks. But from what I have gleaned from the Mistress Aleris as well as Lanai, no one outside a melding actually knows what happens. So even if I chose to, how would I convince you we are truly melded?"

"A good question," put in King Freyan from his seat by the wall. He stood and walked over to the table. The council members looked uncomfortable, and Lanai remembered that usually the Psychic Council was autonomous. For the king to step in was unusual to say the least.

"Your Highness," began Lord Alendar, but the king's upraised hand stopped any further speech.

The ruler glanced at Dyas's and Jhoral's weapons and gave a little nod. Lanai felt the tension ease as soon as Jhoral obeyed the unspoken request to sheath his sword. Dyas crossed his arms over his chest and stared at his father curiously.

Freyan cleared his throat. "I just remembered something. Last night, the queen had an excellent suggestion. However, at the time it was impossible to carry out, because Lanai was too tired. I believe tonight we can."

Jhoral looked suspicious. "What suggestion is that, Your Highness?"

"My wife said we were worrying too much about you being an outsider. She reminded us there was a Kylian involved. Lanai. Perhaps we should hear from her."

"But she is an empath," squeaked Mistress Pruness. "An empath never speaks in mixed company."

"Mixed company?" Jhoral glanced at Dyas.

"Normals and psychics," the Kylian prince explained. "It is usual for the receptor to do the talking. Empaths rarely say anything."

Jhoral's temper rose again, just as it did every time he felt a slight on Lanai and what she was. The irritability was mingled with a sudden tiredness that told him he wasn't completely recovered from the melding yet. He held on to his control...barely. "I give you fair warning. This will not happen between Lanai and I. She has already been told I value her input. She has my permission to speak freely."

Lord Alendar looked unhappy at the thought. "It will cause much confusion, Prince Jhoral. A receptor and empath are thought to be as one. If empaths believe they are their own person, we could have anarchy."

"That is the most ridiculous thing I've—" Jhoral cut himself off when he saw the king surreptitiously shake his head. He took a deep breath instead and forced himself to calm. "I agree with the king. Lanai deserves to speak...to tell her wishes and desires. She is just as important to this discussion as I am."

"Very good," the king approved. He turned to Lanai, who was watching everyone with wide, troubled eyes. "Then it's up to you, my dear. Tell us about the melding. Tell us why you think you should stay with Prince Jhoral."

Jhoral sensed immediately Lanai was scared to death. Of course she would be. If she'd never been allowed to speak in public before, it was no wonder. Ignoring everyone around him, he framed her face in his hands and dropped his forehead to hers. "It's all right," he murmured aloud, before switching to mind-speak. *"I am here with you, telaer. I will protect you. No one will separate us. Remember, I gave you my word."*

Her fingers came up to encircle his wrists, and he felt her draw strength from his touch. When he judged she was ready, he tucked her against him securely, and they turned to face the council.

"I will help...in any way I can," she whispered aloud. Her gaze moved between the king and Mistress Aleris, and she swallowed hard. "What do you want to know?"

There was a momentary pause as all struggled to accept the fact an empath was actually speaking. Then the king spoke again. "Tell us why you believe you and Prince Jhoral are mind-melded."

Lanai's multicolored eyes sought Jhorai's for a brief moment before she looked back to the king. "I know we are melded. He is the one who completes me. He may not be a normal receptor, but I am not a normal empath. Mistress Aleris can tell you, I am not like the others. But I did not seek to go outside the circle. Once I saw him, I had no choice. He was the one I needed."

"Tell us what happened." Lord Alendar sounded curious, not judgmental. Jhorai nodded in appreciation.

"I did what I'd been taught. Tried each of the receptors standing in the circle, but none of them fit me." Lanai's lip trembled. Jhorai could feel her pain again as she remembered what she'd gone through. "I tried a second time, but I was unsuccessful. Then they tried to take me out of the circle, but I wouldn't listen. I knew I had to find my mate, but no matter who I touched, I failed."

"So what made you go to Jhorai?" This time it was Dyas who asked.

"I felt so alone...so incomplete. I was lost. Everyone else had found their mates, but I hadn't. Then I heard his voice. It was all around and inside of me. I looked up, and there he was. And as soon as I saw him, I knew." She lifted her gaze to Jhorai's. "He was the one."

"When our eyes met," Jhorai agreed. "And from that moment on, we belonged together."

"But that doesn't make sense," Mistress Gastia objected. "An empath must touch to find her true mind-mate."

"When I touched him, I melded. That is for certain. But I knew what he was before we touched. I had no doubt of it."

"I can tell you this." Jhorai unthinkingly dropped a kiss on Lanai's smooth forehead. "The moment I saw Lanai, I was drawn to her. I didn't know why. I didn't even believe in psychic gifts. Empaths were to me nothing but a tall tale. But I watched her go around the circle. I felt her pain and wanted her to succeed." He looked at Mistress Aleris. "I saw her energy. The rainbow color all around her. I was surprised no one else mentioned it."

Lord Alendar's eyes sharpened. "You could see her psychic energy? Before you two melded?"

Jhorai took heart in the fact the lord was admitting there was a melding. "Yes. Vividly. And once we touched, it was unlike anything I had ever known."

The tall lord turned back to Lanai. "And you, Lanai. Was the melding anything like what you'd been trained for...what you were expecting?"

Lanai's cheeks went bright pink, and Jhorai felt red creep up his neck as well. He opened his mouth to speak, but she beat him to it. "All meldings are private, my lord. No one knows exactly what to expect. But I knew it was a melding. Just as I knew Jhorai was the one person I'd been waiting for my whole life. He is my receptor. I will have no other."

She trembled with the strength of her emotions. Jhoral cuddled her against him, soothing her with mind-whispers as well as a gentle hand stroking her back. He knew this had to be difficult for her. Especially after the recent melding and then their physical joining together earlier. He suddenly wondered if he'd been right to make love to Lanai. She'd been exhausted. Had he taken advantage of her?

"No, my mind-mate." Her mind-speech came soft and low, and he had to strain to hear it. "I knew I had a choice. You did not force me. While I was surprised by the way we made love both in the vision and later in your bed, I was not upset by it. I knew it was a part of what we were to each other. I do not regret sharing everything with you."

He felt only a little better. *"You are so innocent, Lanai. If you hadn't been so tired...so frightened about what was happening, you might have chosen differently."*

"I chose to make love to you in the vision, Jhoral. Don't make less of my choice now. Or are you trying to find a way out of this melding now that you see the trouble I will cause you?"

"By the gods!" he said aloud, sweeping her up into his arms and staring into her tear-filled eyes. "I'll tell you again, Lanai. You belong to me."

Suddenly, he'd had enough. He was exceedingly tired and angry enough to kill everyone in the room. Still holding her tightly, he turned back to the council members and the king. "We have answered your questions. We have shared what we could about the melding. Take it or leave it, I truly don't care. But Lanai is mine. My empath and a beloved companion now under my protection. Try to take her from me and I will spill your blood. It is the way of the Farsaeen...the way of the Skyhawk warrior."

There was utter silence in the room. Then Mistress Aleris shot to her feet. "I still refuse to recognize this melding. Nothing you have said will make me believe you two are receptor and empath. I call for a vote from this council. Are they melded, or are they not?"

"Vote as you will," growled Jhoral as he glared at the old mentor. "But it matters not to me. No one will separate us. No one can."

"Enough." The king clapped his hands together firmly. "There will be no vote taken. Not today." He stared hard at Mistress Aleris, who slowly eased back into her seat. "You have been given the information you need to research this most unusual happening, but since both receptor and empath say it happened, I see no need to dispute it. I've known Jhoral for some time, and even though he is an outsider and a warrior, he is a truthful man. And Lanai is a Kylian empath. Lying is almost impossible for her. To think they have somehow banded together to deceive this council is absurd. I suggest you look elsewhere for an explanation."

"But King Freyan." Lord Merin looked almost apoplectic. "This could change our whole way of life. We can't ignore it like it didn't happen."

"I don't recall saying that," the king shot back. "In fact, I suggest just the opposite. Accept that it *did* happen. Believe a Farsaeen and a Kylian can meld. If you do that, I think many of your concerns will answer themselves."

"It could be a natural evolution," Lord Alendar mused. "We should consider that as well."

"Do what you want," Jhoral stated, his voice resolute. "But as I said, the decision has already been made."

"You'll need help in learning how to work with your empath." Lord Alendar smiled slightly. "It can be quite overwhelming at first. If I may offer a suggestion? You should stay here until you learn all that being a receptor entails."

Just as he finished speaking, there was a knock on the outer door. One of the guards opened it, and a messenger came racing in. With him came a flurry of fear and excitement even Jhoral could feel. The man dropped to his knees before the king.

"Your Highness, there has been an attack!"

Chapter Six

Everyone went still. "Where?" King Freyan growled. "When?"

"Less than an hour ago." The messenger glanced at Jhoral, and there was mingled horror and pity on his dusty face. "I'm sorry, Prince. The attack was on Orelia."

Jhoral's blood ran cold, and his eyes went dark. "Orelia?" He bent down and jerked the messenger to his feet. "My family. Are they all right?"

"No one knows." The messenger shook his head. "It happened so fast. It came from within as well as outside. A wall was breached, an inside one that should have been secure. No one knows how it happened."

Jhoral dropped the terrified man and turned back to Lanai. He rubbed his eyes as his head whirled. Fear for his family mixed with the still-present fatigue from the mind-mating. All thought of the council and their concerns about the melding were pushed away. "I have to go to them."

Dyas shook his head. "You can't. You're still not strong enough. If you've melded, then you'll be in no condition to fight. Even after a night of rest I can tell you are still exhausted."

"I don't care. I will not leave my family to die." His icy eyes met the messenger's. "Who dares attack the royal house of Farsaea?"

"It...was the rebels."

Jhoral frowned. Lanai swayed against him, and he put his arm around her. "Rebels? I was told nothing of this."

"I sent your father a report," King Freyan said. "It should have been waiting for him in Orelia. I was going to speak to you last night at dinner, but you and Dyas were otherwise engaged."

Guilt pulled at him, but he quickly shook it off. "Tell me of these rebels. Why do they come at us?"

"They don't want an alliance. They say if you bring your troops onto our land, you will make war against Kyla." The king sighed. "The rebels know of your people, of your Skyhawks and weapons. They don't believe you would ally yourself with us. Instead, they think you will take it all for yourself."

"Fools. And they call us primitives." Jhoral pushed back his hair. Lanai's hand smoothed over his chest comfortingly, and without thinking, he brought it to his lips, drawing strength and energy from her presence. Her very presence soothed him like a fine wine. He looked back at the messenger, who was watching wide-eyed. "Do you know how they got into the city?"

"All we know is where they came in, but we don't know how it was done. But we did capture a rebel. He is in interrogation now."

Jhoral came to attention. His bloodlust flared. "Here?"

The man nodded. "Yes. Two Sky-flyers brought us here. The rebel tried to leap to his death, but the Skyhawk caught him with his great talons." It was easy to see from the man's face the impression that had made. "The captain of the guard is questioning him now."

A slow, fierce smile touched Jhoral's lips, and people shivered looking at him. He knew from experience he would look lethal and dangerous, and even the small woman clinging to his side couldn't hide the fact he was somehow deadly. He turned to Mistress Aleris and the rest of the council. If what he was thinking worked, it just might solve all his problems at once.

"You said earlier an empath has no place in war. Isn't that right, Mistress Aleris?"

"Yes. No empath should be anywhere near a battle. It would be too much for them."

"But wouldn't an empath come in handy in an interrogation?" Jhoral's eyes gleamed in triumph. "Couldn't she sift through the lies and find the truth? If an empath could do that, she might save an entire city. Don't you think *that* would be a worthwhile pursuit?"

By the time he was done, he was almost shouting, and the mentor's face had gone very white. She swallowed twice, and her gaze skittered around the room. "I...can see...how it might work. But" —she rallied quickly— "you are not mind-melded, so it doesn't matter."

Jhoral turned to the king, his hard face showing his disgust. He was done dealing with the old woman. "With your permission, King Freyan? I might be able to save my family and your city."

The king looked like he'd been poleaxed. "I would have never thought to use an empath in such a way." He shook his head. "It is an interesting concept. But Dyas is right. It is easy to see you are still very tired. You could do yourselves damage by trying such a thing."

"King Freyan," Lord Audbere protested in a hoarse voice. "To use the empath in such a way will kill her. She has not been trained as an interrogator."

Realizing the older man could be right, Jhoral bent to Lanai. "It's up to you, telaer. I won't force you to do this. I know this is all new, and you are tired from our melding, but I ask it anyway. Will you help me?"

Lanai stared up at him, wondering if he knew he was supposed to order, not ask. What she was thinking must have slipped through into his mind, because his face gentled.

"As we have both already decided, I am not a normal receptor." He ignored Mistress Aleris's snort of agreement. "And you are not a normal empath. Whatever we do, we will do together. Partners...remember? I've just found you. The last thing I'm going to do is use you in a way where you might be hurt." He switched to mind-speak.

"I care about you, Lanai. We just met yesterday, yet I feel as if I've known you always. I look forward to discovering all that my mind-mate is. I won't do anything that could change that." He bent and brushed his mouth over hers. Warmth raced through her and into him. Both their eyes darkened.

Her heart beat faster, and smiling, she cradled his face in her hands and gave him the traditional greeting of an empath to receptor. The salutation she'd been unable to give the night before. This time spoken before those who might try to keep them apart. *"I am yours. Do with me as you please."*

Less than fifteen minutes later, they were standing outside the interrogation room. Lanai was feeling very tired, the day's rest not nearly enough to restrengthen either her mind or her body. She refused to let Jhoral see it, knowing how important this was to him. His family's lives were at stake, and to a lesser degree, so was her own. She knew what he'd been thinking earlier in the council chambers. This may be a way to convince everyone they were truly mated. If not, she still might be taken away from him, no matter how he might fight it. And if that were to happen, she would surely die.

"You may question the prisoner," King Freyan stated to Jhoral, "and take Lanai with you. But I want Dyas and Mistress Aleris to go as well. He, as my representative, and her to watch and make sure neither of you overdo it."

"She is not necess—" Jhoral began.

"It is my command. If there was a melding—and I'm beginning to believe there was—I know you must be exhausted, even after a good night's sleep. You are strong, Jhoral, but I am responsible for you. I won't allow you to be injured. Do you understand?"

Lanai felt her mate's reluctance as he nodded. "I will do as you ask, but you will see, Farsaeans are stronger than you think."

"Just so. But as you've pointed out several times this evening, there is not *just* a Farsaeon involved. You can't forget your empath. She is not as strong as you are." The king smiled down at Lanai, and then he clapped the younger man on the back. "May the gods be with you, son. Find out what you can. Save our people."

The two men grasped forearms, and then Jhoral held his hand out to Lanai. His silver eyes burned with the light of approaching battle, and she shivered, thankful she wasn't the one he was after.

"Are you afraid of me, Lanai?"

Her eyes widened, sensing the sudden pain she'd caused him. Without thinking, she threw herself in his arms. *"No...never. I only was glad it wasn't me you'd be interrogating. But I could never be afraid of you. You are my mind-mate."*

"Good." He dropped a kiss on her lips. "For a moment I was worried. I do not want you afraid of me."

As one, the whole room sucked in its breath. Wide-eyed at the response to his simple statement, Jhoral and Lanai stared at everyone.

"Are you saying," Mistress Aleris whispered, "you can hear her speak to you? In your mind?"

Jhoral nodded, his brows pulled together in confusion. "Of course."

The mentor's face went white, and she sank down into a nearby chair. "Oh my. Oh my goodness."

Staring down at her mentor, Lanai gave a light laugh. *"I think she believes you now."*

"You can talk to each other in your minds?" Dyas looked as if had been struck. "Whenever you want?"

"Yes." Jhoral looked at the surprised Kylian. "Are you telling me if I'd shared this earlier you wouldn't have put up such a fight?"

"It would have helped," his friend responded sourly. "It is a sign of melding."

"Well, Mistress Aleris. Do you believe we are telling the truth?" Jhoral pulled Lanai closer. "That we *are* indeed melded?"

"An empath can only transfer her thoughts to her receptor," the old woman said breathlessly. "I can't believe it. You are a man! You're not a proper receptor. *And you are not even a Kylian.*"

He shrugged. "I guess no one's perfect."

Lanai knew he was more amused than angry.

"Well, this raises some other questions we'll have to deal with. But we will set that aside for now. We have an advantage here. We'd be foolish to ignore it." The king smiled again at Lanai. "Be a good girl and do your best. Make us proud."

She nodded, but Jhoral didn't move. Instead, he turned her to face him. "Are you sure you're ready for this? I know you're tired."

Embarrassed color warmed her cheeks. She knew she must be strong for him. Steeling herself against the fatigue she felt, she whispered, "I am tired, but I want to go on."

Concern darkened his eyes to pewter. "Be sure, telaer. I need you to be sure."

"I am sure. But it may be easier," she went on, "if I do most of my talking in mind-speech. Just for a while."

"I don't understand."

Mistress Aleris stepped in. "After a melding, so much psychic energy has been released, it is difficult for the empath to function on more than one plane of reality. And Lanai gave a great deal of herself last night." The old woman didn't seem to notice her blushing furiously. "She must recharge. With all that's been going on, she hasn't had a chance to do so and is slowly getting more and more tired. It would be best for her to use whatever is more natural for her. In an empath's case, it is using her mind-telepathy."

"But you're all right?" Jhoral's gentle finger traced her mouth, and she shivered again, this time in longing.

"I am fine. Please, use me. Let us save your family."

He stared at her for a long time. Then he nodded and, taking her hand, sketched a short bow to the king and pushed open the door.

It was the stench that hit her first, the smell of fear and hatred. She staggered, taken aback by the powerful wave of emotion that hit her. Jhoral's hand tightened, and as he pulled her to rest against his chest, she knew he could sense the feelings bombarding her as well.

Lanai closed her eyes and tried to remember her lessons. *Breathe deeply, think clearly.* She could recite them in her sleep, but her mentor had never expected her to be staring down such emotions as were before her now. Swiftly, praying for strength, she built a defensive shield around herself. Now she could sense the emotions, but she wasn't driven by them. She knew they were there, but she couldn't feel them as vividly.

Jhoral pulled out the chair opposite the rebel and sat her down, never letting go of her hand. He stood behind her, his hand smoothing her tousled hair as if he had all the time in the world. Slowly, she opened her eyes.

The man facing her was easy to read. His emotions were so strong, she was bathed in them. She barely had to use her gift at all. He was first terrified and then angry. Underlying that was a deep sense of loathing that only seemed to grow the longer he stared up at Jhoral. Looking deeper, she saw a swirling bed of lies and uncertainty that was aimed not at his captors, but at himself. Drawing strength from Jhoral's touch, she sifted through the confusion, but all she could feel was the utter assurance in him that he'd done what was right.

"Lanai?"

She jumped, and Jhoral's mind touched hers, immediately steadying her. She suddenly realized that even though he'd never been taught, he had some instinctive talents as a receptor. To do what he'd just done, adding his strength to hers, was something only a trained receptor could do. So that meant he too was very strong. No wonder she'd chosen him.

"What do you sense?"

At his words, the man's eyes widened. Suddenly, she was slapped with such a wave of fear, Lanai could barely breathe. Her shield crumbled, and she swayed in her seat and had to fight to stay conscious.

Growling in reaction, Jhoral lifted her to his chest and held her tightly. He slid into the vacant chair, pulling her back into his lap. His touch gave her the strength to rebuild the wall of protection. The rebel gaped, completely shocked, and his suffocating fear grew stronger. Once Jhoral felt she was ready again, he used that to his advantage.

"Yes, she is an empath. And I am her mind-mate. I, a Farsaeen. You cannot hide the truth from us. So do everyone a favor and tell me what I want to know." The man just stared at him, and Jhoral smiled, showing his strong, sharp teeth. "How did you get in the city?"

Swallowing rapidly, the rebel's eyes flicked between Jhoral and Lanai. She felt his mind race as he tried to hide the information from her. But it was there, layered beneath the anger and fear. "*They came in through the cellars.*"

Jhoral lifted a brow. "The cellars, huh?" He ignored the rebel's startled gasp and turned to Dyas. "Do you know of these cellars?"

The younger prince frowned. "There are many cellars and tunnels in Orelia. We need something more specific."

Smiling politely, Jhoral fixed his otherworldly eyes on the frightened man. "Exactly *where* did you break in?"

Lanai gasped as another wave of hatred punched through her internal wall. She was just too tired to maintain it by herself, and Jhoral didn't know how to help. Something snapped inside her, and lifting her hand to her face, she found to her surprise her nose was bleeding. Surreptitiously, she wiped the trail of blood away as she once again rebuilt the inner shield. Jhoral could not know she was so weak. He might make her leave, and she refused to fail her mate now.

Using all her strength, she tried to dig deeper, but the man had hidden the knowledge beneath a horrid old children's rhyme he kept repeating in his head.

Pointy teeth, will give us grief, we must stay far away,

But when they come, to bring us down, we'll kill them where they play.

She pushed harder, her whole body shaking with the effort. More blood seeped from her nose, falling into her bunched fist. Tears filled her eyes as she acknowledged she wasn't as strong as she thought. Without Jhoral's help, she couldn't do what was needed. She had failed him. She was unable to dig the secret out. Her stomach rolled when she realized what she must do instead. Slowly, wondering how Jhoral would react, she looked up at her mate.

"I have to touch him."

Jhoral stared at her, his whole body tensing as every primitive part of him cried out in protest. He shook his head so hard his braided hair flew around him. "*No! I will not allow you to touch him. It is not acceptable.*"

The prisoner swore loudly, and he sprang to his feet, trying to get away. The guard holding him easily subdued the man with a knife to the throat, but the fear and anger in the room tripled. Jhoral could sense through Lanai the extreme emotions and wondered just how hard it was on her. She'd looked so tired, her colorful eyes a plain, dull blue. The thought of putting her anywhere close to that type of ugliness disgusted him.

"I cannot see what he knows," she said to him in mind-speak. "An empath has to touch a subject to be able to work."

"You didn't before," he argued.

"With strong emotions, I sometimes don't need to, but he is now hiding his secret under ridiculous rhymes and verse. He's deliberately concealing them. I am not strong enough. I'm sorry."

His hand caressed her cheek. "You don't need to be sorry." Staring at the sweating man across the table, he shook his head again. "I still won't allow it. Even I can sense how strong his hatred is. And you are tired. You could be hurt."

"Better me than your family."

Jhoral's eyebrows drew together in a deep frown when he noticed a small trail of blood at the side of her nose. Using a gentle finger, he wiped it away, sensing immediately what she was hiding the moment he did so. He swore aloud as guilt stabbed him. Lanai was much weaker than he thought. She'd tried to hide it from him, but now she was too tired to keep up the pretense. He might not know about being a receptor, but he did know how to protect. "No. You are already being hurt. This is over."

Her eyes turned the green of a new leaf. *"I will not give up. Use me, my mate. I must help you."*

He growled and showed her his bloody fingers. "I'm not a fool, Lanai. What you did before caused you to bleed inside. I know touching him will be too much for you. I will not sacrifice you. Not even for my whole family."

Her eyes filled with tears. *"I can help you. Don't give up on me."*

He crushed her to him. "I will never do that. But neither will I put you in danger if I can help it." Brushing away her tears, he turned reluctantly to Mistress Aleris. "Is there another way for her to read him without touching him?"

The mentor stepped forward. Her face was pale in the single light of the room. "It isn't normally done, but if an empath is strong enough, she can sense things through her receptor, instead of the other way around."

Jhoral's eyes narrowed. "Explain."

"An empath usually senses the emotion, reads it, and then gives the translation to her receptor. But in Lanai's case, she is strong enough to not only sense the emotion but read the thoughts behind it. She is not just an empath but has strong mind-reading tendencies." Mistress Aleris looked down at the smaller woman. "She is the most

powerful empath I've seen, and after working with her for as long as I have, I believe she is powerful enough to sense things through you."

He stroked Lanai's soft cheek as he thought it through. "So I will touch the man, and she will read him through me?"

The older woman nodded. "Yes. And that way, you will also be in the position to shield her from any harmful emotions. You can break the link if you see she is in danger of being overwhelmed. This is one of the first things a receptor learns, but you have not been trained, and it will be difficult for both of you." She shook her head. "Honestly, Prince Jhoral, this is one of the reasons I oppose this mind-melding. Hate-filled emotion is too dangerous...too unpredictable. Lanai is very strong, but the death and brutality you deal with could destroy her."

Lanai stirred in his lap, and her eyes turned violet. She stared at them both, and he sensed her resolve long before she spoke. "I would...rather die working with my mind-mate, than waste away...longing for him."

The fragile words spoken in that sweet, halting voice decided him. He touched her cheek as he met Mistress Aleris's eyes. "I will be cautious of her. But, I'll also take Lanai's words to heart. I will trust her strength in this. Tell me what I must do."

The mentor sighed and nodded. She gave him a quick lesson in how to erect the protective shield desired. He didn't understand all of it, but Lanai helped him, giving him word pictures of what he was being taught. His mind took it all in, rearranged it, and created a picture of a Farsaeon warrior standing guard over someone he had taken under his protection. By doing that, what was needed made more sense. After a few practice attempts, he took a deep breath.

"I think I have it." He looked down at the woman he held in his arms. "Are you ready, Lanai? I don't know if I will be able to completely protect you. You must be sure."

She smiled, her eyes serene. "I trust you. You will shield me."

Ignoring all around him, he bent and kissed her deeply. He ignored Dyas's suddenly troubled face and the total outrage on Mistress Aleris's. He only turned back to the prisoner who'd been watching them with a look of growing panic. "I give you one more chance. Tell me what I want to know."

The rebel swallowed hard, trying to bolster his flagging courage. He looked between Jhoral and Lanai and then sneered. "I would rather die a thousand deaths than tell you or your empath where anything!"

Fury shot through Jhoral, and his hand lashed out, sending the rebel flying from his chair. Coming to his feet, he dropped Lanai in the chair and strode around to the other side of the table. Jerking the prisoner up by the collar of his dirty tunic, he bared his teeth at him.

"You have spoken your last insult, my friend. When this is over, I will take great pleasure in killing you myself." He cocked his head. "And I'm sure you're aware a Farsaeon knows how to take a life in a variety of extremely painful ways."

The violence was terrifying. It wasn't until that exact moment did Lanai really understand what Jhoral was all about. A warrior was all well and good in a tale around the fireplace at night, but now she was faced with the actual man...and his deeds. In the meld, she had seen his brutal past, but it had been like a fast-moving story. You watched, but you didn't feel the full measure of emotion. She'd heard his threats in the council chambers, but those threats of death didn't seem real. Her sensitive heart cringed, suddenly terrified she might not be able to handle the emotions he would bring to her.

But she knew she couldn't change him. She wasn't even sure she really wanted to. He was too big, too full of life. No matter how scary he might be at times, she couldn't imagine him being any other way. It would be her duty to learn and somehow adapt to his violent ways.

She only hoped she could.

"Are you ready, Lanai?"

Her unruly thoughts were jerked back as the Farsaeen prince heaved the traitor back up into his chair. Dyas and one of the guards held him tightly, while Jhoral sat on the table between them. Her mate stretched out his hand to her, and she grasped it with both of hers. Their eyes met, and she gave a quick nod. Giving her a smile of reassurance, his big hand shot out to wrap around the man's throat.

The same wave of emotion went through her, but this time it was muted, as if she were feeling it through a thick fog. Jhoral was doing it. The surprise and then strain on his face told her he could feel the sensations just as she could. Even more so since he was the one channeling them to her. The anger and hatred still made her want to vomit in reaction, but she swallowed back the sickness and struggled to filter through the ugliness. It was time to search for the truth.

Praying again for strength, she stepped into the man's mind. His pain grabbed her, but as she'd been taught, she allowed it to roll off, not letting it find a place to hide. It was the only way an empath could stay sane. Either she shielded herself from disturbing emotions, or she became a conduit, letting them flow through her. Still, even with the training she'd had and Jhoral between them protecting her, it took a while to sift through everything she felt and take that next step closer to discovering what he was hiding.

Her eyes closed as she made the journey deeper inside the man. She could feel it all. Every emotion he'd ever had, it was like a kaleidoscope of pain and horror, a litany of joy and happiness. At heart, this rebel wasn't a bad man, but he'd allowed prejudice and hatred to twist his soul. Hoping to find some good, tangible thing, she was almost distracted by the love she discovered.

He adored his family and thought he was fighting to protect them. Tears escaped to run down her cheeks as she experienced that love and fear through him...*Telmas*. A single sob broke free before she could prevent it.

Once she discovered his secret, *Telmas* would die.

"Lanai?" Jhoral's familiar voice touched her mind. She could hear the strain in it. "Are you all right?" She nodded, trying to pull herself back to the duty at hand.

Turning away from the love, she searched for the blackness she'd seen before. Slowly, feeling each emotion drain her a little bit more, she examined him. Even with Jhoral's shielding, her nose began to bleed again, and she felt his concern, but she ignored him. Intent on the task before her, she wiped the trail away with a careless hand.

Suddenly, she felt the quick breath of fear in the captive. Darkness immediately swirled up and threatened to smother her with dank, cloying arms. Dread. Terror. The fear of discovery swirled around her with choking mists of panic. Pain assailed her, and her nose bled even faster. Steeling herself against the sensations, she dug deeper. The same children's verse assaulted her ears, but this time she disregarded it. Pushing harder, she peeled away the covering, and there, buried in a sludge of filthy lies, she finally exposed the truth. And what she saw frightened her more than this man ever could.

Moaning in agony, her eyes swirling with her rainbow power, she looked at Jhoral. *"They came in through the tunnels beneath the old court building. But those were destroyed in the attack."* Lanai took another shaky breath. *"He knows they have a secondary route beneath the city administrator's office. The next attack is planned for tomorrow night, at the third bell."*

Swearing, Jhoral glanced at Dyas and repeated the information. "That doesn't give us much time."

"Wait." She stopped him as he released the prisoner and made to stand. *"That's not all."* She turned to Dyas and spoke painfully. "The...city administrator's aide is a rebel sympathizer. He is the one who let them into the city. He is the one who will open the passageway during the next attack."

"One of the leaders?" Dyas said, aghast.

Lanai nodded, exhaustion flowing through her like a mesmerizing song. She had to force herself to continue. "The plan was to cause fear and panic with the first raid. It was meant to draw the troops away from the real objective and check the strength and capability of your soldiers. But they have another target." Her eyes went as dark as the midnight sky when she raised them again to Jhoral's.

"They are going to assassinate the entire royal house of Farsaea."

Chapter Seven

It didn't take Jhoral long to be ready to go. Once he'd heard Lanai's revelation, he dragged her out of the interrogation room, not even remembering his promise to kill the rebel. He'd given the information she'd gathered to King Freyan and received permission to go deal with the rebels as he saw fit. Then he fought with Dyas about going with him. The last thing Jhoral needed was to worry about taking care of his impetuous friend, and he had a feeling this battle was going to be very bad.

Now, as he stood next to his great Skyhawk, Carn, he glared at the other prince. "You should stay here with your father. This is why you brought my people here. To deal with your military issues. You've not been properly trained. You could get hurt."

Dyas snorted. "I'm not going to allow you to take on rebels from my own people. Not only is it cowardly, you should have one of us with you as you fight. My people will follow me, where they may still be unsure about an outsider."

Jhoral hated to admit that was sound thinking. Frowning fiercely, he tightened the flying strap on his soft saddle and smoothed any ruffled feathers. "Then you will listen to what I say. I'll have no heroes under my command."

"As you wish, Crown Prince." Dyas's mocking words made Jhoral grin. But as he glanced back at the castle where he'd left Lanai, his heart sank. It felt wrong to leave her, even though he knew it was for the best. She'd slumped into an exhausted sleep when he was making arrangements with the king, and Mistress Aleris offered to watch her while he was gone.

Seeing Lanai's condition, he knew he didn't have a choice. He couldn't allow her to be hurt any more than she had been. What she'd been through would have destroyed a weaker empath, he knew that instinctively. But it was like leaving a part of himself behind. A very important part, and he knew when she woke up she would be devastated he hadn't kept his promise to keep her with him.

Shaking his head, he motioned to the other two Sky-flyers to mount up. Just as he was about to help Dyas climb aboard Carn, he heard his name being called.

Turning, he saw Lanai staggering toward him. He swore aloud as she stumbled into his arms. "What are you doing here, little one? I left you safe with Mistress Aleris. She will see that you are cared for and get the rest you need."

Her tear-filled eyes looked like wet autumn leaves as they switched between gold and brown. "*You can't leave me,*" she mind-protested. "*You promised we would always be together.*"

He pulled her away and tenderly smoothed back her tangled hair. "Lanai, in the last twenty-four hours you have been through our mind-mating as well as its aftermath and confusion. Today I used you in an interrogation, something you weren't even trained to do." He switched to mind-speech. "*And I know our lovemaking earlier also tired you. Any other empath would be in an exhausted puddle on the floor. It is too much. I will not risk you hurting yourself.*"

Her shifting eyes grew even more panicked. "But what about you?" she whispered aloud before she shuddered and switched back to mind-speak. "*You have been through just as much. I don't want to lose you!*"

He frowned. "I am a warrior. I do not feel things the same way you do. I may be tired, but I can maintain. I can't take you with me into battle. You are too sensitive. Mistress Aleris is right in that. I saw the way you cringed dealing with one rebel. You could die having to deal with a hundred of them."

"*Don't you understand? I will die if you leave me!*" Her mind-shout didn't lack strength. "*Please. I'm afraid if you disappear, they will take me away. And I will never see you again.*"

"Don't say such a thing," he growled, pulling her against him again. "I will be back. But I'm sorry, I must do what I think is best. You can't come. It would be too hard on you."

Lanai's beautiful lips trembled, and her fear and hurt beat at him. He suddenly felt like the slime on the bottom of a Farsaeon *lyg-slug*. Guilt battled with the sure knowledge he was doing right by leaving her. She wasn't in any shape for a journey. She wasn't strong enough. By the gods, after all they'd been through, *he* was barely able to stand up. A trip would be too difficult for a fragile empath. He knew he'd made the right decision. He knew he was right. So why then did it feel so damn wrong?

His thoughts were halted when Mistress Aleris came hurrying up. The older woman was panting loudly, and she looked annoyed. She bowed to Jhoral. "I'm sorry, Your Highness. She got away from me. I thought she was sleeping."

Jhoral's eyes narrowed. "She is not a prisoner, Mistress. She is to be treated with all respect as a member of the Farsaeon royal house. Lanai will sleep in my room and be given every freedom. Do you understand me?"

The mentor's face reddened, and her eyes slid away from his. "Y-yes, Prince Jhoral. I will do as you request."

"Please," Lanai begged, her hands clutching at him wildly. "Don't leave me. I won't make it without you."

Swallowing the huge knot in his throat, he pulled Lanai away and carefully handed her to Mistress Aleris. Her heartbroken eyes and inner weeping made his gut clench, but he sent her soothing thoughts and tried to ignore the other emotions swirling around them. This was what he had to do. It was for the best.

Turning, he motioned to a frowning Dyas. "We go." He boosted the other prince aboard Carn, then leaped up himself. Only then did he turn back to Lanai. "I will be back very soon, telaer. Do not worry. Stay in our room and rest. And make sure you eat something. I want you strong and well when I return." He flashed a sexy grin, then spoke to her in his mind. *"Plus, I want you healthy enough to teach you more about lovemaking. I have several new lessons in mind for you."*

She only gazed at him, her pain apparent in her vivid eyes. Tears ran unceasingly down her cheeks. She wouldn't say another word.

Feeling as if the guilt would weigh him down if he didn't move quickly, Jhoral bent and spoke in Carn's ear. The big bird screeched, and with a single beat of his wings, they lifted up into the air. The last glimpse he got of Lanai was her dropping to her knees and holding her arms out to him in hopeless need.

* * * * *

Lanai ignored Mistress Aleris's fussing and complaining as she walked slowly back to Jhoral's room. She was exhausted and heartsick and utterly terrified that she would never see her mind-mate again. Being separated so soon after melding made her feel as if a jagged hole had been rent in her soul. She ached all over and felt the emptiness of her loss tear into her like broken shards of crystal. She wanted to scream out her pain, and it was only the presence of her old mentor that made her keep her thoughts to herself.

"Once you have slept you'll understand that Prince Jhoral did the best thing for you. It isn't meant to be, my girl. No empath can stand the type of strain you are under. Not even one as strong as you."

Shaking her head, Lanai almost tripped over a rug as she stepped into the hallway. "He is my mind-mate. I should be with him."

Mistress Aleris snorted. "It is a good thing the barbarian is more intelligent than you are. You could be killed, Lanai. Don't you understand that?"

"I understand without him I will die."

The older woman's brows creased. "You must stop talking like that. Everything will be all right. I will see to it."

Lanai was so tired she barely heard her. As she pushed open the door to Jhoral's room, she only shook her head. "I will not truly rest until I am again at his side. It is what you taught me, my lady. How can I do anything else?"

"You remember only what serves you," the mentor muttered. She watched as the younger woman staggered across the room and fell facedown on the large, comfortable bed. Sighing, she lifted a blanket from atop a carved chest at the foot of the bed and spread it over the sleeping empath. "And soon you won't remember even that."

Lanai awoke abruptly, her heart pounding and her mouth dry with fear. Instinctively, she went perfectly still, knowing something was very wrong. After a moment of confusion, she let down her inner shields and slowly stretched out her senses. It was difficult—she was so very tired—but after a few long moments, she felt the faint touch of another mind.

Had Jhoral returned to her? Her heart leaped in joy. But just as suddenly, she knew it wasn't him, and her whole body contracted in fear. What she felt was not her mind-mate, but another person all together. One who was trying to surreptitiously connect with her while they thought she was unconscious.

Shuddering, she carefully built back her shields. She was lucky the other empath was so heavy-minded. Her attempt at a melding was like fingernails on a chalkboard and had immediately woken Lanai up.

But what she didn't understand was why. Why would anyone try to meld with her? That type of bonding only happened in cases of illness or injury. Lanai wasn't hurt, she was only tired from the mating, and with Jhoral gone it was even harder for her to regain her strength.

Curious now, she eased out of bed and followed the psychic touch. She was surprised to feel the person right outside the door. Frowning, she laid her hand against the carved wood and carefully opened up her senses again.

She was shocked to "see" Mistress Aleris, Lord Merin, and two of the training house guards outside. With them stood an older empath, Wescaa, one of the unlucky few whose receptors had died before she did. Once that happened, the receptor's family had sent the empath back to the facility. They had no further need for her, even though she'd been part of their family for almost fifty years.

Lanai thought it terribly heartless.

But what was Wescaa doing? Why was she trying to connect with her? They were both empaths. Lanai felt again the gentle nudge and carefully pushed it away. Until she understood why, she would open her mind for no one but Jhoral. Instead, she expanded her senses, trying to hear what they were saying. It took a few moments to adjust to the correct psychic frequency. Since it was something she'd only done in practice, she was very careful. The last thing she wanted to do was collapse because she'd overused her gifts.

But what she heard frightened her more than Jhoral's leaving. By the gods, she thought. Now what am I going to do? Putting her forehead against the door, she took a deep breath and listened.

"Have you connected yet?" Mistress Aleris's voice seemed tired. "You are a much more experienced empath, Wescaa. You should be able to connect and guide Lanai easily. What is taking so long?"

"She is blocking me, even in her sleep." The empath sounded testy. "You didn't tell me how strong she was."

"Can you do it?" The deeper tone of Lord Merin was heard. "We have to take her before she wakes up."

Lanai started to tremble. She had a hunch where this was going, and it wasn't good. Closing her eyes, she listened again.

"I can meld with her, but it may take a while. If I rush, she will wake up, and then you'll have to do it the hard way."

"Continue then," the mentor told Wescaa. "But if you can't do it quickly, we will have to slip in and use the mind drugs. I would prefer not to do that. In an empath as strong as Lanai, I don't know how her senses will react."

"It has to be done," stated Lord Merin pompously. "We have to undo this so-called melding. I will not allow our way of life to be destroyed by an outsider. We may have gone to bed with Farsaea, but we will not allow them to choose what sheets we sleep on."

"As you wish," agreed the empath. "I will do my best."

Jerking away from the door, Lanai put her hand to her mouth. They were going to drug her. Force her to repudiate Jhoral *and* their mating. Again, she sensed Wescaa's gentle knocking and had to fight not to scream out her rage and fear. Taking a deep breath, she called on her control and psychically yawned and rolled over in her mind. To the other empath, it would look as if she was sleeping too deeply to awaken.

But how was she to escape? Lanai didn't doubt for a moment that Mistress Aleris and Lord Merin would do what they threatened and take her by force. They didn't care about the truth. They were both too hidebound to accept it.

Whirling around, she made for the window. Her fingers dug into the sill, and tears burned when she realized she wasn't on the ground floor. Panic shot through her, but instinctively she used her gift to calm herself. If Wescaa sensed she was awake, Mistress Aleris and company might break down the door and psychically rip Jhoral and her apart by destroying their mind-meld. If they tried that, she would fight them, and all hell would really break loose.

Carefully, she leaned out the window and tried to judge how far it was to the ground. Could she jump? She was in good shape, but if she broke an ankle, she wouldn't be able to get away. She sniffed, suddenly feeling alone and lost. Where was Jhoral when she needed him?

It was almost too much. Empaths weren't trained to make decisions on their own. She was used to being told what to do and when to do it. But here she was, in a life-and-death situation, and she felt crippled by distress and insecurity. She wasn't ready for any of this. What should she do? How could she save herself?

Breathe deeply, think clearly.

The mantra steadied her, and she took another look out the window. This time, she saw to the left of it a large tree. Hope rose in her. A branch big enough to easily handle her slight weight stretched out toward her. Could she reach it?

She really had no other choice. She had to be brave and attempt an escape. She would rather die than lose that connection with her mind-mate.

Slipping on her shoes, she crawled up onto the windowsill. It took her several heart-stopping seconds to deal with the vertigo, but finally she was able to leap off the sill and onto the sturdy branch. As she crawled along the rough wood and then shimmied down the broad trunk, she had to smile. It was lucky she *wasn't* a normal empath. Normal empaths hadn't spent a good deal of their childhood hiding in trees.

Once at the bottom, she knelt among the gnarled roots and looked around. She was in a courtyard, and she could see the Melding Sphere to the right, which meant the training house was to the left. Lanai nibbled on her lower lip in consternation. Where should she go? To the king? Would he help her?

She shook her head. No. She couldn't trust he would believe her over the nobles. She was only an empath and a rogue one at that, since she'd chosen a Farsaeen as a receptor. No matter how he might trust Jhoral, she was an unknown to the king.

But who else would help her? None of the empaths she'd trained with would incur the wrath of the council and hide her until her mind-mate returned. And her parents weren't an option. She didn't belong to them anymore. Fear welled up again when she realized she had no place to go...no one who would help her.

A deeper mind-nudge brought her thoughts back to the people in the palace. She had to get away before they understood she was gone. She had to find somewhere safe. Somewhere she would be protected.

Her heart turned over in her breast when she caught sight of a set of stars twinkling on the horizon. Hope flared and longing burned deep inside her. She knew what they were. Jhoral had pointed them out to her as they were dressing.

"See those stars," he'd said. "Those are where my family is. In the town of Orelia."

She'd stared at him in bemusement. *"Your family is off-world?"*

Jhoral laughed. *"No, telaer. Sky-warriors use the stars to guide them when we fly at night. That semicircle of stars? They are called The Goddess's Smile. If I head toward it, I am going northeast. They will guide me back to the gateway city. The stars always shine the way."*

Looking up at the beckoning lights, Lanai knew suddenly what she must do. If she was looking for safety and protection, there was only one place on the planet where she'd find them.

She needed to go to Jhoral.

* * * * *

There was something wrong. Dyas knew it. Jhoral had gotten more and more edgy as the miles passed, and the bird they were riding on seemed to feel it as well. The Skyhawk's back was knotted with tension, and he often looked back over his powerful shoulder at his master. As Dyas watched, he could see the older prince glancing around as if he was looking for something. After several long minutes of watching his friend, he'd begun having that feeling too.

"What's going on?" he finally asked. "What do you see?"

Jhoral's silver eyes glowed in the light of the moon as he glanced back at Dyas. "All is as it should be."

"Don't give me that." Dyas frowned at him. "I know you well enough to see something is wrong."

Jhoral's lips tightened. "It is nothing. At least I hope it is nothing."

"Talk it through," Dyas suggested. "You don't have *feelings* without them meaning something. Are we being watched?"

"No." The dark prince shook his head, a frustrated look on his face. "It is hard to explain, but as odd as it sounds, I can sense something is wrong."

Dyas looked at the night sky. "Your instincts are usually right. That's one of the reasons I didn't find it strange for you to meld with Lanai. Your intuition is almost preternatural."

"Don't say that out loud," Jhoral grumbled. "It will be difficult enough to explain the melding to my father. Let's not confuse him with any other so-called gifts."

Laughing, Dyas pounded his friend's back. "You have my word. But don't disparage those gifts. They have served you well. Now, tell me what you feel."

Jhoral sighed, finally giving in. "I didn't say anything because I don't know if I'm just missing Lanai or if I'm really sensing something is wrong. All I can tell you is I am uneasy."

"Is it Lanai?"

New worry shot through Jhoral at Dyas's words. "I don't know. That is what makes it so hard. Am I feeling this because we are separated? Or is this a warning I should follow?"

Dyas pushed his long hair out of his face and frowned. "Follow your instincts, my friend. If Lanai weren't a part of this, what would you do?"

The truth spilled from his lips before he could stop it. "Go back. I would go back and see what is wrong."

"Then you have your answer."

"But my family...the rebels."

"Send one of the Skyhawks ahead with the information. Your father can deal with searching out the traitors and getting the defenses set up. The attack isn't until tomorrow. We can go back and check on things and still have time to reach Orelia."

"And if I'm leading us on a wild-*waani* chase?"

His friend grinned. "Then I'll have something new to razz you about."

Jhoral sighed again. Everything in him wanted to turn back, but he was torn between duty and instinct. He knew there was something wrong, but because he couldn't see it, his logical mind said to continue on the path he'd set out. How much of this was longing to have Lanai in his arms, and how much was his instinct identifying a real concern, he didn't know.

Then the feeling came again, this time even stronger. He knew he couldn't pretend there was nothing there. Waving his arm at the other Sky-flyers, he motioned for them to land.

Once there, he picked the fastest of the Skyhawkls and told its rider what the captured rebel had revealed. Minutes later the bird was gone, the vital information on its way to the Farsaeen king.

"Better now?"

Looking over at the Kylian prince, Jhoral nodded. "If heading back is a hopeless quest, at least my father will have the information he needs to begin protecting the city and its people."

"Are you feeling anything else?"

Concentrating, Jhoral cast out his senses the best he could. "Not really. Just that same sense of unease coupled with urgency. It is almost palatable. Let us fly. I would see if I am going crazy or not."

* * * * *

Lanai forced herself past thick tree branches in the darkened forest. She was cold, exhausted, and frightened, but what was behind her was even scarier, so she pushed on into the unknown. Every once in a while she was able to see through the treetops and get a glimpse of the constellation Jhoral had pointed out.

"Please, goddesses," she whispered when a loud crashing in the bushes made her climb the nearest tree. "Please keep smiling so I can see you."

She'd been traveling for almost two hours. Once she'd gotten out of the courtyard and into the woods, she'd breathed a little easier, but eventually she had lost contact with the empath trying to steal into her mind. Lanai knew as soon as that happened, Mistress Aleris would be aware she was out of their range and had been fooling them all along. She was sure they would come after her, and if they found her before she got to Jhoral, the punishment would be beyond terrifying. Just the thought made her move even quicker.

Her narrow gray dress was difficult to walk in, and it was with no regret she ripped the side of it to the hip, just as her mind-mate had done the night before. In the pale pink moonlight, her naked leg glowed, but it made it much easier to move through the twisted and tangled paths.

Night birds called, and she could hear the sounds of animals snuffling in the scrub brush near her, but she forced herself to ignore it. She focused only on Jhoral. If she could get to him, she would finally be safe. Once she was in his arms, this nightmare would be over.

Only once did she allow herself to be angry with him. He shouldn't have left her. He'd broken his promise and put her under the control of the one person who could destroy them both. A part of her wanted to scream out her rage at him for being so stupid. She wanted to pound on his chest and kick his shins until he understood how wrong he'd been.

But then she forced herself to look at it from her mind-mate's point of view. She had been exhausted and probably looked as if she couldn't make the journey. He may not have trusted Mistress Aleris, but the king had also felt Lanai should stay behind. The prince would take his words and believe them.

He couldn't know that being separated would be so hard on them both. Again, he hadn't been trained. He had no idea the physiological and psychological effect being apart would have. And since Mistress Aleris had been planning treachery, she wouldn't have explained that being divided so soon after the melding could do irreparable damage to both empath and receptor.

But that was all in the past. She would help Jhoral learn everything he needed to know. He couldn't be allowed to continue working in the dark. He might not be a "normal" receptor, but he was smart and quick and careful. He wouldn't make the same mistake twice. She'd make sure of it.

But she had to find him first.

* * * * *

"What are you sensing now?" Dyas called out over the rushing wind. Jhoral was pushing Carn harder now, and the faster air currents made it difficult to talk.

"The same, only stronger." Jhoral's whole being was intent on the feelings guiding him. He wasn't sure how he was doing it, but he knew he was following the uneasy feeling back to its source. What bothered him was, it wasn't coming from the palace or even Audera anymore. Instead it was coming from the thick forest that surrounded it. Had a contingent of rebels gotten past the outer fortresses? Was an upcoming attack what he was feeling?

He didn't say any of that to Dyas. It would only worry the Kylian prince. Instead he focused on discerning exactly what it was he was feeling. He could sense fear, anger, and now pain, but why and whom it all belonged to were still a mystery to him.

Yet in the middle of it all, he kept seeing Lanai's tear-wet face as he flew away from her. Was his guilt at leaving her behind making him add her into the mix? It didn't make sense, but still, the nearer they got to the source of the urgency, the more he thought of his mind-mate.

Closer and closer they flew, until the emotions tangling around him grew so strong he could barely think, let alone figure out what was wrong. Carefully he traced the cause of his unease to an area of dense forest right below them. His eyes flashed with warrior coldness as he signaled Carn and the other Skyhawk to dive. By the goddesses, he would find the reason for his disquiet, and then he would end it...forever.

* * * * *

Lanai huddled between two broken, dead trees and stared into the darkened clearing. She sat frozen in terror, her wrenched ankle aching, her pounding heart so loudly she was sure they could hear it back at the castle. She swallowed back a scream, wondering how long she had to live. The creature feeding had thus far ignored her, but she knew it couldn't last.

She shivered in disgust as the huge beast bit off the head of its unlucky victim. Blood gushed as massive jaws crunched through the skull with such ease she was awed. Or might have been had she not been afraid she was next on the menu.

The *mogwraith* slobbered out bits of flesh and bone, then dropped its unwieldy head back to the long-legged *karaar* it was feasting on. Lanai shuddered as the smell of death filled the air. Her senses were on overload, and her terror made it difficult to function. She had seen pictures of this most ferocious beast, but this was the first – and she hoped the last – time she'd see one in person.

It stood taller than any man, even squatted down on all four of its trunklike legs. Its huge feet were the size of dinner plates, and its muscular body was covered in thick, whiplike fur that stuck out in all directions. Tusks similar to a boar protruded from its gaping mouth, and large lidless eyes the color of a murky shadow proclaimed it was a night hunter.

Just her luck that it was hunting her.

But earlier, as the monster chased her down a crooked path and into this secluded glade, the hapless *karaar* had leaped out in front of it. Distracted, and not willing to miss any meal, the *mogwraith* had batted the animal to the ground and quickly killed it. Terrified beyond belief, Lanai had used the opportunity to duck behind some downed trees as she searched for another way out of the clearing.

Instead, she found herself trapped as the feeding creature carried the carcass over to block the only path. Whatever chance she had of leaving was now completely blocked off, the only way out, through the tough bushes and sharp brambles behind her. The inhuman eyes stared back at her as it munched messily. Every movement she made was tracked, every shaky breath watched. It knew she was there, and the pitiless gaze frightened her more than anything else she'd seen or heard.

She swallowed heavily. It was only because she'd heard those sounds in the night that she was in this mess. Sure that Mistress Aleris's guards had found her, she'd bolted through the dark forest, her panic overwhelming her common sense. Her psychic senses

had shut down in fear, and all she'd gotten for her trouble were an injured ankle and a chance to be a monster's dessert. At least she'd gotten away from those chasing her. Even they wouldn't mess with a mogwraith. Not that that was any consolation.

But she couldn't give up. Even though she was more scared than she'd ever been. Even if it did seem hopeless. She had to be strong. She had to survive and find Jhoral. Trying to ignore the slobbering animal in front of her, her gaze darted around for an avenue of escape.

Lanai had just picked a spot in the scrub line where she thought she could slip through unnoticed, when she suddenly heard a sound behind her. Shocked that anything could get so close to her without her sensing it, she tried to retreat. But too late. A hand snaked out from the bushes and covered her mouth as an arm wrapped around her and pulled her silently into the gloom.

She was captured.

Chapter Eight

Jhoral was no stranger to fear. He'd felt it a thousand times in battle. He was accustomed to the coppery taste and the bowel-wrenching shock when it came at you unawares. He enjoyed the rush of adrenaline that went through you with the speed of a lightning bolt. As a warrior, he knew how to channel it, to use it to fight and destroy his enemies.

But never before had he experienced the type of bone-crushing terror he'd felt when he swooped down low over the dark forest on Carn and seen his mind-mate running from a howling, slaving mogwraith. This vicious beast, one even the most experienced hunters avoided, was so close to Lanai he knew she must feel its harsh breath on her neck.

It was only luck she was still alive. Their almost-soundless flight over the treetops had still managed to startle a nearby karaar, whose unlucky leap into the mogwraith's jaws had surely saved Lanai's life. She had been but a breath away from being rent limb from limb.

She was still in danger. Her crouched position near the downed snags was no protection from the beast. And Jhoral could sense her pain, in long, sickening waves that kept flowing over her as she shivered in agony. Knowing she was injured made all his protective instincts flare even hotter. He wanted to rush at the creature terrorizing her and destroy it, but even his warrior strength couldn't guarantee success against a full-grown mogwraith. So instead, he turned to another weapon.

Stealth.

Leaving Carn and the other Skyhawk behind, he, Dyas, and Pnerot – the other Sky-flyer – crept through the forest. It was a slow and painful procedure, their hair and clothes catching on thorns and scrub brambles, their hands and knees bloodied by the rough and rocky ground. It felt as if it took forever to crawl to where Lanai sat cringing

against the dead logs. The mogwraith chewed steadily, its glowing eyes fixed on the woman before him. It was in no hurry. Its instincts said the prey was trapped.

Jhoral eased as close to his mate as possible, surprised she wasn't responding to any of his mind-calls. Had she been hurt worse than he thought? A brain injury, perhaps? He was both terrified and angry, but right now he had to focus on saving her. He'd figure out why she was running around in the forest when they were safe.

He had to time it perfectly. He would have to spirit her away when the mogwraith wasn't looking. The creature may be extremely vicious, but it was also quite blind, drawn only to sudden movement and scent. They were lucky Lanai had chosen a refuge downwind from the beast, otherwise they all would have been discovered.

Time dragged, and his tension grew as more and more of the karaar disappeared into the mogwraith's gullet. Only after several heart-pounding minutes had passed did the monster finally look away. Quickly, Jhoral moved, sliding through the scratchy bushes and snatching Lanai back to him. Her startled cry was muffled by his hand over her mouth as he pulled her hard against him, protecting her from the sharp thorns surrounding them. His intent gaze never left the hairy creature in the glade, praying to every god and goddess listening that it wouldn't see that its meal had disappeared.

Ignoring Lanai's struggles and the painful prick of the brambles, he slid backward through the scrub, motioning to Dyas and Pnerot to move as well. His ears strained as he listened for the mogwraith's movements, but it seemed luck was with them. They had gotten away unseen.

Finally, when they'd put more than half a mile between them and the monster, he called a halt. Spinning Lanai around, he crushed her against him, rejoicing in the feel of his mind-mate against him. His body ached, and his cock stiffened in sudden need. It wasn't until that moment did he realize how empty and alone he'd felt without her. Empath or lover, he wasn't sure whom he needed more, but it really didn't matter now that he had her in his arms.

"Lanai," he murmured, his fear and anger bleeding into overwhelming relief. "By the goddesses, you scared the *caer* out of me."

Lanai was so shocked when she saw Jhoral, she couldn't move or speak. She just let him hug her to him as she tried to understand what was happening. Her mind whirled in confusion. She'd been so sure it was one of Mistress Aleris's guards who'd pulled her away from the mogwraith. She had teetered between terror and thanksgiving, knowing those who had chased her had found her.

But it wasn't. It was Jhoral who had saved her. Tears filled her eyes as her surprise receded, and with a little cry of joy, she wrapped her arms around her mind-mate's waist and held on tight. She had found him. They were together again. The moon goddesses *had* been watching over her.

Suddenly, Jhoral pulled away from her and gave her a hard shake. Anger filled his face. "What are you doing out here? Why aren't you back at the palace? Were you following us? By the gods, woman, don't you know how dangerous that is?"

Looking over his strong shoulder, Lanai could see Prince Dyas's concerned face. She opened her mouth to tell them the truth, but then it dawned on her if she were to tell her mind-mate what had happened he would be furious. So angry in fact, he would want to go back and confront Mistress Aleris and Lord Merin. But if Jhoral did that, he might not be able to save his family.

It only took her a heartbeat to make her decision. She was safe and out of her mentor's clutches. There would be time later for an explanation as to why she was in the forest. Only if he tried to send her back would she share the truth now. Taking a deep breath, she smiled hesitantly up at her mate. "I-I was missing you. I needed to be with you."

Jhoral stared at her like she was crazy. "*That's* why you are out here? Because you didn't want to stay behind? Do you know how insane that is? You could have been killed, Lanai. You have no idea what is out here."

She shuddered as she thought of the mogwraith's merciless eyes. "I do now."

He embraced her again, this time lifting her off her feet in his attempt to get closer. "I think I lost ten years of my life seeing you running from that thing. Damn it, you must promise to obey me from now on. You are too gentle and are untrained for situations like this. I will not lose you. Do you hear me?"

Snuggling closer, she breathed in his unique sent. His touch sent arrows of heat shooting through her. It made her feel both needy and relieved at the same time. "I hear you, my mind-mate. Just keep me with you, and you won't have this problem again." The picture of Mistress Aleris and the others flashed in her mind, and she shivered. But she was under Jhoral's protection now. She had to remember they could no longer hurt her.

Instantly he stiffened, and she felt him probing her thoughts as he pulled away again. "What is it? What are you hiding?" His silver eyes searched hers. "You aren't telling me everything, I can feel it."

Lanai buried the memory of her fear. His family was more important than what she'd gone through this night. He had to explain to his father about the danger, and he couldn't do that by standing here in the forest. She was fortunate he'd found and saved her, but now it was time to move on...to be concerned with other things. She lifted her chin and met his eyes. "It is nothing. Please, Jhoral. I swear to you it is nothing important. We are together, and all is well." She looked at Dyas and the other man and then shyly smiled again. "Shouldn't we be going to Orelia?"

Jhoral knew there was something she wasn't telling him. She was shaking with fatigue and remnants of fear, but her will was just as strong as his. Whatever she was hiding, it would have to wait. He did need to get to his family. Staring down at her

lovely face, he suddenly knew if he were to take her back to the palace, she was just stubborn enough to come after him again on her own. Mogwraith or not.

And for some reason, deep inside, he was relieved she was here. It didn't make sense, but there it was. He didn't want to be parted from her. Maybe she was meant to go with him after all. Fate had already dealt them several wild cards. Who said more couldn't be tossed out?

"Shdok," he mind-spoke her. *"Will you always be this hard to handle?"*

"Only when I have no other choice," she shot back, her face filling with hope.

Cradling her chin in his hand, he gave her a hard kiss. "I must be crazy to even say this, but I can't help it. I'm glad you're here."

Her eyes glowed a brilliant sapphire blue. Jhoral was beginning to understand the colors now. They changed with her moods. Turning to Dyas, he shrugged. "She is coming as well."

The other prince lifted a surprised eyebrow. "Are you sure we shouldn't return her to the castle? We don't know what we are walking into."

He felt Lanai tense and automatically soothed her. "I will not take her back. She'll just come after me again."

Dyas snorted derisively. "And you thought *I* wasn't ready?"

"The mogwraith comes." Pnerot appeared from where he'd been checking their trail. "It is tracking your lady. The creature moves slow, but it will soon be here."

Jhoral tensed but nodded. He turned to Dyas. "Stop worrying and go with Pnerot. You will ride with him on the other bird."

Turning back to Lanai, he didn't even see the other men leave to walk the short distance back to the Skyhawks. He focused only on his mind-mate.

Her face was glowing with happiness as she cuddled closer. "I will not get in the way. I promise."

"Yes, you will." His fingers caressed her cheek with an intimacy that made Lanai blush. His body reacted to her sweet shyness, and he fought again for control. Ignoring the telltale aching in his groin, he lifted her in his arms and strode after the other men. "But I wouldn't have it any other way. I do want you with me, telaer. I was just afraid of hurting you."

"Being separated would hurt worse. Mistress Aleris should have told you that part."

He frowned at that. "It could damage you? No. She didn't mention that."

Lanai's eyes slid away, and he felt her block his thoughts. It sent his protective instincts racing. Something had happened. Something to do with her old mentor. Perhaps that was what she was hiding from him. "Lanai —"

"No, my mind-mate." She prevented him from speaking by placing her fingers against his mouth. "Not now. Now we need to help your family."

He was frustrated with her refusal to share with him, but a part of him knew she was right. Whatever it was could wait. She was safe now and back under his protection. He caught her hand and kissed it. "This is not over, little one. Later we will talk again."

She nodded. "As you wish. But now you have something more important to do." When they arrived back where the two Skyhawks were waiting, her eyes widened at the sight of the huge creatures. Jhoral saw her trepidation and carried her close to the big bird he partnered with.

"This is Carn," he said with a smile. "I raised him from a fledgling."

"Is...is he tame?"

Chuckling, he shook his head. "No. He is not a tame bird. He is a Mountain Hawk, one of the fiercest creatures on the planet. He is disciplined and chooses to work with me, but he is not tame." He thought a moment, then put his finger under Lanai's chin. "Like someone else I know."

Lanai's cheeks went even pinker, but then she tossed her head. "I don't mind being compared to Carn." She reached out a trembling hand to stroke the amber-colored wing tips. The bird crooned, and her eyes widened. A smile curled her lips. "*You see...it's all in how you touch us.*"

A flash of memory went through Jhoral. He and Lanai on his bed back at the Kylian palace, their bodies entwined. Her earthy cries sending his desire skyrocketing. His body reacted yet again, and he swore. This time aloud. It was never good to ride aroused, and he hadn't thought about his cock when he'd agreed to take her with him.

Willing himself to cool down, he picked her up and sat her sidesaddle on Carn's back. Then he vaulted up behind her. Frowning down at her thin clothes, noting the new tear in her ugly gray gown, he took off his flight jacket and wrapped it around her. He could handle the cold, while she wouldn't.

Taking a length of thin hide he used to tie bundles and packages onto Carn's saddle, he carefully wrapped the cord around him and Lanai, pulling her tight into the cradle of his thighs. His body reacted again, and he gritted his teeth. Better he ride aroused than worry about her falling off. Brushing his lips over the top of her head, he realized she felt very right in his arms.

"Once we are up and flying," he said quietly, "try and take a nap. We are lashed together so you can't fall. Rest if you can."

She nodded and, with a sigh, snuggled against him. Jhoral was only partly surprised when her body sagged. Lanai was already asleep. He grinned, and looking around at the others, he lifted a hand into the air.

"*Let us fly!*"

* * * * *

Lanai woke to the sound of the wind streaming over her. It was a soothing sound, even though it made her ears tingle and her nose cold. She glanced down and then

immediately closed her eyes. She was flying...in the sky. It hadn't been a dream. She was actually riding a Skyhawk in the arms of her warrior mind-mate.

Well, she'd dreamed of adventure.

Opening one eye at a time, she gazed down over the forests and hills rushing beneath them. In the distance she could see flickering lights and wondered if that was their destination. As she grew accustomed to how high she was, she looked around again.

Carn's great wings beat strongly, each lift sending them soaring over the wind currents. It was exhilarating, making her want to laugh out loud. This was the way to travel. No plodding along a dirt road for her anymore. She was a flyer...just like her mate. Lanai hugged herself in joy.

Her gaze rested on the flying animal below her. The hawk was enormous – several tall men long and half a man wide. His body was cream colored with slashes of pale and dark browns intermingled. Wing tips were the color of amber, as were his fierce eyes. His head was stark white with a beak of pure black. Feathery legs – she'd seen them before mounting – were a dark umber color with sharp black talons. He was everything Jhoral said he was...wild, strong, and free.

She looked up at her mind-mate and smiled. And he was a perfect master for such a powerful creature. They were one of a kind. Jhoral was as wild and free as his steed, and she prayed again their melding would stand strong. She longed to be a part of his world, even if it meant changing her own. His strength, protectiveness, and tender care were all she'd ever dreamed of but never expected to find. She sent a prayer of thanksgiving winging up to the moon gods for being given such a man to love.

Lanai blinked. Love? She loved Jhoral? Her whole body tensed, and she suddenly had trouble breathing. The words scurried around her brain like a tiny, furry *mithes*, the sharp claws of shock ripping through her mind. What was she thinking? She couldn't be in love with him. Love was not a part of melding. You cared for your receptor, of course. Pairings were not created without it. But to love them? That she'd never heard of.

She'd spoken to dozens of empaths and their receptors as she'd trained, and while she'd found respect and even genuine liking for their mind-mate, she'd never seen it turn to a deeper emotion such as love. In most pairings, there was a restraint. Sometimes by nature, other times by the receptor's family. And while the empath became part of the family, they were also always separate. She had thought that sad.

But were the emotions she felt with Jhoral...love? How could they be? They barely knew each other. They had shared their minds – and, yes, their bodies – but she was not designed for such things, no matter how much she may long for them. Jhoral would someday find a life-mate, and she... The thought trailed off as a wave of misery rolled through her. The idea of him with someone else made her want to weep, and she fought back sudden tears. She'd just found him herself. What they had together was the most important thing in her life. She didn't want to share him with anyone else.

"I can hear you thinking." His deep voice made her jump. "And I sense they are troubling thoughts. Sorry you came?"

Hiding her painful musings away, she shook her head. "I was wondering when we would arrive."

He dropped a kiss on her head and switched to mind-speech to better communicate over the racing wind. *"Soon. You see the brightest light? There...on the horizon?"*

She nodded.

"That is the main clock tower in Orelia. We will set down just inside the gates nearby. Another messenger was sent ahead, so I am hoping he has already spoken to my father. I have no wish to start a panic, but we must see what the situation is."

"Perhaps I could have learned more from the rebel."

Jhoral frowned. "No. I didn't want you near him any longer than necessary. I felt like I needed a bath after touching him, so I can only imagine how you felt."

Lanai thought of the dirt and other things she'd crawled through in the forest. "A bath sounds good."

She felt his sudden desire as if it were her own. "I will enjoy washing your back...among other things."

Burying her flushed face in his chest, she wasn't surprised by the chuckle that rumbled up out of him. She punched him gently. "I still have difficulty believing what we did was in any way normal for a melded pair. But I am glad it happened...with you."

He lifted her chin so their eyes met. The heat in his eyes made her go warm inside. "As am I. Normal or not, what we have is very important." He cocked his head curiously. "I know in some societies, same-sex matings are common, but with my people life-mates are always male and female. But I wasn't sure about an empath and receptor. Are you sure they do not share their bodies? During the melding or any other time?"

Lanai shook her head. "I have never heard of it being so."

"And afterward? As intimate as the melding is, they don't wish to get closer? How can that be?"

"As I said before," Lanai mind-spoke hesitantly, "our mating was unique. We know that. The emotional melding between an empath and her receptor is strong, but since it is never spoken of, it's hard to know what happens with each pairing."

"Somehow I have difficulty believing those pairs I watched at the ceremony were transported to a bed in a faraway land to make sweet love to each other. Or spent last night in the way we did." He bent and brushed a kiss across her lips. "Don't you?"

Her heart skipped a beat. "I suppose. What I feel for you is so different and unexpected. My whole life changed the second I saw you."

His silver eyes burned. "As did mine. I went from not believing in psychic powers, to being a part of one. Many of my people will think I've gone mad."

"You are not crazy!"

Jhoral smiled. *"No. And we will show all who doubt us just what we are to each other. We have already shown them we can work together. Even though I am a warrior and a barbarian prince. The interrogation of the rebel made all of them see us differently. Our melding may have started in the mind, but it soon involved our bodies as well. We are one. In every way that matters. And that is just the beginning."*

"I don't understand," Lanai whispered, feeling the desire whirl up in him again. *"You have my mind and my body. I am your mate. What else could you want?"*

His hand threaded through her hair, and he kissed her deeply. The Skyhawk shrieked as if announcing his master's challenge to the night sky.

"Sweet Lanai, I want all of you."

* * * * *

Their arrival in the city was greeted by awed looks and gasps of surprise. Even though there had been Skyhawks in the city before, they were few and far between, so any arrival was noticeable. And two landings in one night made the Kylians take notice.

Jhoral had smiled at the shock on Lanai's face when he'd told her what he wanted. Had she really thought he would be content with what she'd already given him? As wonderful and fulfilling as both the melding and subsequent lovemaking had been, he was a man, full grown, and she was a desirable, if sweetly innocent, woman. He wanted more from his mind-mate...much, much more.

Knowing her confusion, he hadn't pressed the point, only kissed her deeply, leaving her soft lips trembling in surprise as they dipped down to circle once before landing before the clock tower.

Leaping off Carn, Jhoral helped his mind-mate to slide carefully to the ground, mindful of her hurt ankle. He glanced around him curiously. None of his Farsaeon troops were nearby, but a small contingent of Kylian soldiers stood watching, their expressions not quite suspicious, but far from welcoming. He motioned the highest-ranking one over.

"What is the status of the city?"

As Dyas moved to join him, the leader gave a short bow to both the royals. "All is well, Your Highness. The rebels have been turned back, and the tunnel where they gained entrance has been closed off." The man glanced at Lanai, obviously surprised to see a Kylian empath with a Farsaeon of any rank. "Ummm...the city administrator and all the cabinet are safe, as is your family."

Happiness filled him as Lanai cuddled close, her own relief loud in his mind. It wasn't very warrior-like, but he scooped her up and hugged her, knowing she was sharing his pleasure that his family was alive. Over his mind-mate's shoulder, he smiled at the astonished soldier. "Thank the goddesses. But I must speak to my father immediately. Please...take me to them."

A few minutes later, they stood before a large ornate building. Glistening in the moonlight, it stood three stories high, sprawling across the grassy courtyard. From a battle standpoint, it would be difficult to defend, and Jhoral hoped they could defeat the next wave of rebels before they got this far.

"Once I make my greeting to your parents," Dyas said finally, "I will retire. I believe you all have a lot to talk about."

Tossing the other prince a wry look, he gazed down at the woman he held cradled in his arms. She smiled, her eyes weary, but he could still sense her deep pleasure at being with him. That look...that pure sense of joy, a man would do much to have a female feel that way about him.

"I think that would be advisable," he answered his friend. "Once we discuss tomorrow's battle, I'd appreciate the privacy to speak openly. It won't be easy for them to accept what has happened."

Dyas frowned as they climbed the stairs. "It was difficult for us as well. In less than twenty-four hours, you changed a millennium of beliefs about psychic powers."

"We Farsaeans do have a tendency to stir things up, but even I didn't expect what happened. And since there are *no such things* as psychic powers," Jhoral said mockingly, "this talk will be very interesting."

"*If there are no such things,*" Lanai put in, her mind-voice sleepy, "*then what am I?*"

Chapter Nine

Jhoral chuckled as he pushed open the door. "A miracle, telaer. You are my miracle."

They stepped into the entrance hall of the large home and were greeted by an older servant struggling into his robe. Dyas put up his hand to calm the man as Jhoral lowered Lanai to her feet. "Peace. We seek the sovereign and his family. Where are they?"

"They have all retired for the night," the man answered, bowing low when he saw the two men were royalty. "The sovereign and his lady are in the master chamber, while the young prince and princess have rooms down the hall from them."

"Thank you," Jhoral said politely. "It is late. Go back to bed. I will find them myself."

"Jhoral?"

Jerking his head up, he saw his father standing above him on the landing. "Father!"

The royal smiled broadly. "By the gods, it is good to see you. Your mother was very worried."

"Worried about *me*?" Pulling Lanai carefully behind him, he climbed the stairs to embrace the older man. "I was worried about *you*."

Jhoral felt Lanai's curiosity and interest as she peeked out at his father. Lord Jhonen had the dark good looks of his son, with the same silver eyes of the Farsaeon royal house. His ready smile and joking manner masked one of the quickest military minds in their people's history. He was a man who was often underestimated, which suited him fine, and those who opposed him found out very quickly that he was not a man to be trifled with.

Still strong and muscular after nearly fifty sun-turns, he was a picture of health and gave those who knew Jhoral a look at what his future held in store for him.

"Why were you worried about me?" the sovereign asked as he clasped arms with Dyas and looked questioningly at Lanai, who smiled shyly back. He turned and led them back into a large sitting room. Moving to a raised table, he poured a glass of wine for each of the new arrivals. "I sent you a message as soon as I could. I didn't want you to worry."

Jhoral led Lanai over, frowning at her limping stride. He would need to get her ankle looked at. He sat her down on one of the long couches before taking the beverages from his father. "We must have passed each other in the night. When the messenger brought the rebel to the palace for questioning, it was not yet known if you were all right. Of course I came as soon as possible."

"While I appreciate it, my son, it was unnecessary. It was a small revolt, easily put down."

Handing a glass to Dyas, Jhoral turned to give Lanai hers but smiled when he saw his mind-mate was already sound asleep on the couch, her hands tucked up under one cheek. A wave of exhaustion crashed over him, and he fought to stay on his feet. It had been a long, tiring day, and the sleep from the previous night suddenly seemed as if it happened a lifetime ago. He longed to gather Lanai up and find a bed somewhere where they could sleep for a fortnight. His legs literally shook with fatigue as he heard Dyas speak.

"Lord Jhonen, as you must now know, it was not a small revolt as we first thought, but a test of our strength here. Didn't Jhoral's man fill you in? We have uncovered evidence that another, more severe attack will take place tomorrow. I'm sorry, my lord, but it is your family they are after. They mean to assassinate you all."

"Yes, I was told what happened and have set guards to prevent it, but I want to hear it again from you. Now."

The clipped order made Jhoral grin. The benevolent host was gone. The military master and protector of his family had taken his place. Sitting down on the couches, he and Dyas filled the sovereign in on what they'd learned from the rebel. They didn't go into the mind-melding, and his father, more concerned about the upcoming battle, seemed to forget about the unconscious woman on the couch.

"Tomorrow at three bells," Jhonen mused. "Daylight hours or night?"

"If it were me, I would wait until the cover of darkness," Jhoral answered. "It would cause more confusion...keep us off our guard."

"But these men are Kylian. They have no fighting skills. No experience in intrigue." His father shook his head, glancing apologetically at the younger prince. "No offense intended, Dyas."

A wry smile traced the Kylian's lips. "None taken, Lord Jhonen."

The sovereign continued. "But if what this man said is true..." He looked at his son.

"The information is accurate."

Jhonen nodded. "Then we must be ready for anything. Take nothing for granted."

"Agreed." Jhoral looked toward the bedchambers. "You say Mother and the baby are all right?"

"Yes. She was nowhere near the fighting. Neither were your brother or sister."

"We will have to speak to the city administrator as soon as possible," Dyas said, his brown eyes angry. "We must deal with his aide and make sure he can't betray us again. This assassination attempt has to be stopped. I will not allow your family to be hurt on Kylian soil."

"I sent a message as soon as your man came to me. I am awaiting a reply. Until then, what is left of a good night's sleep is what we all need."

Dyas yawned. "I *am* tired. Not used to all the goings-on. I must say, having Jhoral around keeps life lively."

Jhonen chuckled. "Yes, he is definitely one who enjoys stirring things up."

Standing, the younger royal bowed to the Farsaeans. "I bid you both good night." Turning to Jhoral, he winked. "And to you, good luck."

His father waited for him to leave before he smiled at his son. "So, your friend believes you need luck, hmmm? Does it have anything to do with the female you watch so carefully when you think I'm not looking?"

Jhoral went red. Of course his father's keen eyes would see everything. "It's a very long story, Father. By your leave, I will wait and tell you and Mother together."

Jhonen's eyes narrowed. "Have you gotten yourself betrothed to a Kylian, Jhoral? Is that what this is about?"

Shock laced through him. "N-no. I am not betrothed." Jhoral's brow furrowed. "At least I don't think I am...not in the way you mean. It is" — he lifted his gaze and met his father's — "very complicated."

"It sounds like it." Jhonen's mouth quirked up in what might have been a smile. "Perhaps a hint?"

His son rubbed his eyes, feeling another wave of tiredness hit him. "Suffice it to say, I went to the palace to visit Dyas, and without meaning to, I turned their entire belief system upside down, almost caused a war, and either strengthened our relationship with Kylia or destroyed it."

"Well..." Jhonen's pale eyebrows shot up into his hairline. "And it all has to do with the female?"

"Yes, Father."

"Is she worth it?"

A slow smile curved Jhoral's lips, and he put his hand possessively on Lanai's hip. "More than I can even begin to tell you."

Jhonen grinned back. "Then I look forward to hearing about it. It sounds intriguing, if nothing else." He stood. "Your young friend went to sleep next door. So, the last bedchamber on the left is still empty. You and your lady can sleep there."

"Thank you, Father."

"We will talk in the morning. If I hear anything else, I'll wake you."

Bending, Jhoral lifted Lanai's limp body in his arms. He was so tired, his eyes were gritty. If an attack were to happen now, he'd be close to helpless.

"By the gods, boy," Jhonen muttered as he steadied his wavering son. "You look as if you haven't slept for a full moon-cycle."

"It feels that way. What I have gone through in the last twenty-four hours...I cannot begin to explain."

"Tomorrow is soon enough. To bed with you."

Gratefully, Jhoral bowed and left the room. He was so tired, he could barely walk, but luckily, the room his father had indicated was close by. As he pushed open the door, his gaze went straight to the bed in the corner.

He sent a prayer up to the gods in gratitude.

Laying the unconscious Lanai down, he chuckled. Seemed he was always removing her clothing when she was asleep. It was beginning to be habit. As quickly as his shaky hands would allow, he divested her of the ugly gray robe, and this time the threadbare slip as well. He wanted her naked in his arms when she slept with him, no clothing between them.

With a curl of his lip, he tossed both the ripped robe and underslip out the window. From this point on, she would wear Farsaeon clothing. She was no longer under any obligation to the Kylian empaths or their council. He would make her understand that.

He wished he could take time for the bath they'd teased each other about earlier. Jhoral knew the flight and the tramping through the woods had made them dirty, and he still felt filthy from being in the same room—not to mention the same mind—as the rebel.

Ignoring the slight discomfort of not being clean, he crawled into bed and pulled his mind-mate into his arms. This is the way it should be, he thought to himself. With Lanai in his arms, even with all the rebel forces gathering against his family, he was somehow content.

* * * * *

Jhoral was awakened by Lanai's screams. They weren't loud. In fact, most of them were caught in her mind...*and his*. But to him it was as if she were shrieking so loudly the very windows in the room could have shattered from the intensity. Jerking upright, he pulled her into his arms and rocked her gently. His mind filled with her overwhelming fear, and when he saw the hideous face of the mogwraith, he shuddered.

"Be easy, telaer," he murmured quietly. "You are safe. It is just a dream."

She buried her face against him and started to cry. Her frail body shook so hard, he was afraid she'd break in two.

He smoothed a hand over her back and kissed the top of her head. "Shhh, Lanai. I am here. Nothing will hurt you."

Her sobs just grew louder.

Uncomfortable, not sure what to do with a woman who wept with such abandon, Jhoral only held her. He was a warrior, used to battle, but he didn't know how to fight a woman's tears. When he touched her mind to try and soothe her again, she eventually calmed enough to allow him to see all that had happened to her in the woods. He shuddered again to think at how close he'd come to losing her.

"You were very lucky," he whispered, holding her even closer. "If we had not scared that karaar when we flew by, things could have been very different."

She nodded and finally spoke, though her voice was watery. "I was sorry for the poor creature, but I'm very glad it was there."

"As am I." Bending his head, he kissed her, first lightly, then more deeply as his body warmed and her lips softened beneath his. "Ah, Lanai. I think I'm very glad you came after me, dangerous as it was."

He felt that odd skip in her thoughts again, as if she was hiding something, but before he could say anything, her breasts brushed against his chest and all coherent thinking fled. Rolling her over onto her back, he kissed her, deep and hard, forgetting her inexperience, only knowing he needed her desperately.

To his delight, she kissed him back, her curious tongue licking...caressing. Answering his need with an excitement of her own. Small teeth nipped at his lower lip, sending a flood of heat down to his cock. He was suddenly full-out starving for her with just that gentle nudge.

"You're naked," Jhoral growled. "I do like you naked." He bit, then sucked at the curved part of her neck. He'd marked her there the night before, and it drew him inexorably back, his brand—this symbol of passionate possession. The small bruise he'd left made him even hotter for her now.

"So are you," she gasped out unnecessarily. His legs were already tangled with hers, and there were no secrets there. "I like the way you look naked. I like it very much."

Blushes accompanied her revelation, but Jhoral barely noticed. So innocent, yet so open to him. All he could think about were her simple, sweet words that set fire to his soul. "I'm going to make love to you now, Lanai. You won't dream about the mogwraith. Instead, you will dream of me."

He kissed her again, rolling to his side and wrapping his arms around her slender form. The length of her body pressed against his, and he stifled a groan. He could feel each silky inch of her, and when she wriggled, it was all he could do not to pull her

thighs apart, push her knees back to her ears, and bury his cock so deep he would imprint himself on her very soul.

He was so strong...so single-minded in his lovemaking, Lanai could only obey his every whim. Someday, once she learned how, she might try to tease and tempt him on purpose. But now it took everything she had just to think. When Jhoral touched her like this, when he used his mouth and hands to send her whirling into the maelstrom of passion, there was nothing she could do but feel.

Even now his fingers were stroking her. Easing down between her legs where the need blossomed, wet and quivering. It grew with every touch until she ached, writhing against him like a woman with a fever. In her mind, she pleaded with him. *"Put out the fire, Jhoral. Please..."*

He only laughed, his head dropping to her breasts. She felt first his tongue and then his sharp teeth. Liquid lightning shot to her quim and then back again, making her nipples hard and pointed. She moaned and arched against him. His mind joined with hers as he pulled the crown of her breast into his mouth and sucked.

Fire lanced through her, and she cried out, this time aloud. His dark laughter filled the room, but then cut off quickly when she bent and bit down sharply on one of his flat masculine nipples.

It was as if she'd set a light to tinder. Growling out her name, he pushed her over to her stomach and onto her knees. She felt the blunt head of his penis probing the warm, wet folds of her body. Her quim contracted with a desire so strong, she almost wept from it. Then, with one strong thrust, he entered her from behind. Her astonished gasp of pleasure was almost smothered as he pounded against her, his movements out of control.

She cried out again when he leaned over the top of her and pulled her back against him, wrapping his arms over her stomach and beneath her breasts. His sharp teeth fastened onto her shoulder. Treasuring the marks he made in passion, she moved with him, calling out his name as the pleasure-pain of desire shot through her. His fingers went to her clit to caress her, and that, along with the driving force of his body, sent her over the edge and into the storm.

He was there with her. His big body pumping hard and fast, before he groaned out her name and exploded. Their shared passions mingled as their minds opened wide. They shared each shuddering emotion, each delightful moment of bliss, before their bodies collapsed back into the soft bed.

Lanai's heart took a long time to slow. He spooned up behind her, his penis still embedded deep within her body, his arms holding her close. His lips teased at her hair, and she sighed, sleepy and utterly fulfilled. No woman alive was happier than she. No mating could have been more perfect. She felt Jhoral's smile as his mouth traced down to kiss the newest mark on her neck.

"Sleep, telaer," he told her, his deep voice lulling her into a peaceful slumber. "You are safe and protected here with me. I won't allow anything to touch you. Rest easy and go back to sleep."

When Lanai woke a second time, the pearly pink and red lights of dawn were painting their morning colors on the wall of the bedroom. She yawned sleepily and felt Jhoral's arm tighten around her waist.

Looking back over her shoulder at him, she smiled. He was still sleeping, his face softer, yet still more masculine than any other man she'd ever seen. His long, dark lashes fanned out on his cheek, and she wondered if he'd been teased about them as a child. Women paid thousands of credits to have lashes like the ones the goddesses had granted him for free.

His hair was messy. Bits and pieces poking out of the thick braid, and his chin — like yesterday — was covered in short, stiff bristles that poked her when they kissed. She wanted to touch him again, but she forced herself not to. Her mind-mate needed his sleep.

Moving slowly, holding her breath, she eased out of bed. Jhoral mumbled and turned over, but to her delight didn't wake up. Quickly, she limped out of the room and into the necessity chamber.

Feeling much better once she'd rinsed out her mouth and taken care of other business, she tiptoed back into the bedroom. A muffled sound coming from the window stirred her curiosity, and since she couldn't find her gray robe, she snatched up Jhoral's tunic, wrapped it around her, and went to investigate.

She pulled a portion of the curtain aside, careful not to send any light streaming into the room. Jhoral might think he was big and strong and invincible, but she'd seen the exhaustion in his eyes last night. She would make sure nothing bothered him.

Her interest peaking, she pressed her nose against the glass. At first glance, she saw nothing. Just a circular entryway of carefully groomed dirt, lined with purple and fuchsia flowers in squat white, stone vases. Tall trees stood off to the side of the house, and she could see an ornate enclosure of glass and rock beneath them. It was neatly kept and quite lovely. Almost as beautiful as the courtyard she'd seen at the palace. But there was nothing there that could have made the sound she'd heard.

A moment later, she heard it again, this time a little louder. A glance over her shoulder told her Jhoral still slept, so she frowned and looked out the window again. Her quick eyes caught a movement far to the left, and looking over a tall boundary made of more bushes, she saw the source of the noise.

It was a market. Large and bustling, filled with every conceivable treasure and trinket. Lanai abruptly remembered that Orelia was one of the favorite cities for shopping, and now that she'd seen it, she understood why. Her excitement grew, and she shivered in expectation. She'd never seen a marketplace before. It was one of those

areas forbidden to an unmated empath. Too much emotion. Too much confusion. Too many undesirable people.

Even in her small scan of the street, she could see down into a dozen-or-so shops and canopied tables. Everything from sweet-smelling *calana* bread, to live animals was sold there. Handmade jewelry, pottery, and leathers. Feathered hats and tall, ornate candles with golden beading. Piles and piles of colorful cloth that made her fingers itch to touch and stroke. She saw an outside taverna and restaurant, and her mouth watered. All the shops were getting ready to start their day.

Fascinated by it all, she crawled up onto the windowsill to watch. It amazed her how many people there were. So few at first, then more and more as the red sun rose higher in the sky. The noise level increased as well, but here behind the thick glass it was muted, and she was glad to see Jhoral slept on undisturbed.

Lanai bit back laughter as she watched a skinny woman with a nose like a bird's beak haggle over some dried vegetables with a surly shopkeeper. Beady eyes flashed, and her thin fingers poked at the merchant. Her lips moved constantly as she bartered and cajoled. The shopkeeper, unimpressed, yawned once and then began to bargain himself. They were still arguing when another sight caught Lanai's eyes.

It was a woman—a girl, really—beautiful, with long red hair and smiling pale green eyes. She wore a fancy dress sure to make any woman's heart sigh. It looked as if a thousand flutter-bugs had come and landed on her to make a dress so shimmering in color it outshone a rainbow. Lanai felt the unfamiliar emotion of envy and quickly suppressed it. That was not her life. It was not allowed for an empath.

But she watched the girl as she laughed and giggled her way through the marketplace, buying a trinket here or a fruit pie there. The beauty bought an iridescent bonnet and added it to her outfit, twirling in a circle for all those around her to see. A half dozen tall men guarded her, watching her carefully and with wry amusement, but for the most part, she ignored them. And seeing it all, Lanai couldn't help but sigh.

After that, it was children screaming for their ice treats, deft pickpockets who did a brisk business on the crowded streets, and fat, jolly men who parked themselves at the taverna and drank mug after mug of bright orange brew. Lanai's stomach growled once, but never did she think to ask for food. This glimpse of outside life was too intriguing, and besides, an empath learned at a very young age never to ask for anything.

How long she sat there she didn't know, but she almost fell off the windowsill when lips buried themselves against her throat and a big hand cupped her breast.

"Jhoral?" she managed to gasp as he caught her.

He laughed and dropped a kiss on her surprised mouth. "Who else, telaer? Are you expecting another warrior to grab you?"

She blushed and relaxed in his arms. "Of course not. I was just far away, imagining things." Excited again, she pointed out the window. "Look, my mind-mate, a marketplace."

He stared outside for a moment and then nodded. "So it is."

"It is most interesting," she enthused. "I have seen a two-humped *camak* get sold to a man with hair the color of leaves, and a large woman with lots of children came and bought all the tiny yellow fish there were. Then there was this girl in a rainbow dress who —"

"Slow down, Lanai." Jhoral laughed. "It's just a marketplace."

"I have never seen one before. There are so many things. So much to see."

Jhoral blinked. "What do you mean you've never seen one? There are markets in Audera."

"I was not allowed. Too difficult for me to handle without a receptor." She looked up at him shyly. "Do you think I could see one...up close? I won't buy anything, I promise. I just want to be a part of it for once. Just feel it. Please. I won't be any trouble —"

Holding on to his control with an effort, Jhoral stopped her pleading by covering her mouth with his. Suddenly he was furious all over again. What could it have hurt for Mistress Aleris to take Lanai to a market a time or two? This way of protecting their empathths seemed more and more ridiculous with each new fact he learned about it.

It wasn't until he felt her shivering that he realized all his thoughts and emotions had been transferred to her. With a light curse, he lifted his head and looked down into her frightened eyes. "Forgive me, Lanai. I forgot myself."

Her lips trembled once before she bowed her head. "I am sorry. I shouldn't have asked."

"No. It isn't that." He sighed as he set her on the ground and twitched back the curtains so the whole room was flooded with the scarlet light of the sun. "I am not angry at you, but at your people. Their cruelty is something I cannot abide."

She frowned. "They were not cruel. If I was in a busy place like that without a receptor, it would be dangerous for me."

It was still hard for him to fathom, even though he had felt the emotion yesterday. "Couldn't you put up one of those walls?"

"Sometimes. But only with a few. Not with so many people. Too much emotion overloads my mind. Why do you think no one touches an empath?"

"I still think the council could do something so your kind could be treated more normally. It bothers me to know what you've missed."

"But Jhoral, we only miss it until we have melded. Then we can do anything as long as our receptor is there to protect us."

"And if the receptor is one who doesn't want to take you to the marketplace, or show you a two-humped *camak*? What then?"

Lanai's gaze dropped. "Then we don't see them. We belong to our receptors. Their wants are ours. We are happy with that."

Jhoral didn't believe a word of it. "So if I said we won't go to the marketplace because I hate shopping, what will you do?"

Her lips trembled, making her disappointment easy to read. "I-I will obey you as I promised."

He grinned and scooped her up in his arms. "You are lying to me, sweet mind-mate. You may obey me, but you'll hate every minute of it."

"I didn't say I'd like it," she rejoined primly as she kissed his whiskered cheek. "I just said I'd obey."

"I will hold you to that," he said with a laugh. Then he sobered. "But I still say Mistress Aleris could have done something to change it all. No child should have grown up as lonely as you did."

Immediately he felt the mind-shift at the mentor's name, and he stiffened as he remembered the night before. Something *had* happened, and he wouldn't allow her to keep secrets from him any longer. "Oh, no you don't." He gave her a little shake. "You've put it off and tried to hide it from me, but I want the truth. What happened, Lanai? Why did you leave Audera? And don't tell me it was just because you missed me."

He saw the fear enter her eyes, and his voice gentled. "No one can hurt you now, telaer. Be honest with me and I can protect you."

She fought it for several long moments, but his will was stronger in this. "All right," she whispered. "But you have to promise not to get upset. You are needed here. You can't go back to the palace."

Impatiently, he nodded. Whatever it took to get the truth.

But then her mind opened to him, and she allowed him to see what had sent her running into the forest. In a single instant, all the fury of a millennium of Farsaeen warriors burned within him. His silver eyes glowed with ice-fire, and his whole body tensed for battle.

"She dared to do what?"

Chapter Ten

Lanai almost took a step back from his anger, even though she knew it wasn't directed at her. It was just he was so big, and when his temper burned hot, he was almost as scary as the mogwraith in the woods.

"Tell me exactly what happened," he bit out, his eyes so furious they glowed. "What did she do to you?"

Sighing, she told him everything, from the odd way Mistress Aleris had acted once he left, to when Lanai had climbed out the window and disappeared into the night. She didn't know her eyes showed each and every fear, or that her inner shielding was down enough that he could actually see the events as she relayed them. It was only when she felt the swell of anger in her mind that she realized he was privy to everything.

"Jhoral, don't be angry." Her eyes pleaded with him, even though she knew it was a lost cause. His face had taken on that same harshness he'd worn when interrogating the rebel prisoner.

"They try to steal your mind, threaten to drug you, and want to force you to repudiate me, and you don't want me to be mad? By the gods, Lanai... They all deserve to die for what they've done!"

"If you go after them, it will be bad for both of us. Please, my mind-mate. Let it go."

"Never." His voice was adamant. "They will have to pay for what they've done." He paced away and then swung around back to her. "You could have been killed, telaer. Their actions forced you to take refuge in the forest...to seek safety with me. A mogwraith isn't the only dangerous thing in the forest." He shook his head, and his face grew haunted. "I should never have left you. Never have trusted them."

She'd been afraid he would blame himself for not protecting her. "It's not your fault. You were trying to do what was best for me. You could only act on the information you were given. How were you to know it was a lie?"

His anguished eyes met hers. "By listening to you."

Lanai drew in her breath, and any remnant of anger she may have been harboring bled away into nothingness. His willingness to take the responsibility for what had happened to her made her heart ache. She moved so quickly, she was in his arms before he even saw her move. "Don't. You can't blame yourself. We both are learning about each other. You had no idea how bad it would be for us to be apart."

His arms wrapped around her tightly. "I was supposed to take care of you. Guard you. But I failed. You had to protect yourself."

"And I did a pretty good job of it too," she realized suddenly, a warm glow of pride flaring inside her. But she knew now wasn't the time to congratulate herself. Jhoral needed to know he was forgiven. She hugged him closer.

"Do not be angry with yourself, my mind-mate. You relied on people you *should* have been able to trust. I find no fault in you for that. And I was able to keep myself safe until you came back to protect me." Her brow furrowed as a sudden thought hit her. "That reminds me. Why were you coming back? How did you know I needed you?"

Jhoral sighed and dropped a kiss on the top of her head. "I can't explain it. I just *knew* something was wrong. It got to be so bad, even Dyas recognized it. Eventually, I had to follow my instincts and turn around."

"You knew I was in trouble?" she marveled.

He shook his head. "Not really. I didn't know what it was. Just that something was off. But I should have known it was you. Every time I examined the worry, you came to my mind."

"I do not think that was a compliment."

"Compliment or not" —he narrowed his eyes— "when I saw you in the forest, I was glad for the connection between the two of us. You might have died without it."

"You found me," she said soothingly. "And you saved me. I am here and all right. Don't think about it again. Let us worry about your family and the danger they are in. That is what is important now."

Still angry, he cupped her face in his large hands. "I will not let this go, Lanai. They will pay for frightening you. And by the gods, Lord Merin and Mistress Aleris will be punished for trying to rape your mind and take you from me. You have my oath on it."

She acted instinctively, wanting only to appease his anger. "Please, Jhoral..." Her hand slid down his naked torso and wrapped carefully around his softened penis. "Are you sure you want to think about all that right now?"

Sucking in his breath, Jhoral's entire body went hard in an instant. He watched Lanai's eyes widen as his cock swelled in her hand. He fought back a chuckle, his bad humor sliding away just as he knew she'd hoped it would. She was flirting with him, hoping to distract his anger, but he decided – this time – to allow it. He wouldn't forget what her mentor had done, but he enjoyed the fact she was comfortable enough to try and tease him into feeling better.

"So," he muttered, tracing his hand up and under the tunic top she had tossed around her shoulders. His fingers tweaked a nipple, and she shuddered. "You think petting me like that will make me forget what has happened?"

"No," she said with an empath's honesty. "But I hope to remind you that I am here and safe and in your arms. That must be worth something to you."

His sharp teeth flashed in a sexy grin. "Oh...it is worth everything, telaer. Perhaps I need to show you just how much."

Giving his hard cock one last squeeze, she ran both hands up his chest and clasped them behind his neck. The tunic dropped unnoticed to the floor. She fluttered her eyelashes at him, so innocently seductive, all the heat in his body flashed to his groin. Then she smiled. "Perhaps you should."

With a growl of suppressed need, he lifted her so their bodies were pressed flesh to flesh. She was warm and soft, and her own sweet scent was mixed with that of their previous lovemaking. His mouth watered. "By the gods, I want you again."

The bed was too far away, so he strode over and sat her on the high windowsill. Her face was flushed, and her eyes were already dreamy, but when he wound her long hair around his hand, she cried out in pleasure-pain and arched against him. Cursing the need that boiled up, he urged her legs apart and stepped in between them.

"Is this what you want?" he demanded hoarsely. "Tell me telaer, do you want me inside you. Here? Now?"

Her eyes went to swirling shades of rainbow, and he felt her desire, as hot and lusty as his own. "Please, Jhoral," she whimpered, trying to wriggle nearer. "What are you doing to me? I want to be closer to you. Please."

"Then you will be."

With one strong thrust, he was inside her, needing to possess her in the most primitive way possible. They both moaned in relief, the joining just as pleasurable as the one done in the dark of night. For a long moment, neither of them moved. Then, Jhoral threaded his fingers through her tousled hair and undid the messy braid. Holding her perfectly still, his eyes on hers, he began to move. Long, slow, deep strokes that set fire to his cock. Over and over again, deep within and then all the way out, until the tip of his cock teased the warm folds that embraced him. The heat in his groin, the need in his very soul, made his heart ache along with his body. It grew and grew until he could barely breathe. This was more than simple sex. This joining of mind and spirit made it very different from any other mating, and he knew it.

Lanai's eyes went blurry, and she whispered his name as she convulsed around him. Her body was hot and shivering and so beautiful, watching her pleasure this time was just too much for him. He lost control. Feeling the lust swamp both of them, he rode the wave of passion and emptied himself inside her.

"That was very sneaky, you know," he said a few minutes later as he panted over her. "But I hate to tell you this. I knew what your plan was from the beginning. I just thought I'd go along with it...for both our sakes."

Lanai smiled contentedly against his shoulder. Her heart was still pounding, and she knew if she tried to stand, she'd fall over. Her whole body tingled from his possession. "I should hope so. You are supposed to be this mighty warrior. Someone as smart as you say you are should have seen through me in an instant."

"Ummm..." He dropped a kiss on her cheek and then peered outside. "Someone as smart as I'm supposed to be probably wouldn't have chosen to make love in a window with a clear view to the courtyard either."

Lanai's head popped up so fast she collided with his chin. His muffled "ouch" went unnoticed. "Are you saying...? Is someone...?" Embarrassment flooded her as she pushed against him. "Get up! We can't let anyone see us like this."

He laughed, and sliding gently out of her, carried her away from the window. "Don't worry, telaer. It is early yet. I'm sure there weren't many people out there."

She knew her face must rival the sun's, and it didn't help she could sense his very masculine satisfaction with what they'd just done. He was totally unconcerned whether they'd been seen or not. "This is so humiliating," she moaned. "You can't touch me again. I stop thinking when you do."

The gleam in his eye instantly unnerved her. She wasn't surprised when he caught her to him and kissed her until she went limp.

"That's too bad, because I refuse to stop touching you. You are mine, Lanai. Get used to it."

"And are you mine?" she asked daringly before she could stop herself. She went very still as she waited for his answer.

His eyes softened, and he cupped her cheek in his hand. "We belong to each other, telaer. In whatever ways we still have to discover, but know this, you belong to me and I...I do belong to you."

Her shy smile bloomed, and the kiss they shared was just as filled with emotion and passion as the lovemaking had been. When it was over, Jhoral held her tightly.

"As much as I'd like to show you how I feel all over again, it is getting late and we still must explain ourselves to my parents. There is much work to be done before the attack. But" —he bent and scooped her into his arms again— "I think we would first both enjoy a real bath."

A few minutes later, she was treated to her first true bathing experience. Back at the empath training house, she had bathed, but only in a small tub with water that was lukewarm at best. At the palace in Audera, there had been only time for a quick scrub before the evening meal had arrived. The large bath Jhoral carried her into now was more like a small pool and so blissfully warm she moaned in enjoyment when her body slipped beneath the water.

They laughed like children as they played and splashed. Jhoral taught her how to squirt streams of water with her hands as well as how to make soap creatures out of the froth of bubbles. She giggled madly as she gave him a beard of suds and then gasped when he playfully ducked her head under the water.

Unused to the intimacy, she was hesitant as Jhoral cleansed her body with fragrant soaps and washed her long hair, massaging her scalp with his strong hands. She shyly returned the favor, unwinding his untidy braid and running her fingers through the tangled locks until his hair was clean and shiny. She reveled in the strength of his shoulders, back, and chest as she used the slick soap on him, wondering again how she'd been so blessed to be given such a handsome man as her mind-mate.

A groan caught her attention, and her gaze lifted to see his burning silver eyes on her. Startled, she dropped the soap, and when she reached to get it, he stood, and for the first time, she had a chance to examine his full strength and masculinity.

His muscular torso narrowed down to slim hips and strong legs. But what held her attention...what made her mouth go dry, was the erection that stood hard and firm, throbbing with need for her. He was so big, she shivered, wondering how they'd managed to fit together. Jhoral smiled and stepped closer, as if asking her to touch him.

"Again?" she whispered, amazed either of them had the strength after what they'd already done.

"Always." He stared down at her, his whole body tensed and waiting.

She really hadn't had much chance to touch him before. Other than the brief encounter at the window, he'd always been the aggressor. So curious, she traced her finger down the single line of hair on his torso to the appendage that glistened, not only with water, but with a pale white liquid that seeped from the top of the helmet-shaped head. She touched it, feeling him shudder, and her body warmed with its own need. Gently, she wrapped a hand around him, marveling again at his softness, yet recognizing the steel beneath the velvet flesh. His hand came down to cover hers and squeezed.

"Touch me, telaer. My cock aches for your soft hands. Someday, when we have more time, I shall teach you how to use your warm mouth to pleasure me, but for now...just touch me."

Her breath quickened at the picture his words created. Loving the feel of him in her hands, she followed his directions and stroked him. Up and down, squeezing and caressing, she watched as his cock throbbed and wept more of the slick, wet liquid. His musky scent grew stronger the more she touched him, and when she opened her mind

so their thoughts could mingle, she felt a tangle of lust and need so strong she shuddered with it.

His eyes were as dark as the far side of a star when he finally pulled her away. "I need you, Lanai. Here. Now. Again."

All she could do was lift her arms in offering. With a groan, he pulled her to him, covering her mouth with his. Holding her tightly, his hand stroked down her slick body to caress her breasts, her nipples, before moving down to tickle and tease her clit. Her whimpers of pleasure made him shake in response, and before she could say a word, he'd stepped between her legs, and allowing the water to buoy her against him, he swiftly slipped inside of her.

Their mating was fast and furious then, the passion between them swelling until neither could do anything but give in to the driving need to be as close as possible. Water splashed over the rim of the pool with Jhoral's driving thrusts, and all Lanai could do was hold on as her mate warmed her body and soul. Together they exploded in a waterfall of desire, their shared climax so strong it left them gasping and shuddering in its wake.

Thirty minutes later, they were dressed and ready to confront Jhoral's parents. Lanai pulled at the borrowed tunic, a frown marring her lovely face, and he shook his head. "You look fine."

"I'm supposed to wear empath robes," she whispered. "So all know what I am. It's forbidden to wear other clothing. I told you that."

Jhoral shrugged as he took her hand. She was far prettier in the deep blue outfit she now wore than she'd ever been in the ugly gray robes. "Your old clothes were ripped and dirty. I threw them out the window. And I don't care about the rules. The council has no further claim on you, especially after what they tried to do yesterday. You're my empath now, and I want you to wear something else."

She worried her lip. "But —"

"Shdok," he swore as he pulled her out the door. "You didn't argue over the change of hair. In fact, you asked me to do it."

Lanai smoothed the intricate braid she sported. "That's different."

"Enough."

His command brought immediate silence, and he felt her hurt in his head. "I'm sorry. But you must remember...things are changing. Don't fight them, telaer."

Her lips trembled, but she only nodded. As they stopped outside the sitting room, he touched her face gently. "Are you ready for this?"

"I suppose. If you are with me."

"Always," he promised. Taking a deep breath, he pushed open the door and entered.

All conversation came to a sudden stop, but he ignored it, smiling at his family and Dyas. They were all there, sitting around a large table, partaking of some delicious-smelling food. Suddenly, he was ravenous. He felt Lanai's painful hunger as well.

"Son. You are awake." His father stood slowly, and after a moment, his brother, Jhu, and Dyas did the same.

"I expected you to sleep much longer," Dyas stated as he stared in obvious surprise at Lanai's new look. "It is usual after a..." He ground to a halt and cleared his throat. "After all you've been through."

Irritated by his friend ogling his mate, Jhoral stepped in front of her. "As you know," he growled, "nothing about this has been usual."

"I think it's time you introduced us," Jhonen stated. "We are all very curious about the woman you've brought into our midst."

Now that the time had come, Jhoral was unaccountably nervous. He knew it wouldn't be easy to make them understand. "Father, Mother, this is Lanai." He urged her forward. "My...mind-mate."

There was complete silence. Lanai's trembling fear shivered through his mind, and he instinctively brought her hand to his lips to soothe her.

"Mind-mate?" his mother, Jhdeara, queried politely. The queen of Farsaea was tall, beautiful, and very pregnant. She brushed back a lock of auburn hair as her cool green gaze swept over Lanai. "What exactly is a mind-mate?"

"That will take a bit to explain." Taking his courage in hand, Jhoral led Lanai to an empty seat. "As I told you last night, Father, it all started when I went to visit Dyas."

For the next half hour, he told his family what had happened. As Lanai nibbled nervously on her breakfast, he wolfed down food as he talked. He first shared his reluctance and then unwilling curiosity about the ceremony he'd been invited to. He recognized their amusement at such a ritual, then their surprise when he shared the deep impact it had on him.

Shock touched their faces when he told them how Lanai had failed to find a receptor in the group but had chosen him instead. With halting words that had to leave much out, he tried to explain what it was that happened between them.

Knowing they couldn't believe easily, he told them about his struggle to keep Lanai as his, his declaration of war if the Kylians tried to part them, and how he'd shown everyone they were truly bonded by using her as an interrogation tool against the rebel. For the first time, his father's face showed interest, and Jhoral continued, finishing the story with the nighttime ride on his Skyhawk and the exhausted sleep that took him once he'd arrived. He said nothing yet about the treachery of Mistress Aleris and Lord Merin. He wanted to talk to Dyas and his father privately about that.

There was silence at the table when he finished. He took a quick sip of his now-lukewarm *caffee*, needing something to wet his throat. He leaned over and squeezed Lanai's cold hand, hoping to comfort.

"So," the sovereign broke the silence. "You believe yourself...melded to this female."

"I don't believe it, Father," Jhoral answered. "I *know* it."

"There are no such things as psychic gifts or empaths," his sister, Jhara, said, her silver-green eyes flashing in obvious concern. She was a younger, trimmer version of the queen, complete with a redhead's temper. Glancing at Dyas, she bit her lip. "You must have been taken in by a delusion."

"I beg to differ, Princess," Dyas said in a cold, hard voice. His brown eyes glistened with anger. "They are very real, and my people have been using them for many millennia."

"I didn't believe it either, but he's right, Jhara." Jhoral stepped in before his impetuous sister said something she would later regret. Her feelings for the Kylian prince were quite obvious, but like politics, unusual beliefs made a tenuous bedfellow. "It's impossible for me to describe what happened between Lanai and I, but our minds *are* mated. She can use her empathic gift to read people and then give the knowledge to me. We share our thoughts and feelings. It isn't like anything I've ever witnessed, but it is true and wonderful."

"But why you?" his mother asked. "There were all those other...receptors. Why could she not choose one of them?"

Lanai stirred uncomfortably beside him, and he sent soothing thoughts to her. "She didn't belong to any of them," he said simply. "She belongs to me."

"Can you give her back?" Jhara glanced at the small woman at his side, her gaze dismissing. "I mean, you don't have to keep her, do you?"

"I think what your sister is saying," Jhonen said quickly when he saw his older son's eyes flare with anger, "is this melding may cause a great deal of problems between our two peoples. Especially now. It may be best to return this...empath until things quiet down a little."

"She is not a flying saddle or a dress that can be returned to the shop," Jhoral snarled, coming to his feet. "She is a thinking, feeling being who is now inexorably a part of me." He glared at his sister. "Would you ask me to cut off my fighting arm and give it away?" At her gasp of horror, he turned to his father. "Would you have me gouge out my own eyes and cast them aside?" He slammed his hand against the table. "Because that is what you are asking me to do by giving Lanai up."

His words were met with appalled silence, and he struggled to control himself. Lanai's soft mind-touch soothed him with gentle memories and whispered promises. He took a deep breath. "Forgive me, but you don't know what you're asking."

Dyas cleared his throat. "Perhaps I can explain more." He glanced around at the dumbstruck family. "This situation is unique. Jhoral is the first male and the first outsider to ever meld with a Kylian empath. I didn't believe it either at first. But I can tell you this...I've seen them together. I've watched the connection he speaks of. They are mated. Lanai and he cannot be separated."

"Why?" the sovereign inquired bluntly.

"Because, without her, Jhoral will never again feel complete." The prince glanced at Lanai and sighed. "And without her receptor, Lanai will die."

There was a long, thoughtful pause before Jhdeara spoke, her tone quiet. "But you have more than mind-mated with this girl. Isn't that true, son?"

The adults at the table went still, and all heads turned to Jhoral.

He reddened. "That's not the issue here."

"Isn't it?" His mother shook her head. "You ask us to accept this girl, this...empath as your mind-mate. Something we don't understand or believe in. But you sit her down with us, with your mating marks at her throat, and think we won't notice?"

Dyas's head whipped around to stare at Lanai, whose hand went nervously to the marks easily seen on her neck now that she wasn't wearing her empath robes. Turning back, he glared at Jhoral. "You've mated with her? *Physically* mated with her?"

Baring his teeth at his friend, Jhoral put a possessive hand on Lanai's shoulder. He hated the feeling of embarrassment and shame he felt rolling through her. For a moment, he wanted to carry her away from all the condemning eyes. "I marked her, yes. And I mated with her. Why not? She belongs to me – body, mind, and soul."

There was another long silence, and through Lanai, Jhoral could feel the muted emotions in the room. Fear, anger, confusion, disbelief. All of it directed at her, more than himself. It made his mind-mate shiver, and he pulled her closer to comfort her.

The quiet was finally broken when his younger brother, Jhu, leaned forward. The boy wrinkled his nose as he stared curiously at Lanai. "You have weird eyes."

The child's candor made a single tear slide down Lanai's cheek. She choked back a sob and offered instead a shaky smile. "I know. But so do you."

Her remark seemed to lessen the tension in the room, and Jhoral sat back down. "I know this is unexpected and even unwelcome. But I will say to you what I said to King Freyan: She is mine, and I will not give her up. For any reason. I'm sorry, but you'll all have to deal with that." He let that sink in before turning back to his father.

"It was Lanai who discovered the rebel's plans. Her gift can be of great use to us. Perhaps the gods brought our peoples together to teach us both. We may be evolving...both Kylian and Farsaeon. But not if prejudice keeps us apart."

Jhonen sighed. "It may be you are right, my son. But change comes slowly. Gifts such as you speak of are not something we believe in. I see your sincerity, but I can't trust this girl is what you say. I do not know her."

"But you know me."

"Yes..."

"Then give her a chance," Jhoral urged. "I know this is all strange and different, but I ask this of you."

"Please, Your Highnesses... If I may?" Lanai's soft voice made them all jump in surprise. Without waiting for permission, she rose and walked hesitantly toward the queen. "Empaths are used for diagnostic purposes in Kyla. With your consent, I can empathically travel inside of you...to check the child." She smiled, and her dimples flashed.

"If you want, I can even tell you if it is a boy or a girl."

Chapter Eleven

Jhoral grinned, his pride in his mate's courage shining in his silver eyes. "*Good girl,*" he mind-spoke her. "*You are brave and intelligent. I am very pleased with you.*"

Her cheeks went pink, but she didn't respond. She only waited patiently for Jhdeara to answer.

"Go on, Mother," his sister said with a toss of her head. "*I won't believe it until I see it.*"

"Shut up," Jhoral snarled at her. "You have the brains of a flutter-bug." At Lanai's gasp, he turned back to her, but she was staring at the younger woman, sudden recognition in her eyes. As he caught his mind-mate's thought, he realized immediately Jhara had been in the market earlier that morning.

"You went out and shopped?" he thundered at his sister, such stupidity making him even angrier. "Even though you knew it wasn't safe?"

Jhara's mouth dropped open. "How did you—" She cut herself off and whipped around to look at Lanai. Her eyes narrowed in resentment. "Is that what an empath supposedly does? Tattletale?"

Lanai went red, and her soft mouth trembled. "I'm sorry. I didn't know then it was you. I was watching from the window, and I noticed the dress. It was the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen."

The obvious admiration in her voice didn't seem to matter to the princess. "Keep your *mind* out of my business."

"That's enough!" The sovereign glared at his daughter until her gaze dropped to her lap. "We will discuss your disobedience later. Obviously, Lanai communicated something to Jhoral, something none of us heard. I would like to see more."

"She isn't a trained *deg*, Father. She won't bring you your slippers." Jhoral was still angry.

"I don't need a deg." Jhonen winked at his wife. "I have your mother."

Ignoring the sly humor, Jhdeara looked down at Lanai. "You can see if my baby is healthy and strong? And you can tell me what it is?"

"Yes, my queen. If you wish it."

Jhdeara lifted a perfectly shaped brow when she heard the exquisitely polite tone. "You may call me Jhdeara. And yes, I wish it."

Glancing over at her mind-mate for his final nod of approval, Lanai knelt at the queen's feet. Her eyes closed, and she concentrated. Surprisingly, Jhoral's mind joined with hers and the extra boost steadied her among all the high emotions in the room. Her mate's family was highly expressive with their feelings. She felt almost suffocated by them.

Taking a deep breath, she eased inside the older woman's swollen body, through flesh and bone, tissue and marrow. Finally she saw it, the tiny fetus swimming in a sea of warmth and affection. It was so lovely, she almost forgot why she was there. But a mind-gasp from Jhoral when he saw it brought her back to the matter at hand.

Carefully, using her mind's most delicate touch, she delved into the child's forming body. She measured and tested, touching each molecule of it in every way. Lanai knew if she could show the queen her psychic talent, perhaps they would be more understanding of what she and Jhoral had done. She only hoped that the baby was all right. To have to tell the queen anything different was unthinkable.

It only took a few minutes to complete her search, but she was tired when she finally pulled herself out. That showed her she was still not completely recovered from the melding. Jhoral's mind slipped away from hers once he took note of her diagnosis. His pleasure at what she'd found made his lips turn up in a smile.

"Well?" The queen's worry was obvious. "Is my baby all right?"

Lanai rose and bowed. "Yes, Your Highness. The child is very healthy and strong. It will be born on time, and you should have no trouble." She smiled shyly. "Do you wish to know...what the child is?"

Jhdeara glanced over at her mate, uncertainty in her eyes. "I don't know."

"You will be pleased, Mother," Jhoral informed her. "Let her tell you."

"*You* know?" Jhara stared at her brother.

"I was with Lanai when she did her examination. It was" —he met Lanai's eyes, his own filled with awe — "the most astonishing thing I've ever seen."

They all chewed on that; then, after a moment, Jhdeara cleared her throat. "I think...I do want to know."

The sovereign hesitated, then nodded. "As would I."

Lanai smiled. "Then I am pleased to say you will need another one of those beautiful flutter-bug dresses, my queen. The child is a girl."

Jhdeara's eyes brightened, and she blinked back tears. "A girl?" Her hand softly caressed her belly as she met her mate's proud gaze. "My lord, at last the numbers are balanced."

"Two males, and now two females." Jhonen grinned widely. "Another warrior in pigtails."

"A girl?" Jhu was the only one who looked disappointed. "I wanted a brother."

"You have one, brat," Jhoral teased as he bopped his sibling on the head. "What about me?"

Jhu wrinkled his nose again. "You're too big to boss around."

The others joined the older prince in laughter. "I'll tell you a secret," Jhoral whispered, an amused glint in his eyes. "You can boss them around no matter what they are."

His little brother looked up at him suspiciously. "You promise?"

"I do."

"Okay." Jhu looked at his mother. "It's all right then. It can be a girl."

Jhdeara bit back a smile. "Thank you, son."

"Lanai? Is that what you did with the rebel?"

The king's sudden question made her start, but she answered quickly enough. "No, Your Highness. But it was something similar. With the rebel, I went into his mind, not his body."

"I told you, Father," Jhoral said, his pride obvious. "She can be of great help to us once I learn how to use her properly."

"Just so." The sovereign sighed thoughtfully and then focused his otherworldly eyes on Lanai. "Come here, child."

At her mate's nod, Lanai walked to the royal. But when he extended his hand to her, she flinched. Looking back at her mind-mate, she waited for him to shield her with his protection, but instead he only smiled at her. She worried her lower lip, afraid if she asked *him* for help, his family would sense it and think even less of their melding.

"Give him greeting, Lanai," Jhoral finally admonished, not understanding her hesitation.

Slowly, knowing what would happen and wishing she could refuse, Lanai took Jhonen's hand.

And fell into chaos.

Emotion, pure and uncontrolled, swept through her, and she fought to keep her feet. She felt Jhonen's pride in his family and sensed his fury at those who would threaten them. Already weakened by the strong feelings in the room and tired by the previous use of her gift, she could barely hold on to her control. Quickly, she worked at her shielding, but without the help of her receptor, she was no more than half successful. Only when Jhonen released her was she given some respite.

"Child? Are you well?" Jhdeara asked in concern. She touched Lanai's shoulder.

A second wall of emotions pushed through Lanai, making her break into a sweat as she tried desperately to counteract what she was feeling. All her training, all her lessons, had been geared for her to work with another. She needed her receptor. Never was an empath taught to work on her own. What she'd learned, she'd learned out of necessity because she was so different. And to be touched was more than she could stand. Especially with all the sensations she'd dealt with over the last few days.

Without Jhoral's guidance and protection, it was as if she'd been thrown into the sea and left to be battered by waves of feeling so strong, she was unable to defend herself. With the rebel she'd been protected and shielded somewhat, but now...now she was all alone.

"Jhoral, stop them!" shouted Dyas as he leaped to his feet. "She can't take it. Don't you realize? She's an empath. She feels everything!"

The arms of her mind-mate jerked her away. Her body ached and shivered, and she clutched at him, wishing she could crawl inside his tunic and never come out. "I'm sorry," she whispered, her trembling worsening. "I tried..."

"I don't understand," he murmured, holding her so close she could barely breathe. His stark eyes stared at his astonished parents.

"You still have much to learn about empaths, my friend," Dyas muttered as he walked over to stare down at them both. "This is but a part of it."

"Tell me!"

Dyas sighed in frustration. "Don't you get it yet? An empath has the psychic gift to feel and read emotions. Lanai walks into a room and senses *everything* each one of us is feeling. Joy, sorrow, anger. All the emotions, all the time."

Jhoral stared up at him. "I know she senses things, but I thought she could shut it off. She's done it before. Otherwise...how can she live?"

"Why do you think empaths were taken and kept in a place by themselves? They have very little contact with the outside world until their melding. When Lanai came to you, she was pure...in every way." The Kylian prince shook his head. "When they meld, it is the receptor's responsibility to protect her from all the strong emotion surrounding her. They are trained to shield and to help the empath keep things in control...like you did when you shielded her against the rebel. But what is learned behavior to most receptors is foreign to you. You never had this training, so I'm guessing Lanai has been doing most of it herself these past few days. I think Mistress Aleris is right. She *is* very strong."

"Then why did she collapse?" Jhdeara questioned.

"My guess is she overloaded. There is a lot of emotion in this room. You don't have to be an empath to realize that." He looked back at Jhoral. "And don't you remember? Empaths can't be touched or do any touching without first shielding themselves. They must have their receptors close by to guide them. Again, if we use the

rebel as an example, you wouldn't allow her to touch him, yet you forced her to touch your father."

"My father is very different from that rebel scum!" the older prince snarled.

"Empaths don't differentiate between emotions, Jhoral," Dyas tried to explain. "They know the difference, but it's the strength that matters. Joy can be, and often is, much stronger than hate, but to an empath it can still be devastating."

Jhoral stared down at Lanai, suddenly realizing all that she'd gone through since their melding. The rebel had been bad enough, but the betrayal, the mogwraith...even his lovemaking, no matter how joyous it was... The emotions involved would be overwhelming. He didn't understand nearly enough, and the realization appalled him. "Telaer...why didn't you say anything? This training I lack could kill you."

She took a shaky breath. "You said...we would be fine. You would try to remember...our differences."

His eyes smarted with moisture as he buried his face in her fragrant hair. "And you believed me."

"You are my mind-mate."

As he listened to her mind-speech, this mating suddenly took on a whole new dimension. His fear for Lanai almost overwhelmed him. It made him ill to think it, but he finally had to admit Mistress Aleris might be right. He might be a mighty warrior, but he knew nothing of being a receptor. Those ideas were completely foreign to him. Protection, he understood, but how could his sword be of use against an enemy he couldn't see – only feel.

Guiding? He'd led thousands of men, but how could he, a man of war, guide an empath's gentle heart?

He shook his head as fear and self-condemnation twisted his guts. There was so much more to understand. More than he'd known when he'd accepted her that first night. Then, all he'd reacted to was the pure instinct of knowing she *should* be his. That she was something special to him. The promise that when they were together, he could be more than a warrior. But would he have done it if he'd known the changes he'd have to make? The changes she'd be forced to accept? The questions haunted him.

And now it was too late. If he made a mistake now, she could die. Gently, he wiped her tears away. "You were right, Lanai. Neither of us was prepared for this."

Fear turned her eyes a deep green, and she repeated his own words back to him. "Do you wish to give up?"

He hesitated, trying to find the right words, but before he could answer her, there was a knock at the door. A servant entered and bowed deeply. "The city administrator is here, Lord Sovereign."

Jhonen nodded. "Give us a few minutes and send him in." Turning back to his son, he sighed. "It is obvious you weren't told everything about this melding business,

Jhoral, and you have some decisions to make. We will stand with you, of course, but right now we have a battle to win."

Jhoral felt Lanai pull away from him. Emotionally and physically, her pain at his unconscious hesitation was more than she could bear. Her mental door slammed shut, and she struggled off his lap to sit at his side. The agony of loss ripped through him, and frustrated, he pulled her back to him, cradling her face in his hands. "We are not finished here, Lanai. What is between us is not settled. But as my father said, we have other duties first."

Her eyes were a dull gray when she answered him. "Yes, Jhoral."

He could feel her disbelief as if it were a viper snapping at the fragile bond between them. He wanted to shake her for it. To shout at her for thinking he didn't want to keep her. Jhoral might have been uncomfortable with the word "owned" as the Kylians used it, but every fiber of his being knew Lanai was his. For her to think differently infuriated him.

A moment later, the door opened and the servant bowed in three ornately dressed men. They all bowed and smiled. "Your Highnesses," the first man said. "We came as soon as we received your summons."

"Did you, Lord Charos?" the sovereign muttered. "I find that hard to believe, since the note was sent close to twelve hours ago. I just sent another message thinking perhaps the first one had gone astray."

Lord Charos smiled a politician's practiced smile. "My apologies. There were things we needed to see to."

"City administrator," Dyas interrupted. "Were you able to find the man we spoke of?"

Jhoral felt Lanai's sudden stillness. Automatically, he grabbed for her hand. "*What is it?*"

"*He's here,*" she mind-whispered, the shock she felt shooting right into him even with her shields up. "*One of these men is the traitor!*"

He went still. Jhoral had no reason to doubt Lanai, yet the official was saying something very different.

"Our people appreciate the warning more than you know, Sovereign." The flashily dressed man beamed at the royals. "I mean...to have a traitor in my midst and not even know it."

"Where is he now?" Jhonen asked.

"He's locked up and awaiting transfer to the palace." Lord Charos turned and smiled at Dyas. "Please tell your father thank you, and if there is anything more I can do..."

Jhoral couldn't allow the man to leave. Not now. His instincts were telling him something was very wrong. Remembering what they'd done once before, he squeezed her fingers. "*Will you help me, telaer?*" he mind-asked quickly.

He felt her shudder, but with a sigh, the door to her mind opened again. Her warmth flowed into him, and he realized just how empty he'd been without her.

Still holding on to his mind-mate, Jhoral stepped forward and extended his hand. "I would also like to thank you. My family's safety is very important to me."

The administrator automatically took the proffered hand. "My pleasure, Your Highness."

Jhoral didn't need Lanai's mind-cry of alarm to tell him this was the man they were after. Whatever flowed through him and into her was so strong, he felt the wrongness himself. His hand clenched down on the official's, pulling him close as his silver eyes stared into the frightened man's face. His teeth flashed in a feral grin, and dropping Lanai's hand, he grabbed Lord Charos and pushed him against the wall, his arm against his throat.

"We are betrayed, Father! Have care!"

Behind him, he heard the sound of crashing dishes and chairs being turned over. Lord Charos struggled, but Jhoral pulled his sword and held it to his enemy's throat. "I will kill you for this," he whispered. "No one comes against my family and lives."

The man's panicky eyes turned cunning. "Let me go, or your mother dies."

Icy fear sliced through Jhoral as he glanced over his shoulder. Dyas was on the ground, his eyes dazed with pain. His father stood with a sword on the second man, but the third man had a short knife pressed against his mother's belly. A tiny smear of blood could already be seen.

Jhoral's eyes flared with rage. He pressed the sword harder against Lord Charos's neck as he glared at the other rebel. "Release her, or I'll kill him."

The man sneered and pulled his mother's head back. The knife whipped up to her exposed throat. "There are many of us rebels," he snarled. "But only one of her. Your choice, Farsaeen...his life or hers?"

Fury poured off the dark prince, but finally, he pushed away from the city administrator. Freed, the man grabbed Jhoral's sword from him and backhanded the royal across the face. Jhoral only stared at him, his otherworldly eyes glowing as he wiped the trickle of blood from his lips.

Jhdeara was pushed into her mate's arms after he was disarmed. Lord Charos laughed. "So much for Farsaeen fighting skills. The only reason you even got close to us was because of a Kylian empath." He strode over to Lanai, but Jhoral blocked his way, refusing to move even when the sword pointed at his heart.

"I couldn't believe it when our secret was exposed." The administrator stared down at Lanai, hatred in his eyes. "But we have sympathizers everywhere. It was easy to put together that the empath who'd arrived here with a Farsaeen prince was the same one who'd been used to rape a man's mind and betray her people. It was only luck the rebel you questioned didn't know *I* was the rebellion's leader."

"You are all traitors," Dyas shouted, climbing to his feet. "You have betrayed us all."

The official spit on the ground. "You royals are the betrayers. You, who will let these animals take over our lands. But we won't allow it. Knowing we were discovered moved the timetable up, but this rebellion will succeed, and now I'll have the honor of killing you all myself."

The horror Jhoral felt from Lanai was overwhelming. It came in great billowing waves that made it hard for him to concentrate. He tried to calm her, but he didn't have time to deal with her fears. He was too busy searching for a way to turn the tables on his enemies. He would not allow this rebellion to take place. By the goddesses, he vowed to himself, I will protect my family.

Before he had a chance to do anything, there was a massive explosion downstairs. The room rocked around them, and everyone staggered, but the rebels still kept their weapons on their targets. A moment later, the old servant came flying in the door.

"Help! We are under att—"

His words were cut short when one of the rebels thrust his sword through the man's chest. Scarlet blood gushed from his wound, and the servant's surprised eyes met Jhoral's one last time before he choked and gasped for breath. His eyes went blank as he stumbled and, dropping with a harsh thud to the ground, died.

Lanai's keening scream cut through the room, the shrillness of it so sudden and painful all the men flinched. But the distraction was just enough. Almost as one, the three royals attacked the rebels, Dyas and Jhonen swarming over those closest to them, while Jhoral grabbed Lord Charos and wrestled him to the ground. For several long minutes, he heard only the sound of bodies pounding together, crashing furniture, and grunts and groans as blood flowed and lives were taken.

Jhoral rolled over the ground, fighting to keep his own sword from piercing his body. He punched and kicked, and finally was able to send the weapon flying. Jhara ran over and picked it up, and when he pushed his enemy to the side, she tossed it to him.

Not wanting to kill him yet, Jhoral slammed the hilt against Lord Charos's head, and the man crumpled. Turning, he saw Dyas standing over his dead opponent, just as Jhonen gave a mighty shout and ran the last man through.

"Is everyone all right?" Jhoral panted, his fierce silver gaze sweeping over the room. His mother had his little brother hidden behind her, and Jhara nodded shakily as she stared longingly at Dyas. But his heart almost stopped when he saw Lanai crumpled in a ball on the couch. He ran to her and pulled her into his arms. "Telaer? Where are you hurt?"

She made no answer, and when he touched her face, he saw her eyes were filled with shock and pain. He ran his hands over her, relieved to find her unharmed. "Lanai? Snap out of it. It's over. Everyone's all right."

The city administrator groaned, and leaving his mind-mate for a moment, Jhoral grabbed the rebel and dragged him over to where she sat, still unmoving. He grasped her hand and then put his on the fallen man's head. "I need your help, Lanai. They've changed the plan. We need to know when they are coming in. Search his mind. What do you see?"

"Jhoral—" Dyas began.

"Be silent!"

Lanai sat frozen, and frustrated, Jhoral grabbed her chin, forcing her to look at him. "Lanai! Wake up. I need your help! Shdok, woman! We haven't much time."

Jhara stepped closer. "Jhoral? I think she's too scared to talk."

Looking closer, his heart filled with dismay. Lanai did indeed look terrified, her mouth parted in a noiseless cry, those rainbow eyes dark and filled with horror. Her mind was a swirling mass of emotion. He shook her, this time a little harder. "Wake up! I need you. Your people need you."

"It's no use, my son." Jhonen's voice was filled with pity. "She's too frightened to help you."

Jhoral stared down at her, a deep scowl on his face. Her refusal to help rankled and disappointed. Finally, realizing she would be of no use to him, he pushed himself away. Picking up the city administrator, he shook him awake.

"Remember what I said?" he asked hoarsely. "That I'd kill you for touching my family?" Without remorse, he thrust his sword through his enemy's heart. "Consider me a man of my word."

Dropping the bloody corpse, he turned to his father. "We should go to his offices. There can't be that many available tunnels. Perhaps it is the same place, just a different time. We might still be able to stop them."

The sovereign nodded. "You and Dyas go. Gather the men and wipe out the rebellion. Kill every rebel you see. I will take care of anyone who comes at us here. I will protect the family."

Jhoral knelt next to Lanai, who had curled back up in a ball when he'd killed Lord Charos. He touched her forehead, his heart heavy. He was torn between helping her and doing battle, but he knew where his duty lay. And she couldn't help him in this condition. He looked back at his father. "Take care of her."

"We will."

Without another word he walked toward the door. Dyas started to follow; then firming his jaw, he stepped over to Jhara, and pulling her against him, kissed her deeply. When he was done, he set her back on her feet. "That," he said with an impudent grin, "will give you something to think about." A moment later, they both were gone.

Jhara touched her still-tingling lips with her fingers. "Oh my."

"I think we will be seeing another mating soon." Her father said with a chuckle.

Jhdeara shook her auburn head as she gazed down at the unmoving empath. "At least Jhara's will make more sense than the last one."

Locked away in the icy cavern of her mind, Lanai tried to fight back through the heavy swirling layers of hatred, fear, and death that imprisoned her. Each separate emotion pierced her, dragging her deeper and deeper into the pitiless darkness, and no matter what she did she couldn't claw her way out. A part of her wanted to get back to her mind-mate. But because he may hate her...because what they had may be over forever, a bigger part only wanted to hide.

She'd felt Jhoral's disappointment and disgust. When he pushed away from her, she'd seen the anger in his eyes, had sensed him distancing himself emotionally. It had happened just as she thought it might. He'd decided he'd made a mistake. The agony of loss filled her, and her heart ached with the knowledge she had failed her mind-mate when he needed her most. Failed the one person who meant more to her than her own life.

Aware of his father's pity and the displeasure of his mother and sister, and knowing Jhoral would never forgive her, she let herself drift. Deeper darkness beckoned, and her dulled eyes went even emptier. A welcome blackness overcame her, and believing she'd lost the only man she would ever truly be a part of, she allowed it to pull her deeper into the safety of silence where there was no pain.

Chapter Twelve

Dyas met Jhoral at the bottom of the stairs, and together they made short work of the few rebels who had dared enter the house with the rebellion leader. Both princes were almost disappointed when the last one sank to his knees and fell lifeless to the floor. Their anger still burned hotter than the sun, and as they sprinted out the door and raced through the streets, Jhoral knew a good portion of Dyas's fury was pointed right at him.

He glared at the younger man. "You have something to say...say it!"

"You're really something." Dyas shook his head at him. "Do you know what you just did to Lanai? Pushing her away like that?"

"What are you talking about? I have no time for frightened females. By the gods, man. We're in the middle of a battle. Did you really expect me to hold her hand?"

"You still don't understand, do you?" Dyas vaulted over a hedge and led the way down a back alley. "Even after everything you've been told, after everything you've seen, you think Lanai was just scared?"

Remembering the look on his mind-mate's face made him stumble, but Jhoral shrugged the thought away. "She's a woman and empath I know, so more sensitive. But she is also strong. There was no reason for her to break down like that."

"Jhoral, I love you like a brother, but you are a fool."

That stopped him in his tracks. Rage raced through him, clogging his throat and darkening his eyes. "Take care, princeling. No one insults me. Not even you."

Dyas only looked at him pityingly. "Listen to your own words. She's an empath. What does that mean?" He didn't wait for an answer. "Don't you understand? She felt everything in that room tonight. Every single thing."

Jhoral nodded, still confused and wretched about how he'd left Lanai. Her withdrawal had affected him too. He'd already gotten used to the connection between

them, and having it taken away... He shuddered. "Yes. That I do comprehend. She felt the emotions. But I was there with her. She could have used my strength as she did before. There was no reason for her to just give up."

"Shdok! You *don't* get it. An empath doesn't take anything. She gives. She waits for you to give to her. And you didn't. You were so busy fighting, you didn't offer to shield or protect her. She was helpless."

"And you think I was wrong?" Jhoral glared at his friend. "If I had a choice between helping her feel better and saving lives, you know what I would...should choose."

"By the gods, Jhoral. Are you being deliberately obtuse? Didn't you listen when I tried to explain it earlier?" Dyas threw up his hands when Jhoral growled and moved toward him. "How can I make you comprehend? Your mind-mate didn't just sense the emotions. Since Lanai is an empath, she felt...experienced them. Each and every thought of hate or anger. Each slice of pain. Every bit of fear from each one of you. You must understand what I'm trying to tell you. She felt each emotion *as if it were happening to her.*"

There was a long moment of shocked silence.

"No," breathed Jhoral, his whole body going icy cold as he finally recognized what his friend had been trying to tell him. "That cannot be. But...but that means —"

"Yes," Dyas interrupted. "She knew your mother's fear for her child, experienced the prick of the knife at her belly. She felt you get slapped across the face and tasted the blood in your mouth. And when the old man died, she felt that sword pierce his heart. She *felt* it, Jhoral. Not as if she was watching it like you and I did, but as if it were happening to her personally. Why do you think she screamed?" He rubbed his eyes tiredly.

"Each time. Over and over again. Every thrust of the sword, each beating, each bruise. My gods, man. If the blows administered tonight had all happened to you, a warrior, you would be hard-pressed to struggle to your knees. So why would you expect Lanai, a gentle woman who has never experienced any of these things, to do more?"

Guilt flooded Jhoral's soul as he remembered the look on Lanai's face when he'd turned from her. Dyas was right. He was a fool. And worse than that, he was a hard-hearted one. No wonder she'd shut herself away from him. Could he have been any more ignorant of her needs? "I thought...I thought being there for her would be enough."

"A receptor is much more than a presence in a room." Dyas glanced down the alley and began jogging again. "It is a way of connecting you haven't yet grasped."

Jhoral hunched his shoulders against the sorrow and regret welling up inside him. The thought of what Lanai had experienced almost killed him. She was so sweet and gentle, yet with a courage and strength that matched his own. How else could she have stood against her mentor? How else could she have managed by herself out in the

forest? "I should have helped her. I should have protected her." He shook his head again. "But, I didn't know how. Shdok! I wasn't there when she needed me."

"None of us knew who those men were. You can't blame yourself for all that happened."

"No...it was after," he said hoarsely, his silver eyes anguished at the extent of his folly. "I was angry with her weakness, and she felt it. She knew I was disappointed in her. My gods, she probably thinks she let me down, and I'll reject her because of it. Her heart must be broken. What have I done?"

Dyas's eyes narrowed as the lights of the garrison came into view. "She felt what you felt, my friend, and you don't need to be psychic to see you've become the most important thing in her world. I don't know what will happen if she thinks she's lost you."

But Jhoral did. Lanai's fears and worries had never been hidden from him. As he and Dyas gathered the men together, Farsaeon and Kylian fighting side by side, he thought about his promises to his mind-mate. *"No one will take you away. I will allow no one to separate us. I will kill anyone who tries."*

Who would have known it would be himself and his ignorance he would have to fight first.

* * * * *

Back at the mansion, Jhonen paced by the window. Jhara and her mother took turns watching Lanai, who still lay on one of the couches, wrapped in a blanket. Jhu, holding a walking stick, played soldier as he marched back and forth at the far side of the room. The murmured conversations couldn't penetrate the blackness that had stolen Lanai away. She floated, refusing the pain that beckoned, feeling only the grief of loss.

"I see lights flashing near the city center," Jhonen said as he watched for any soldiers who might have gotten through the outer defenses. "It should all be over soon."

"I hope Dyas will be all right." Jhara's eyes filled with tears. "And Jhoral too."

"Your young man is in good hands. Jhoral has been through many battles and will watch him carefully. These upstarts are no threat."

"I hope so." Jhdeara joined her mate at the window, rubbing her hand over her rounded stomach. She glanced at the motionless Lanai. "But our son seems different since he met the female."

They all fell silent, staring out the window. No one noticed the door to the pantry open and a pale man with feral eyes slip out. Behind him, a small dumbwaiter sat open, an entrance none of them knew of. Stealthily, he moved forward, his hate-filled eyes intent on the large man at the window. He didn't notice the small form step into his path.

"Halt! Who goes there?"

The royals all turned in time to see the dark-haired Jhu swept off his feet by a ragged soldier. A dagger was pressed to his neck, and Jhdeara gasped as she tried to go to him. Both her daughter and her mate held her back.

"What do you want?" Jhonen growled. "Are you such a coward that you hide behind a child?"

"I will kill him and then your woman," the man boasted. "Then I will slit your throat and make sport with your daughter while you die. Say your prayers, because the next words you speak will be to the gods."

Jhara screamed in rage, and at the same time, Jhu — his silver eyes flashing — bit down on the man's hand. Swearing, the rebel dropped the boy, and reacting quickly, Jhonen stepped forward and snatched the child to safety. But as he turned back to meet his enemy, the rebel struck, plunging his weapon deep into Jhonen's belly.

The sovereign fell, blood pouring from the ragged wound. His enemy laughed triumphantly and turned to what he thought were lesser prey. But he reckoned without knowing the full truth about Farsaeen females. They were warriors too. Without hesitation, fury lighting her green eyes, the queen snatched her mate's sword from its sheath and, with one slashing blow, took the rebel's head.

Already on her knees, Jhara frantically tried to staunch the flow of blood that poured from her father's stomach. Tossing the sword aside, Jhdeara joined her, but one look told the queen it was a mortal wound.

The lord sovereign was dying.

Pulling her youngest son under one arm, she cradled her mate's head in her lap, closed her eyes, and grieved.

* * * * *

"Kill every rebel you see!"

Jhoral shouted his father's words, shattering the silence of the courtyard as the rebels poured out of the hidden tunnel, expecting to take the city by surprise. But it was the soldiers who surprised the rebels, Jhoral leading the way, killing any enemy who came close. His anger and grief over what had happened with Lanai made him fight wildly, and men by the score found their deaths at his sword.

Dyas made a good showing himself, proving Kylians could be warriors as well. The men fought, guarding each other's back as one by one the rebels all died. Soon the square out front of the administrator's house ran red with blood, bodies lying everywhere in a tangled mass of arms and legs.

It didn't take long. The rebellion was quashed before it started. Because Lanai had known the exact location of the tunnel, the city had been saved. But Jhoral's sorrow only increased. His mate was the reason for this victory, and he'd turned away from her. He could barely stand being in his own skin.

Dyas wiped his sword on his cloak and turned to his friend. His eyes were bright with victory. "It is done. Thanks to you and your men, we have won."

Jhoral shook his head. "Your men fought well. They have skills you didn't tell me about."

White teeth flashed in a grin. "Have to keep something as a surprise."

"Your Highness!"

Both men turned to see a soldier racing up to them, his young face worried. "The king bids you come. There has been another attack on the mansion. A rebel hidden within the house —"

He was never given a chance to finish. Both royals exchanged a single look and sprinted down the street.

* * * * *

It was the grief that pulled her slowly from the inky blackness surrounding her. Terrible, heart-wrenching grief...so very much like her own. Lanai shied away, not wanting to feel any more of that kind of pain, but it called out to her, curling around her mind and forcing her to feel again. The darkness receded a little, but still she fought. It hurt. The agony of loss, the knowledge that she would forever be incomplete. Pain slashed through her with sharp, greedy talons, and she wept. A rain of never-ending tears.

Yet, still the sorrow called to her, the anguish so terrible she could no longer separate it from her own pain. All around her was misery, and though she tried to push back, she felt herself moving through the darkness, coming closer and closer to the source of the sadness.

The blackness of her own pain faded, yet the grief never lessened. It only grew, mingling with the new unhappiness until her heart wanted to burst with empathy. She heard weeping, and her tears flowed anew, knowing that whoever they were, their grief had now become her own.

A new pain touched her, a physical one, so deep and profound it stole away her very breath. This pain too was what had dragged her from her dark misery. One last time she tried to retreat, but it was impossible. What she was, all that she'd ever hoped to be, told her this was where she was needed.

Tears coursing down her cheeks, she stretched out her hand toward the pain. Her mind and soul split open as she crawled slowly closer. Darkness threatened again, but instead of embracing it, this time she turned away. The fog of emotion surrounding her grew thicker the closer she drew to the source of the agony.

Her fingertips touched someone, and it was like a sword being driven through her tender heart. This person she knew.

Jhoral?

Fear clutched at her before tears of relief were shed. No. It was not her mind-mate. But as she came closer, her senses cringing from the smell of blood and horror of death she now could feel, she knew it was someone very close to him. He had a similar scent, a comparable feel to his mind.

"What is she doing?"

Lanai heard the voice and flinched. The anger was palatable, the pain tremendous. This was a source of the grief that had brought her here. She wanted to move away, to go in the opposite direction from that misery and anger, but she knew she couldn't. Pushing away her own fears, she crawled nearer, her hands growing bloody as they moved up the man's still form. Her body beginning to scream with the same pain he was experiencing. When she touched his face, she knew and cried out as the truth raced through her. Not Jhoral, but *Jhonen*, his father. He was dying. She whimpered in agony. Her mind-mate loved this man. He would be devastated to lose him.

Lanai shook her head as determination raced through her. Not this time. She couldn't let it happen. She'd failed Jhoral before, and he'd left her, but she would not fail him this time. He might never come back to her, but it didn't matter. She would do this for him because...because... The knowing flowed through her, and for the first time, she wept for the love she would never have.

I love you, Jhoral.

The whisper filled her mind, giving her strength as Lanai finally understood she'd loved him before she even knew him. Soulmates...mind-mates...lovers. Fated to be together before they were born. She smiled, and with the love in her heart shattering all the fear, she gave Jhoral the only gift she had left.

Her life.

Kneeling beside the fallen man, she put her hand on his forehead. Her other hand moved down to cover the deep, gaping wound in his abdomen. Slowly, ignoring the incredible pain ripping at her, she took a deep breath. Taking her psychic gifting past anything she'd ever been taught, knowing somehow instinctively what she must do, she opened up her mind.

Disorder. Confusion. Bedlam. Never before had she felt such deep, wrenching pain. Her head went back, and her eyes flew open, the rainbow color muddying instantly to black. Tears streamed down cheeks, which were as pale as salt, and she cried out as the agony slashed at her soul.

"Mother?" she heard Jhu say in a hushed voice as he watched Lanai from the safety of his mother's arms. His face was wet with tears. Even at nine sun-turns he knew his father was dying. He was, after all, a warrior's son. "What is she doing?"

"She shouldn't touch him," his sister hissed, her grief deep and tormenting. She made to push the smaller woman away.

"Leave her be," Jhdeara said softly as she gazed at the emotions rippling across Lanai's tortured face. "I don't know, Jhu. But I think...I think she's trying to help."

Lanai didn't acknowledge them, so intent was she on her task. Her skin was on fire as particle by particle she absorbed Jhonen's pain and made it hers. Her lips parted in a silent scream as she used her own strength to knit the torn and dying flesh. Minutes passed, then hours, but slowly, painstakingly, she completed her task. This time her mind-mate wouldn't be ashamed of her. This time he would be pleased.

The last bit of skin under her hand pulled together, and fighting back the black wave of unconsciousness threatening to swallow her, she touched her mind to his. Jhonen was there, but still hidden in his own remembered pain—Death loath to give up another victim. But Lanai fought through that as well. Using the last remnants of her strength, the entire essence of what she had left to give, she brought him back from oblivion.

Jhonen sucked in a deep, life-giving breath as Lanai breathed her last. Her frail, empty body slid to the floor and lay still.

Jhoral, Dyas, and the soldier raced through the door a few minutes later. The dark prince skidded to a stop, aghast at the sight that met his eyes. His mother and father sat on the floor, their arms wrapped around each other. Jhara and Jhu leaned against them, weeping copiously. An intruder—sans head—lay a distance away. But what made his heart stop beating in his chest was the pale, still body of his mind-mate lying in a pool of blood on the floor.

"*Lanai!*" he shouted as he stumbled to her. His arms wrapped around her to pull her up against him, and he flinched at the utter stillness of her body. She was still warm, but his mind screamed in denial. The emotion and life that made her what she was had disappeared.

"She saved Father," Jhara wept as Dyas lifted her up to hold her tightly. "She touched him and healed him. He was dying, and then he was alive."

Jhoral stared at his father, who sat in his mother's arms, healthy and whole. Jhonen shook his head, his own sorrow obvious in his distressed face.

"I was on the other side. Surrounded by music and light. I saw my mother and father, but they were crying. Then your Lanai was there. She took me by the hand and brought me back. My gods, son. She saved me. She gave her life for mine."

As he smoothed back the hair from her brow, Jhoral's tears fell on her pale face. He couldn't...wouldn't believe she was gone. She'd open her eyes and smile at him, and they would start all over. He'd learn to protect and guide her just like a real receptor would do. No one would ever hurt her again, himself included. She would live and love and laugh with him, and they would grow old together. She would never feel lonely again, because he'd never let her from his sight. *Ever*. He'd made a promise. This time he intended to keep it.

Burying his face in her hair, he closed his eyes and searched for her. His temples throbbed, and his body felt like it would explode with grief when all he saw was the emptiness of an eternity alone. "Don't leave me, Lanai," he whispered aloud, before

switching to mind-speak. *"If you go, I'll never be whole again. I need you, mind-mate. Always."*

"Jhoral?" He flinched when he felt Dyas's hand on his shoulder. "I'm so sorry, my friend." The Kylian prince stared down at Lanai's still form with mingled awe and grief. "She's done something that should be impossible. Empaths can heal, but to return the soul to the body? To give up their own life to bring back another? That is something written about only in legend."

"It hurt her," Jhdeara said, her voice thick with tears. "Like she was being tortured, but she never hesitated. She just sat there for hours in terrible agony, but she never moved...never flinched." The queen buried her face in Jhonen's chest. "She gave me back my mate but killed herself doing it."

"I'm so sorry," Jhara wept. Her fingers clutched at Dyas's tunic as she buried her face against his chest. "We were wrong about her. She is...was special."

"Jhoral can make her all better, can't you?" Jhu looked at his older brother, complete trust in his eyes.

Jhoral stared unseeingly at his family, barely hearing their words of sorrow. He refused to acknowledge Lanai was gone. It couldn't end this way. She couldn't be dead. It had to be a mistake. Or — his father's pale face came into focus — there had to be a way to bring her back. She'd saved his father...gave up everything to do it. Couldn't Jhoral find a way to do the same for her?

"You did it for me, didn't you?" he murmured as his fingers wiped the tears and blood from her eerily calm face. "You thought you'd failed, so you were trying to make it up to me, when it was me who was in the wrong the whole time." He kissed her cold lips, uncaring of anyone around him. "Telaer, I should never have pushed you away. I was wrong...so damned stubborn. I didn't understand. But I would never have rejected you. I swear it on my own life. You're a part of me now. You...what we have is too important. Come back, Lanai. Let me show you how much you really mean to me."

Only silence met his pleading, but still he refused to give up. He was a fighter, was he not? Now he had something to fight for, something far more important than anything else in his life. And yet as he stared down at Lanai, he knew all his warrior's skills would do him no good. He needed that special something that made him more. That unbelievable magick that had brought them together in the first place.

Thinking back, he remembered how she'd melded with him originally. Taking her head between his hands, he closed his eyes and pressed his forehead against hers. He poured all the energy she'd ever given him back into her, sharing his mind, soul, and spirit again. He howled in desperation as he finally realized what he'd known instinctively from the first time he saw her. Brushing his lips over hers, he gave her the only gift he had left to give.

"Lanai, I love you."

At his words, blinding silver light enveloped him. He cried out as all the warmth and love they'd shared flowed from him back into Lanai's still body. The others in the

room had to shield their eyes, but Jhoral refused to look away, staring instead into his beloved's face. The truth sliced through him with the power of a thousand meldings. Always there, yet waiting patiently to be discovered.

It was love that made their joining so special. Love that had brought them together from the very beginning. Made for each other from before the dawn of time, their love and passion was preordained. He would rather die than give it up now. He would do whatever it took. Fight whomever he needed to fight. Because now he knew, and that knowing made all the difference. Lanai loved him, and by all the gods and goddesses above...*he loved her too.*

The power of his own gifting enveloped them both, and for the first time, he truly understood why he'd been chosen for her. He *was* special. His strength...his instincts were different from what he'd ever understood. Not because of rank or birth, but because Farsaeen or not, believer or not, he had a fantastical supernatural ability that no one else of his kind had. Call him psychic, tell him he had special powers, the title mattered not. He was one of the few who could bond with an empath and complete her. And it was only with Lanai could he be more than just a warrior.

Knowing this...finally understanding, he gave her all he was, just as she'd done for him so many times before. His love, his need and desire to hold and protect her, everything that made him the man he was, he gave back to the woman he loved above any other.

Using the gift he was just now beginning to understand, he sent the light of that love shining into her shattered soul. Deeper and deeper he traveled, flinching at the profound darkness he traversed. The thought Lanai was somehow trapped here—caught between life and death—made him ill. The knowledge she may never escape filled him with horror. He crossed an icy cold barrier into a murky, muted light where there was such a feeling of emptiness he had to shudder. Using his mind, trying to do what he'd seen Lanai do, he searched, resolved to find his mind-mate or die trying.

He was unsure how much time passed, but as the seconds turned into minutes, he could feel the tremendous strain tearing at his mind. His head ached, and his body shook with the effort of trying to contact her. Jhoral's mouth went dry, and his eyes burned, but still he wouldn't give up.

He'd just taken another firm grip on his control when he felt it. A caress as soft as a kiss and as warm as a sunbeam's light. His heart stuttered to a stop, and quickly, he sent his mind sweeping outward, greedily searching for the touch he knew above all others.

Lanai.

She was there, caught amid the churning shadows. Battling through them, fighting the cloying feeling of hopelessness, he traced her to where she floated...indistinct and alone. Instinctively, he seized the tendril of her life force, rejoicing at the sudden knowing he'd finally found what he'd been seeking. He held on so tightly, his mind almost shredded with the pain he felt. The darkness surrounded

him, threatening to rip her from his arms, but he refused to let go. Not now...not when he was so close to saving her. Grimly, he fought, his warrior's heart knowing this was the most important battle of his life.

Suddenly, his mind was filled with the same colors, lights, and sounds he knew so well. The beauty of it made him cry out, and then she was there with him, her rainbow warmth filling him anew. Jhoral lifted his head and gazed down at the woman he loved, hope swelling almost painfully inside him. His heart pounded as he raised her fingers to his lips in a lover's kiss.

She took a deep, cleansing breath, and then Lanai's eyes slowly opened. Her lips curved into the same lovely smile that had touched his soul the very first time he'd seen it. Joy filled him to the bursting, and he pulled her into his arms...the one place she was meant to be.

"Mind-mate." Their minds touched as his lips captured hers. *"Welcome home."*

Epilogue

The stars twinkled down on the two lovers as they lay together, their hearts beating as one. Gently, Jhoral threaded his fingers through his mate's long hair, enjoying the silky feel of it caressing his naked chest.

He'd brought her here, back to his beautiful aerie in the sky...the mountain palace of Skyros. There would be time enough for all the lessons he knew he needed to keep her safe and protected in her new life as his mind-mate. For now, he just wanted to hold her, to keep her close. To thank all the goddesses and gods in heaven for the second chance they'd been given.

That day when she'd come back to him, alive and new, Jhoral cried like a child. When she'd opened her eyes, filling his mind with her rainbow of colors, he'd known a joy he couldn't express. She was the greatest gift he'd ever been given, and he'd spend the rest of his life making sure she knew it.

They'd been so exhausted—her from the healing she'd done, and him with bringing her back from oblivion—Jhoral had just carried her upstairs where they'd fallen into bed to sleep for a solid forty-eight hours. It was only when the other needs of their bodies became too much for them that they'd struggled back to wakefulness.

Once they'd bathed and eaten, they slept again, this time to awaken and celebrate the love they both now recognized. Their joining was slow and as sweet as a dream, as passion was softened by the knowledge of another kind of forever. Lips met...fingers intertwined as he slipped gently inside her. Together, they moved in the sensual dance that makes two people completely one.

Silver eyes met rainbow and then went opaque as their mutual climaxes shivered through them. And then, holding each other tightly, they slid back into a satisfied sleep, knowing they never again would be separated.

It took them almost a week to recover, and in that time, both their kingdoms were radically changed. The soldier who'd come in with Jhoral and Dyas let it slip to his fellows what Lanai had done. Within hours it was all over Kyliia, and Lanai was fast becoming someone to either be worshipped or feared. An empath who could bring the dead back to life? A miracle worker? Now that was something to talk about.

She tried to explain the sovereign hadn't been dead, only dying, but it didn't seem to matter. Commoners whispered, and the Psychic Council demanded she be returned for study, but Jhoral ignored them all. Lanai was his and would remain that way. What she could do may be the stuff of legends, but for him, she was the answer to all his dreams and longings, and that was what was truly important.

But then his own people got involved. The first time Jhoral and Lanai left their room and came down to dinner, they were interrupted by one of the Farsaeen military commanders. His excitement was palpable as he stared at Lanai with calculating eyes.

His question as to whether Lanai could take the process she'd used and do the opposite was at first greeted with confusion. But then he made it clear when he proposed using Lanai to get close to one of their enemy leaders. If she could give life, couldn't she take it? Wouldn't the empath be a perfect assassin? No one would suspect such a sweet young girl, and all it would take was a single touch of her hand.

He barely made it out of the room alive.

Jhoral lost control, hurling the man across the room with one blow of his strong fist, then following it up with a beating that left the soldier battered and bruised. He'd sent him running, furious at the thought that someone would try and use Lanai in such a despicable way. His shout had made all the windows in the house rattle ominously.

"My mind-mate...my life-mate is not an assassin!"

It was only after he'd sent the lucky-to-be-breathing officer away did he realize what he'd said. Turning back to his family, he saw they were all staring at him with the same surprised look Lanai wore.

At first he'd thought his mind-mate was upset about the strong emotions, even though he'd done his best to shield her. But then, when his mother smiled knowingly at him, he understood what he'd really done.

Going to the woman who held his heart, he'd pulled her against him and kissed her lovingly. Then, cradling her face in his hands, he asked, "With the way I feel about you, Lanai, can you think I'd be satisfied with anything else? Remember what I said before? When we were riding Carn? I meant it, my love. Mind-mate, life-mate, partner. Companion, lover, mother of my children. *I want all of you.* I will accept nothing less."

Her tear-filled eyes and elated smile told him all he needed to know. As their lips met, he had vowed that she would never fear losing him again.

His parents, filled with gratitude and acceptance, welcomed her into the family. What they'd seen left little room for doubt. How his people may react had yet to be seen, but since Lanai had saved the sovereign's life, Jhoral had little worry about how they would accept his new mate...and someday queen.

And even her own people's concern about him life-mating with an empath wouldn't dissuade him. As the days passed, those who had heard the tale of the miraculous healing began to show up in the courtyard, bringing with them their sick and dying. They all wanted Lanai's help. But when Jhoral saw how much it took out of his mind-mate, he put his foot down. *No more.* Her health and well-being were much too important to him.

Because he needed her more than any of them.

When the press of people became too much, Jhoral wrapped her in a warm flying-rug, tied her securely to him, and flew her back to his mountain kingdom for the rest they both still desperately needed.

Not more than a day had passed when a messenger arrived with a note from Mistress Aleris, demanding Jhoral return the empath to the training facility for further study. He ignored it. Before he'd left Orelia, he'd sat down with Dyas and Jhonen and told them what had happened to send Lanai running into the forest. The Kylian prince had been infuriated at the deception and treachery by those he'd been taught to trust and respect. He'd been angrier than Jhoral had ever seen him, and swore that Mistress Aleris and Lord Merin would be punished for what they tried to do. Jhoral agreed to leave the matter in Kylian hands. At least for now.

They'd been back in Skyros for three days when Dyas sent him a formal letter telling him to ignore the good mistress's message. Mistress Aleris and Lord Merin had been removed from their positions as council members, and both had been banished for what they'd done. The empath who had helped them, Wescaa, was also punished, though to a lesser degree. She'd just been following orders.

While there was obvious concern for Lanai's well-being, since Jhoral had mated with her, both in mind *and* body, the royal house of Kylia now granted him full possession of the empath. They asked that he come back for proper training, but since he'd chosen to make Lanai his life-mate, that bonding superseded any rights the Psychic Council might have had. Jhoral smiled, knowing it was Dyas's words of support to the king and queen that made everything possible.

He hadn't shared the first missive, but he had the second. The joy in Lanai's eyes when she knew she could truly belong to him forever staggered him. He realized again just how deep her feelings for him were.

When his sister and brother arrived home a few days later, Jhara went out of her way to be kind to Lanai. Jhara felt badly about the way she'd treated the older girl, knowing it was the empath who'd saved her father from certain death. Lanai, who'd never had a real female friend, bloomed like a *baruna* flower, especially when the princess gave her a rainbow-colored flutter-bug dress of her very own.

Jhu thought of Lanai like a new toy, always following her around and asking her to show him how to heal someone. Finally, after his mind-mate was looking a little frazzled around the edges, Jhoral took his brother for a long Skyhawk ride and chat. After that, the younger prince tried to keep his curiosity in check.

The rebellion had been totally crushed, and while there might be some who were still disgruntled about Farsaeans being on Kylian land, the majority of the citizens seemed to welcome the newcomers. With the advent of a cross-culture melding, many of the old fears fell away. New questions were asked, and the Psychic Council, now headed by King Freyan himself, commanded studies to see if Lanai and Jhoral were an aberration or the first of many.

Dyas visited Skyros and formally asked for Jhara's hand. She hadn't given him her answer yet, but her emotions were plain in her expressive silver-green eyes. Jhoral didn't need to be a receptor to know his sister was in love.

So, knowing they might soon be in-laws, Jhoral's parents, along with his siblings, returned to Audera for another visit, and they were all still at the castle enjoying King Freyan and Queen Castila's hospitality.

That meant Jhoral and Lanai were alone, and if her screams of pleasure were any indication, it was a good thing.

He smoothed his hand down the curve of her back, smiling as she shivered. "How do you feel?"

Lanai wrinkled her nose. "A poor question to ask an empath."

He lifted a brow. "You know what I mean. Are you tired? You still look a little pale to me."

She sighed and rubbed her foot along his hairy calf. "If I'm pale, it's because you won't let me out of this bed."

"And that is a problem?"

"Only when you aren't in it with me."

Grinning, he pulled her up for a deep kiss. "You need your rest. For the gods' sake, Lanai, you almost died. Let me pamper you a little."

Her smile teased him. "I do enjoy you spoiling me. No one has ever treated me like this before."

"You deserve it and more. I want you well rested before my parents return. Remember, we have another mating ceremony to enjoy."

"Life-mate." Lanai sighed in happiness. "I never thought I would have one. And now I am doubly blessed. I have a mind- *and* a life-mate."

"I've been thinking about your name." Jhoral wrapped a strand of her hair around his finger. "You know it is the tradition of my people to add our family's surletters, in our case, the letters *Jh*, to a female's name upon mating. It is a symbol of blending...of acceptance, but you are Kylian, not Farsaeon. And Jhlanai, I must admit, is a mouthful. So, if you'd prefer, you may keep Lanai."

Her rainbow eyes turned a deep blue. "But you will be my mate. What would you like me to do?"

Jhoral smiled. "Whatever you want."

She shook her head. "You can't fool me. Remember, I know your mind." Giggling, she rolled over on top of him. "So, I will be Jhlanai in public to honor my mate and his family. And in private you can call me Lanai."

"In private," he murmured as he reached down and ran his hand over her shapely rear, "I will call you, my love."

"In private," she whispered back to him, "I hope you will do much, much more."

His silver eyes flared again with a need that never really disappeared. Sliding down his body, she let her teeth nibble at the soft skin of his groin. To her great joy, Jhoral had taught her the different ways they could use their mouths to satisfy each other, and she enjoyed giving that pleasure back to him.

Now, she took his already hardening shaft in her mouth, loving the feel of his soft skin over the hard strength of him. As he'd taught her, Lanai stroked him, first with her tongue, licking and sucking from the tight balls at the base, up the underside to the small ridge of skin that was so very sensitive. When his cock went even harder, she used her teeth, gently nibbling all over until he was throbbing and urging her to do more.

She licked the helmetlike head, tasting the bittersweet flavor of precum, shivering in delight as her mouth slowly sucked him in. He was much too large for her to take fully, but she'd learned to hold the base and pump gently at the same time she used her mouth to suck him deep. His guttural groans and jerk of his hips made her own body tighten with desire. Each time they made love, Jhoral showed her something more, and their nights and days were filled with enjoyable experiments and passionate discoveries.

Now, his movements became stronger, until, with a growl, he pulled her off and over the top of him. Blinking in surprise, her breath caught when he held her high above his throbbing cock. His glowing eyes never left hers as he lowered her, guiding his erection into her wet, hot quim. Slowly, he pulled her deeper, and she cried out at the delicious stretching of her flesh around him.

It seemed to take forever, it only took a moment, but soon he was buried all the way inside her. Her body throbbed along with his, and she put her hands on his strong chest for balance. Jhoral smiled, so slow and sexy, she shivered in delight, making her body tighten and his eyes go even hotter.

And then he moved, grasping her hips to shift her slowly up and down on his rock-hard length. Fire shot through her loins, and she moaned. Her breasts ached, and her nipples were like hard, dark berries wanting to be picked. After a few minutes, she began to move with him, using her strong legs to lift and lower herself.

She cried out when his hands, freed from moving her, went to her breasts to roll and pluck at her nipples. Streaks of heat flashed straight to her quim, and her head went back as her body neared its release.

"Let go," he growled hoarsely. "Let go. I'll catch you."

Lanai said one word...only his name, yet the passion and love were unmistakable. Their desires mingled as every nerve ending sparked with hot, sweet lust. She knew now what she could do to him, just as she knew what he could do to her.

And that knowing was the sweetest part of all.

She felt him throb hard one last time, and then he reared up and clasped her hard against him. Her name was a muffled shout, and with a breathless cry of desire fulfilled, she leaped over the edge as well and let him catch her.

Several long sighs later, he moved so they were side by side, yet still joined. His lips traced over the side of her jaw. "I love you, Lanai. I don't think I'll ever be able to say it enough."

She smiled as she caressed his strong back. "And I love you, more than I can say. I thank the gods you decided to come to the Melding Ceremony that night."

Jhoral rolled her over on her back, and she shivered at the feel of him still inside her. "And I thank them," he whispered, his lips exploring her mouth as if it were the sweetest wine, "that you are so very stubborn and wouldn't give up."

"Do you think we would have found each other if you hadn't come early to see Prince Dyas?"

He nodded, his silver eyes burning with certainty. "We were fated to be together, telaer. I would have found you if it took the rest of my days. In this life or any other. And this is just the beginning. We have a lifetime of love to share." His mouth captured hers again, their thoughts melded, and her mind soared into a rainbow of passionate longings.

Forever as one, forever together. Mind-mates, life-mates. The warrior and the empath...two so different and yet perfectly matched. All that she was and would be had begun when they'd finally found each other. Lanai knew she would be blessed for eternity. She had been given acceptance, love, and understanding, and still the best reward imaginable was what she had found underneath it all. She had discovered Jhoral was more than a warrior.

He was her destiny.

 THE END 

CJ England

CJ England credits her passion for writing to her second grade sweetheart, Steven, a blond haired cutie with dimples, who dumped her for a girl who could swing on the monkey bars. She wrote her first story about love and loss after that tragic episode.

In her life she has modeled, competed in rodeos as a barrel racer and trick rider, taught preschool, performed as an actress and singer, served cocktails at Disneyworld, specialized in production work, and got carried away by Spiderman when she worked with him at Universal Studios.

She is a gypsy, due to her curiosity and "itchy feet", spending time in twenty countries, and has visited forty-two states in our own. Even raising three kids didn't slow her down. Married to her own personal hottie, Jonathon, who is her inspiration, lover, and bestest friend, she plans to travel the world, writing about all the places they visit.

She is known on the Internet as a bestselling, award winning author who can bring sensuality and romance together in ways that require you keep a fire extinguisher and a box of Kleenex handy. CJ wants her books to spark the imaginations of her readers so they will begin to believe anything can happen if you...*Follow Your Dreams.*

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