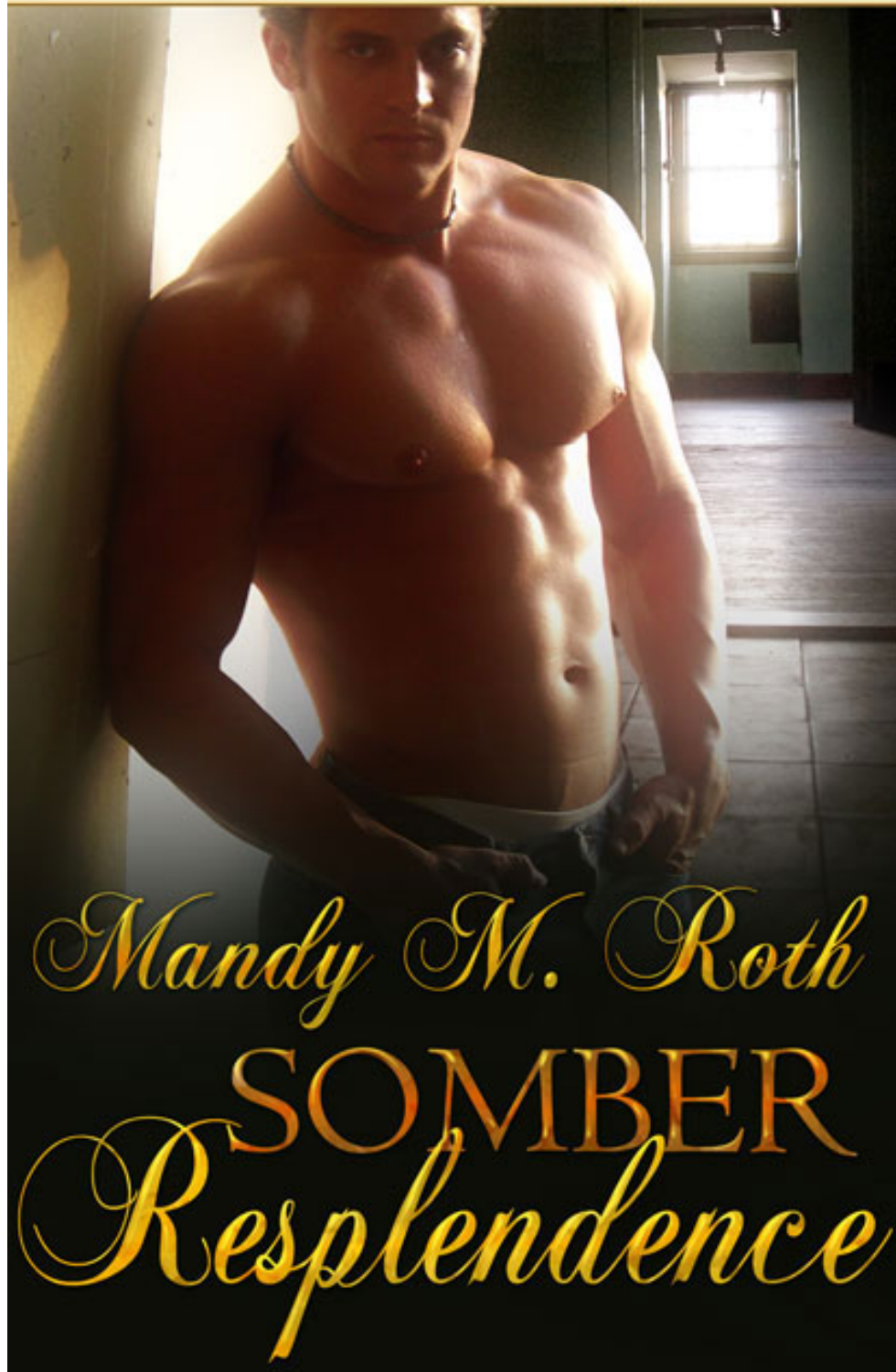


ELLORA'S CAVE **AEON**



Mandy M. Roth
SOMBER
Resplendence

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Somber Resplendence

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SOMBER RESPLENDENCE

Mandy M. Roth

Dedication

*To my readers for sticking with me through thick and thin.
To my editor Suz, for helping to whip Sidney and Aland into shape.*

Prologue

Aland flashed into the locker room of the dance studio, Sirius, his best friend and brother-at-arms, near his side. They'd been on the hunt for a group of renegade Constellaziogēn warriors. Men who ignored the rules set in place by their king long ago. The renegades didn't care that they were hurting, stealing and even killing human women. All that mattered to them was finding a mate, someone to sate their needs and spend their seed in with the hopes of reproducing. Whether or not that female was willing and was truly destined to be theirs was secondary. They hunted for women with psychic gifts, born under the same astrological sign as the legion in which the warrior served. Their actions sickened Aland. While he didn't exactly believe humans were the be-all and end-all, he did respect their lives and understand their value to the way of things. They were part of the natural order. A balance needed to keep all realms healthy and happy.

The stench of a renegade was all around them. Tainted power and magik almost always accompanied the ones who had grown too bold, who thought themselves untouchable as did the main one they hunted now.

Xipil.

It was the renegades who still worried about being caught who proved the hardest to track. They bothered to cover their energy signature and looked for new ways to sneak past the Gatekeepers undetected.

Blinding white light from a portal caused them both to lift their hands to shield their faces. Between the smell, the light and the strumming of power in the air around them, it was evident someone had opened an unauthorized portal. Not only that, they'd done so in a location that did not naturally lend itself to one. The physics of their society were far more advanced than that of humans. Even so, a heavy amount of constellation

appreciation, knowledge and magik was required. To open a portal in a spot ill-equipped for one meant the person was desperate. They were unstable at best. While they wouldn't do much in the way of damage to the surrounding area, they weren't something Aland would willingly pass through—not if he wanted to come out the other side totally intact. This lot apparently didn't care about safety.

Catching sight of Sirius, Aland reached out, nudging his friend. "Where's Phoebe?" he asked, concern for his friend's mate first and foremost on his mind.

The sound of a male voice drifted to them. It was coming from the other side of the locker room. "Tell me, Phoebe, when is the last time you visited your sister?"

"What's wrong with Sidney?" Phoebe asked, her voice tight.

Sirius reacted first, rushing in the direction of his mate's voice. Aland followed closely behind. Xipil, the renegade, had betrayed his own kind by trying to take what wasn't rightfully his—a mate. He and others like him had orchestrated abductions all over the area the media was now dubbing the Zodiac Zone. So far, Xipil was the only renegade stupid enough to make another go at Phoebe.

"Nothing," Xipil said. "Other than the fact she foolishly separated herself from you on purpose. With no mate present, and two powerful females in one location, you were like a beacon to us. She sensed this."

Aland and Sirius slowed their pace, using a row of lockers as cover. If Xipil knew they'd arrived, he'd do something rash, like kill Phoebe. Sirius motioned to Aland to move around and flank Xipil from the other side. With a nod, Aland did as instructed, drawing upon his natural-born powers along the way.

"She even managed to keep us at bay," Xipil said, still talking with Phoebe. Aland was confused as to who the "she" of the matter was but he held his questions for a later date. "There is even word that she managed to reach a Gatekeeper, summoning him forth to aid in protecting you."

“What do you want from me?” Phoebe demanded. “You have to realize that I’m not about to run off into the sunset with you, and that my husband will kill you when he gets his hands on you.”

Aland slipped into position and let his magik trickle out and through the locker room in search of Sirius. When it found him, he formed a mental link with his long-time friend. It wasn’t something that could be done all the time between males who weren’t blood related but it was something that could be done in short bursts.

Your mate is in my line of fire, he pushed with his mind. Get her to go to the floor.

Xipil picked that moment to point at the television in the upper corner of the locker room. It sat just above Aland’s current hiding place. He stepped into the shadows more to get a better look at what the renegade was doing. The channel on the television changed. An image filled the screen, one Aland knew wasn’t being broadcast from anywhere other than Xipil himself. It was something he was determined to show Phoebe.

Three young girls appeared. One he recognized instantly as Phoebe as a child. Another he reasoned to be her cousin Heather. The third was one he’d not yet met but his deductive skills told him it was most likely Sidney, Phoebe’s sister—who now resided in a mental ward.

While too young for him, the girl was breathtakingly beautiful. It was easy to see she would grow up to be stunning. Something about her caused an odd pulling sensation to occur behind Aland’s navel. He tried to rip his gaze from the image of Sidney, but couldn’t.

A dog ran in a circle around the three girls as they played. Sidney bent, helping Phoebe tie her shoes.

“You were destined to be one of us,” Xipil said to Phoebe as she too watched the television screen, seeming as captivated as Aland was.

"The others, the Gatekeepers, do not see what we see," Xipil continued. "The resistance knows the truth. You and the others like you, Phoebe, are more than connected to us. You're not human like the others wish to believe. See for yourself."

The image continued to play out on the screen. The girls all had chalk and were drawing upon the sidewalk. Phoebe near her sister, giving instructions on how best to draw symbols human children should know nothing about.

They were symbols meant for travel between the realms. Symbols used by his people.

Sidney glanced at Heather, giving a small sigh. "How long do you think she's going to keep making us draw the same thing?"

Heather laughed. "You don't want to know."

"You're not putting all of them on there again," Phoebe protested, her bottom lip stuck out in a pout. "Why?"

Pushing her long black hair from her face, Sidney stared out from blue eyes, seeming annoyed with the child. "Because you just keep making up new ones so I have to draw more."

"No I don't," Phoebe said. "Lynx is real. It's just not as old as most of them. But it's really up there. It's another gate point. A secret one. Don't tell anyone that it's a gate point too because they'll know I visit and they'll get mad."

Sidney and Heather stared at one another. "What do you mean 'visit'?" Sidney forced a smile to her face as she centered her focus on her sister. "Phoebe, please tell me you're just making up more stories."

"What?" Heather asked, nudging Sidney lightly. "You don't believe her, do you? I mean, no one can..." She seemed to ponder something for a moment, biting at her lower lip before speaking once more, "What if I told you I dreamed about this constellation?"

“Ooo, want to go for real? Here.” Putting her tiny arms out in the air, Phoebe began to twirl. Flower petals appeared out of nowhere, floating about the girls’ heads. Sidney and Heather raced toward Phoebe.

“Phoebe, stop!” Sidney pleaded. “They’ll sense you! They’ll come and steal you like Daddy said they would. Stop!”

“But don’t you want to see it?” the younger version of Phoebe asked. “It’s very pretty. It’s like when we go to stay at great-grandma’s house. Lots of trees, birds, really big birds. I saw a purple one before. Honest-to-Gods purple.”

Renegade warriors filled the screen, converging on the girls. One grabbed Phoebe and the dog bit the warrior’s arm, causing him to release the young girl. Sidney and Heather lunged for her, grabbing her and then tumbling into a heap. The renegades continued to come for them.

Pushing her way to the top of the pile, Sidney glared at the men, as if daring them to make another move. They did and when she spoke, it was with the native tongue of his people. Her words, loosely translated, were a call to open a portal to another realm. Aland couldn’t look away. Never had he seen any female, let alone a human one, do something such as that.

The renegade warriors were sucked through the portal quickly. A terrified Phoebe clung to her cousin all the while Sidney remained calm and collected. She whispered something softly, again in Aland’s native tongue. “Forget that which you have witnessed upon this day. I shall take the memories, the fear and the knowledge of this with me to my death for it is my duty to protect those who cannot protect themselves.”

The words were ones that would be spoken by ancient warriors. They weren’t ones said by a human child who was barely in her teens. The image faded to black and Aland almost foolishly revealed his location in hopes of seeing more of Sidney. How dare the renegade drag up memories best left forgotten. How dare he know anything about events that had obviously taken a toll on not only Phoebe but her sister as well – a female Aland felt an unnatural pull toward.

"Do you know what she did for you, Phoebe?" Xipil questioned.

Aland wanted to level the man but Phoebe was still in the way.

"Of course not," Xipil said. "She cast a memory spell on you and Heather. She did it so you could both still sleep at night. Though in doing so, she isolated herself, never able to talk about what had happened, what she knew was going to happen." He took a step toward her. "You see, Phoebe, your sister was well aware we would keep coming for you all. She shouldered that burden on her own to allow you, the baby girl, to live without fear. It drove her mad. You drove her mad."

Phoebe shook her head. "No. I didn't drive Sidney crazy. I didn't. Did I?"

"Come. I can fix her, Phoebe." Xipil extended his hand. "I can make Sidney whole again. All you have to do is agree to come with me. To join me."

Phoebe got down fast. Aland struck without warning, as did Sirius, thrusting their power out and above Phoebe's body. Xipil tumbled backward. A fellow renegade appeared, this one bearing scars on his arms.

Phoebe rose slowly, her attention fixed on the newcomer. Anger radiated off her in powerful waves.

He gave a lecherous smile. "Xipil, she is even more glorious than you said." He took a step toward her and she laughed. "You think me funny, human?"

"Very," Phoebe replied.

The scarred renegade blinked away only to reappear directly in front of Phoebe, blocking Aland's clear shot of him. "I visit your sister often, Phoebe," he said. "Shall I tell you what I do to her while she's strapped down?"

White-hot hate filled Aland. For a moment, the only sound he heard was that of his heart thumping in his ears. He clenched his fists, his power coursing through his veins at the thought of Sidney being hunted by the renegade. All too easily Aland could picture her being tormented by the man.

He snarled, the desire to kill great.

Much to Aland's surprise, Phoebe took matters into her own hands, delivering a wicked kick to the groin. "What have you done to my sister, asshole?"

"Well done, Phoebe," Xipil said, clapping. "Do you have any idea how hard it is to take down a Constellaziogēn even when you are one yourself? I find it nearly impossible to believe one as young as you can do it. Had I not seen it with my own eyes I would not have believed it."

The scarred warrior made a move for her again.

Phoebe surprised Aland more by tapping into gifts he wasn't aware she possessed. She locked the scarred warrior in power, holding him in place. He tapped the force-field surrounding him. "I sensed this in you when you were just a child," he said. "I knew. I told the others that you and the other girls were more than just human. I bet you're as sweet to taste as your sister. I bet your —"

Aland roared, his magik breaking free of him. He lost himself in the moment, the primal need to kill the man who had dared to harm Sidney all consuming. He gave in. The room shook as a ball of yellow light shot forth from Aland. It struck the scarred renegade, going through Phoebe's power, circling him, causing pain the likes of which the man had never known before.

Aland walked with purpose out from his position behind the locker, his gaze never leaving the scarred renegade. "What did you do to Sidney?"

"N-nothing. I-I swear," the man said, stumbling over his words. "She doesn't let anyone near her. S-she's powerful."

"You're lying!" Aland shouted, thrusting additional power at the man. "What the fuck did you do to her? You had no right to look upon her, let alone touch her! No right!"

Aland's magik continued to do as it pleased. It wanted to exact revenge. So did he.

Doing nothing to stop it, Aland watched through narrowed eyes as a funnel-shaped white portal opened directly behind the enemy. It was not his doing. This portal was

forced open by Sirius as he thrust Xipil through it. Aland stared down at the scarred man as he prepared to deliver a killing blow.

Sirius rushed toward him, shaking his head. "Aland, don't do this. Send him to the King's dungeons to await trial. Killing him isn't the answer."

"He hurt Sidney," Aland whispered, pain lancing his chest.

"You know my sister?" Phoebe questioned, sounding surprised.

Sirius grunted, his gaze still on Aland. "You can't help her if you're being held on charges by the King."

His friend was right. Aiding Sidney would be impossible if he was sitting in one of the king's cells. Pulling back on his power slightly, he tapped into Sirius' residual energy, opening another portal. He kicked the scarred warrior through it, waiting until he was sure there could be no hope of rescue before forcing the portal closed at its midpoint.

If Sirius asked, Aland would tell his friend what he'd want to hear—that he'd sent the renegade to a cell in one of the king's dungeons. The truth of the matter was far more grim.

The renegade was dead.

Nothing could survive a portal being terminated in mid-stream. Aland would risk the wrath of his king if it meant Sidney was safe. He turned to stare at the now-blank television screen.

One thought held firm.

She's my mate and she needs me.

The image flickered and this time his magik latched onto it, causing his mind to see the truth of the matter. She was indeed all grown now and alone. For a split second Aland was positive Sidney's soul called to his. He lost his footing and stumbled, catching himself with a hand to the wall. With a ragged breath, he gathered his wits

about him and pulled his power back into himself. Soon, he'd make his move. Very, very soon.

Chapter One

Aland Werner walked through the darkened halls of the hospital, wondering how it was he could have missed Sidney's signal, missed she was so very close to him all these years. Literally within his precinct. He still marveled at how destiny had seemingly laid her out before him. Had Aland not been aiding Sirius, in concerns with his mate Phoebe, he'd have never known Sidney was his, and so very close. Had a renegade warrior from his own race not tipped his hand, revealing he'd been in contact with Sidney, he would have never seen his mate's face frozen on a television screen on a dance studio in the Zodiac Zone. He'd have never known she'd been in danger.

Anger welled inside him once more. A slow, calculated grin slipped over his face as he thought of the painful way in which the renegade had met his death. Aland wanted to summon the man back from the afterlife and torture him for eternity for daring to terrify his mate. Already he chanced too much, tempting the fates by killing the man when he should have sent him forth to be tried in the king's courts. Aland had to keep his nose clean and his power off the radar for a while, just until he was certain no one would notice the death of a renegade. As strict as their king was with traitors, he respected and abided by the rules of the realm, expecting those who served as his head guards and Gatekeepers to do the same.

Aland shook his head, trying to will the thoughts from it. He was too close to finally coming face-to-face with his mate to let anything, even fear of his king, interfere.

How many times had he and his partner driven past this very hospital? How many times had he responded to calls generating from the emergency room on the lowest level? Here she was, under his nose even though she'd seemed so far away. In truth, she'd seemed more like a figment of his imagination or even wishful thinking on his part.

When he was but a boy his father had talked of true mates, women destined for the men of their race from birth. He thought the stories to be just that—fairy tale. He was wrong. He could still see the happiness in his father's eyes as he spoke of Aland of women from Earth who were said to be fated to wed warriors of their kind. It was as if the man knew something of Aland's future that he did not. Like he knew one day Aland would find his slice of happiness among humans. Since the female population in his home realm of Constellaziogēn was low—only one female to every twenty men—he'd always assumed the stories were created to give young warriors hope of one day finding happiness. He never dreamed the fates had aligned and selected that one person to complete him. And his one person was here, locked away from other humans, treated as a second-rate citizen, her rights stripped away, all because she knew too much.

The hospital environment was sterile, smelling heavily of disinfectant and lacking anything noteworthy. No matter where he looked, all Aland found was shades of gray and white. Devoid of color and emotion. He wondered how anyone could survive staring at the same setting, day in and day out. It had to be mind-numbing.

Exactly the way it was intended to be.

The night security guard sat with his feet propped on the counter behind unbreakable glass, watching various screens. The man switched ankles, lifting one and crossing the other. His keys jingled on his side. It was the only noise to be heard.

Aland walked right past him, knowing he would not be seen unless he willed it. Humans were almost too easy to manipulate. They presented next to no challenge for him. Long ago he'd learned the only real threat to the Gates between his realm and the human one came from his own kind. He'd never heard of a human accidentally stumbling through one or being able to open a portal at all. Though he had heard of them being dragged through by renegade warriors of his race.

He sighed. Where once portals being opened let off a certain energy signature, the enemy was becoming crafty. Already they'd found ways to shield their activities, hiding their movements between realms.

He let his power trickle out and over the hospital level in search of the woman who had captured his attention—the woman he knew to be his mate. She'd been locked away for years, believed to be insane when all along she was gifted beyond the humans' limited comprehension. She had at least bits of his people's powers. Somewhere in her family history there had to be a Constellaziogēn. Since his kind had been among humans for many centuries, the ancestor could be further back than even Sidney's family could trace. All Aland was sure of was Sidney had been able to draw upon enough power to open a portal when she was just a child. That was saying something.

Aland sensed her there and, for the first time in centuries, a feeling of completion came over him. She was in the room at the end of the corridor. Her signature was unmistakable. It thrummed the air, beckoning him closer. He quickened his pace, the need to see her to freedom too great to dismiss.

As he approached her large metal door, he felt something brush past him, going toward the room. Raw and pure animal lust raced through his veins, seeming to center in his groin, wrenching a moan from him. His cock stood at attention, almost as ready as he to find what had caused such a reaction in him.

Aland stalled, glancing around, positive someone or something had touched him. He found nothing. He wasn't human and his powers were greater than normal while on Earth. For something to make it past him, unseen, it had to be very powerful.

Powerful and able to make my dick hard.

As a Constellaziogēn, an immortal Gatekeeper sent forth hundreds of years ago to guard the portals on Earth, his mission was to protect against unmonitored passage between realms. A task easier said than done since their presence was a closely guarded secret for good reason—their powers, normal in their own realm, were the thing of

fantasy on Earth, and there was a risk he and his kind would be revered as gods by humans, or pandemonium would result should the public learn of their presence.

So Aland hid among humans, assuming the same day-to-day lifestyle as they did. His position as a police detective afforded Aland the chance to enforce laws, as he was accustomed to doing, and to receive firsthand information in the event something was to go wrong with the portals, as had been the case recently.

When Aland had seen Sidney's frozen image on that television screen, he'd known deep down who she was to him. At the time, forced to help Sirius protect Phoebe, Aland had struggled between aiding another or going to his mate, locked away from the world in an institution. He'd done what was required of him at the time, but it was time to seek Sidney out and protect her. With the band of renegades broken up, Aland felt secure she was safe from them, but still, risking losing her wasn't an option. If nothing else, he needed to simply be near her, even for a little bit until he could devise a plan to get her released through the proper channels.

He continued down the hall, coming to a stop just outside of the door to her room. Putting his palm to the cool metal, Aland let additional power rise from deep within him, scanning the room. He found her there, lying in the bed. Desperate to finally see her, he utilized his power and walked directly through the door, materializing on the other side. The moment his gaze landed on the tall, slender frame in the bed, Aland froze.

Sidney had sacrificed herself to ensure her baby sister and cousin lived as normal lives as they could considering they were destined to mate with powerful Constellaziogēn warriors—a fact their father apparently was well aware of and had tried to stress upon the girls.

Long, silky black hair hung in waves over the edge of the bed. One pale white shoulder showed and he visually traced a line down the length of her body. She was thin. Thinner than she should be and that only served to infuriate Aland more. He should have sensed her need of him and not left her to rot slowly in a mental

institution. He'd never bought into the idea of having a special someone and had been content with sating his baser needs with random woman when his cock required attention. It wasn't until Sidney's presence was made known to him that nature seemed to take its course – demanding he go to her.

She lay perfectly still as he took a step closer. He reached out tentatively, needing to make contact with her. Something struck Aland, knocking him back into the cinder brick wall with a thud. He blinked, shocked he'd not sensed anyone with him, and stared around the room. Other than the female he'd come for, he was completely alone. His cock once again stiffened at the feel of the energy around him.

He felt it then, something brushing past him once more. It headed straight for her and his insides tightened. "Sidney, wake up!"

She didn't stir. Instead, whatever power had passed by him, struck her sleeping body and she jerked. Aland cried out and reached for her, knowing then there was no mistake – he'd sacrifice all for her.

Sidney Fisher came awake with a start, gasping for breath as she sensed one of them near. She rolled out of the bed and onto the floor, ignoring the stab of pain running up her leg from making contact with the linoleum too hard. Her mane of black hair fell forward over her face, masking her view of the room. She swept it back and remained crouched like a tiger ready to strike.

Her breathing was shallow as she let her eyes adjust to the darkened room. There was little doubt in her mind that one of them was close. The men from the stars paid her frequent visits, each time trying to take her with them or torment her. They seemed amused by either outcome and eager to test her limits. Where she once welcomed the challenge, Sidney was growing tired of the continual battle. Giving in wasn't an option. So long as she drew the men to her, her sister and cousin stood a chance of living lives free of them.

She sensed someone nearing and she scrambled backward, frantically scanning the room to pinpoint their exact location. The men who came could hide themselves from the view of humans, helping to encourage the belief she was crazy if she spouted off about seeing men surrounding her. It had taken her nearly a year before she'd come to fully realize no one but she could sense them when they pulled their vanishing routines. It was a year's worth of sedation and restraints, of learning to tap into her inborn magik to keep them at bay. She was far from helpless as many of them could attest to.

Her wrists ached at the thought of memories over ten years old now. She rubbed her wrists, taking tiny, measured breaths as she remained in the ready position. There were times when the lines between sanity and insanity blurred and she wondered if it was the fear of being held down and forced to lose control because of the administering of medications, or the fear of being taken by the star men that scared her more.

"Sidney," said a deep voice from the other side of the room. It didn't strike fear into her as did the others, but she knew better than to trust any of them. They were sly and calculating when they needed to be. Their stunning good looks and powerful bodies could easily make a girl forget they were deadly. Some who had come had attempted first to gain her trust by offering cunning smiles and trying to court her in their own way. She never let her guard down with them, going on instinct where it concerned them. Others resorted to violence almost instantly. In the end, it didn't matter what avenue they took, they'd all felt the same to her.

Wrong and dangerous.

Well, almost all of them did. This one seemed different and that unnerved her even more than the fact he was in the room with her.

"I won't hurt you," he said, with a slight lilt. His voice was like velvet and the pull of it alone almost had her giving in.

Sidney used the wall behind her to push to stand. The cold floor bit at the soles of her bare feet and the thin hospital-issue pajama bottoms did little in the way of

warming her. Her nipples hardened from the cold and she could almost feel the man's gaze snap to them. Heat flared through her. The desire to have the man come forth and touch her, tweak her aching nipples and ease the burning deep inside, caught Sidney off guard. Never before had the men who came made her body react so.

A light rapping at the door caught her attention. "You all right in there, sweetheart?" Barry, the night security guard, asked. His voice was a deep baritone and it seemed to have a naturally calming effect to it. One she welcomed when she felt lost and alone.

She made her way around the room, keeping her back pressed to the wall as best she could. When she got to the door, she maintained her stance in order to watch the room closely. "I'm fine, Barry."

An audible sigh came from Barry's side of the door. "Have another dream, pumpkin?" he asked, the slightest hint of a Southern drawl evident in his voice. He was a good man. One of only a few guards she genuinely liked. His first grandchild was due any day now and he'd worked at the hospital since Sidney arrived almost ten years ago. They'd forged a friendship that had stood the test of time.

She nodded, keeping her back to the door. "Yes, but I'm better now. I just can't sleep. That's all. I'm fine."

Barry did what he always did when she was having problems sleeping, he sang softly. It was a hymn, one of many he knew by heart. While Sidney held little to no faith in the higher power that Barry did, she was comforted by his gesture and always had been. He'd sung to her the first night she arrived, terrified, drugged, screaming to keep the men from the stars away. It was Barry who took pity on her, refusing to treat her as a nutcase without feelings but rather a young girl, going through a rough period.

Sidney leaned against the door, sinking a little as she hummed along with him, the need to be consoled too great to reject. Tears threatened to fall but she held tight to them, refusing to let the enemy see her weakness. As Barry finished, Sidney closed her eyes. She heard Barry's footfalls and knew he'd left to do his rounds. It was easy to read

his emotions and his thoughts. He, like many people, never knew Sidney was prying into his mind. It broke his heart to leave her alone when she couldn't sleep.

Something brushed over her cheek lightly and Sidney drew in a hasty breath. Soft, warm lips pressed to her ear. An inborn awareness trickled up her spine, telling her this man would not hurt her. The newfound alertness guided her, telling her that whoever was there wouldn't show themselves just yet. She kept her eyes closed a moment, enjoying the sensation of peace and safety.

"Trust in me, Sidney," he repeated, seeming to want to stress it as often as possible.

She remained still, mulling over his words. Trust in him? Could she dare? Would hope be what finally broke the fragile state of her sanity? She'd come so far. Stood against so many. To openly allow one under her defenses could be her undoing.

Powerful magik crept over her slowly, heating her body and causing liquid to gather at the juncture of her thighs. Her chest rose and fell, slow at first and then faster as the magik slid between her legs, caressing her feverish skin and delivering sweet suffering. Alarmed, she resisted at first, the intrusion new to her.

"No," she whimpered.

"Trust me, Sidney." His mantra returned, tranquility settling over her once again.

She didn't relax. Moving as much as she could, she pulled her knees close to her chin, hating her traitorous body. Cream flooded her sex. She wanted more but was too scared to give in.

"He can't hurt you anymore," the man said. "He's dead. I promise."

He?

The mystery man spoke as if only one star man had come for her. She would have corrected him but the feel of a mouth pressing to her neck made a tingling sensation rush over her. She squeezed her eyes shut tighter, shaking her head back and forth.

"Sidney," he hinted. "Do you want me to go?"

Yes. No. She didn't know.

Reaching out, she managed to make contact with him. Her fingers curled around his powerful shoulder. Any thoughts she might have had about sending the mystery man away vanished. Not only did he promise pleasure, he promised peace. Too long she'd been denied both.

She clung to him. "Don't leave me," she pleaded, desperation coating her every word. She wasn't sure why. Sidney had thought she'd hardened herself from vulnerabilities. Obviously, she'd been wrong.

"I won't," he promised, easing closer to her. Still, she refused to open her eyes. He traced a finger under her right eye. "I'm here now, Sidney. You don't have to be afraid anymore."

"I'm not afraid." Even she knew it was a lie but she said it all the same, scooting closer to him.

His muscular arms enveloped her body. He tugged her closer and a shuddered breath escaped her. "I know." The way he said it let her know he was appeasing her. She didn't care. It was comfort and she was starved for what he offered. So many others of his kind she'd refused, battled with all she had while locked away. Him, she seemed instantly drawn to and so far, she sensed no trickery on his part.

"No games," he whispered, his lips brushing her ear. "I told you that you can trust me and I mean it."

She would have questioned how it was he tapped into her thoughts but others of his kind had done similar things in the past. Of course, when they did it, it felt like someone was peeling back the layers of her mind with a sharp object. Not even a hint of pain lingered with this one. He read her thoughts and emotions with ease and without harming her.

Unsure how much time had passed, Sidney squirmed slightly, still staying close to him. She stretched her legs and then pulled them back up, keeping them tucked in near her.

"Talk to me, Sidney," he said, his embrace warm. "Tell me something about yourself. About your past. Anything."

"I once had a dog named Copper," she blurted out, not exactly sure why. "He's dead now though." Her father had shared the news with her on one of his many visits. Sidney had been heartbroken, but her father's attempts to talk her into agreeing to "get better" had overshadowed the dog's passing. It would have been easy enough to convince the doctors and the hospital staff that she wasn't crazy and that she'd found her way back from whatever mental disorder they'd labeled her with that week. She didn't because her safe haven was just that—a place she knew well and where she knew she could take on the men from the stars and hopefully prevail. In the outside world, the real one, she wasn't so sure she could handle it all.

The compulsion to talk to the man took over. "I like to read. Dr. Marmora is good about bringing me books. When I was little, I liked to draw and paint. It's lost some of its shine now though."

"But you haven't," he said. It was odd and she found herself snuggling against him.

"Funny. I feel like I've lost *all* my shine."

"You haven't," he assured.

Smiling, Sidney found herself blurting out more details about herself and her life. They weren't secrets but they were pieces of information about herself that she'd never shared with any of the star men before. Time passed slowly and she even noticed herself caressing him as she spoke. He listened quietly, providing the comfort she hungered for.

"Do you have a favorite ice cream?"

She laughed at his question. It seemed out of place but worked to help forge the connection she felt building between them. "I don't really get to try too many flavors in here. It's vanilla or chocolate. That's it."

"Sometime soon," he confessed, "I'd like to take you out of here. You could taste as many flavors as you want then."

She tensed. Leave the hospital? She clutched his arm, her fingers digging deep.

"Sidney," he said. "It's okay. I'm not asking you to leave right this minute. I can see you're not ready for that but I won't lie, I would like you to leave here." It was his turn to stiffen as if he were awaiting her answer. "Even just for ice cream?"

A tiny snort fell free from her. "You mean like go on a date with you and at the end of it, you'd kiss me good night on the doorstep to the loony bin?"

His laugh was deep and created a fluttering sensation deep in her belly. "Do they give you a curfew here?"

She knew he was joking and it was appreciated. Twisting somewhat in his arms, Sidney's body ignited. His lips eased over hers and she tensed, her eyes still shut tight.

"Sidney," he said softly, touching her chin. "If I continue to shield myself from your view, will you open your eyes?"

"I can't."

"Why?" he asked.

"What if you turn out to be like the rest?" She bit her lower lip. "Worse yet, what if I'm imagining you?"

"I'm not and you're not," he soothed, tapping the end of her nose lightly. "Please. Open your eyes. You have beautiful ones."

"Promise not to show yourself first."

A manly chuckle followed. "I promise."

Opening her eyes, Sidney half expected to find herself staring at the mystery man. She saw nothing yet knew he was still there, holding her, his mouth close to hers. His lips swept over hers again and she moaned, parting her lips. The feel of his tongue inching around hers had her falling against him, allowing him to take the lead.

Aland knew the kiss was no small victory. He also knew he wouldn't be satisfied with just a small taste of her. She was pure perfection. Everything he wanted in a

woman and more. She tipped her head, giving him a better angle to increase their kiss. He seized the moment, his tongue lacing around hers.

Tightness in his jeans reminded him of the power he was allowing the beauty before him to have. Already she made his cock respond faster than any other woman ever had. He made sweeping, swirling motions in her mouth, mapping it boldly with his tongue.

She broke the kiss, her breathing heavy. Her forehead came to a rest against his lips. "Why did I do that? Why did I kiss you?"

"I kissed you," he corrected, putting his hands on both sides of her head. He cupped her face gently, forcing her to look upwards. She seemed so lost. His chest ached and guilt nearly consumed him for having left her there so long. "I'm going to do it again, Sidney. You need to understand that."

Something flashed in her eyes and he could have sworn it was desire. That was all the incentive he needed to return to sampling her mouth. She moaned and he drank it away as he continued kissing her. She fidgeted and he held tighter to her face, ensuring she'd accept him. Before long, it was Sidney who was trying to up the heat level of their actions. He smiled against her mouth and she bit his jaw lightly. There was a wild, wanton woman in her, wanting to be free.

Purring, she rubbed her body against his. His cock twitched, damn near spilling come in his jeans. "Fuck, Sid. You're killing me here."

"Mmm, yes, fuck," she repeated, her hands roaming over the planes of his chest. Aland had to make a conscious effort to keep himself masked from her view. All he wanted to do was drag her to the floor and ram his cock deep into her. She wasn't quite ready for that, no matter how willing she seemed to be at the moment.

"Touch me," she pleaded, her voice small. "Please."

Unable to deny her, Aland ran the backs of his fingers down the front of her body. The thin material of her clothing allowed him to feel her skin. Sidney grabbed his wrist

with both her hands and yanked it down, forcing his hand between her legs. "Here. Touch me here. I ache."

Dampness already resided there and he knew she'd be wet. He clenched his teeth, willing himself to walk away. To let her be.

He couldn't.

He put his palm against her mound. "Like this?"

"More," she said, nodding.

He rubbed his hand against her clothed pussy and used his free hand to grab himself through his thick jeans. Sidney whimpered and he knew she needed more. He tugged open the top of her pajama bottoms and swirled his index finger just under her navel.

She hissed, tossing her head back and letting her legs open wide for him. He dipped his hand lower, bringing in the use of his magik as well to ensure her the ultimate pleasure. As much as Aland wanted to drive his fingers into her hot, wet entrance, he resisted. He settled for parting her folds and rubbing her swollen clit while allowing his magik to ease into her cunt, slow at first and then faster.

Sidney nearly shot off the floor at the feel of the magikal fingers spreading her pussy, making her cry out.

"So tight, *une srecota moje*, so warm," her mystery man whispered against her temple.

Sidney clawed the door, needing something, anything to ground her as pleasure built. She turned her head to the side and bit her lip, hoping to block her mind from the sensual onslaught. It didn't work. The power increased as did her pleasure. She gasped as the magik slipped into her body, pushing past her entrance and deep into her pussy. She rocked against it, moaning as an orgasm neared.

It was too much yet not nearly enough.

The energy continued, buzzing about, running over her and bringing with it pleasure. The star men had tried something similar with her before but her inborn gifts and power had retaliated with no thought on her part. This was different. This she wanted.

She opened her legs more and turned her head, panting. The power moved in and out of her cunt, mimicking a cock.

A really fucking big cock.

"Come for me," the man whispered, his voice calming while the power was hot and branding. "I feel what you feel, Sidney. Give me this gift."

There was no logical reason why she should obey him but she did. She arched her back to him, nodding as she closed her eyes tight again. She bit her lower lip as the pressure between her legs increased. The energy paid close attention to her clit. It tweaked it with skill, sending her closer to the edge of culmination. She thrashed her head back and forth as her legs began to quiver. Her belly tightened and a sensation like none other crashed into her and rippled through her entire body.

"Ah yes, *une srecota moje*. Look at how beautiful you are, covered in my power and sated."

Opening her eyes, Sidney half expected to actually see the bringer of pleasure. He was still masking himself from her. It was probably for the best. It was easier for her to be brave when she wasn't staring at the harsh reminder of what hunted her day in and day out.

The power around her began to caress her once more. "Mmm, Sidney, already I can't get enough of you."

She couldn't go through that again. He'd confused her. Made her want him.

Sidney drew upon her inborn gifts and thrust out energy, needing air, anything to clear her head. "No!"

The magik and the hand down her pants jerked away as if she'd scalded them. She knew the source of the power still lingered, waiting and watching her. She also knew he wouldn't harm her. The strangest sense of peace settled back over her, chasing away the demons in her mind.

Curious, she tipped her head and stared around the room, hoping to catch a glimpse of him. Still, she saw no one. She felt him though. The distinctively male presence was close.

She let out a shaky laugh and thumped her head against the door. The hollow sound echoed throughout the room. If she didn't stop, Barry would return and worry more about her. "You're the first one who hasn't terrified me."

Sidney wasn't sure why she admitted that to him and felt no need to take it back. It was the truth. Something she rarely saw much of anymore. Her life was a lie, encouraged by her to ensure she drew the star men close to her, not her sister or her cousin.

Memories of her sister Phoebe filled her head. It had been far too long since Phoebe had visited and Sidney understood why. Almost two full years since Phoebe had arrived in the common room to spend a half hour with her. Sure, Sidney's parents still visited often enough but it wasn't the same. It was hard for her sister to see her locked away like a caged animal. It was even harder knowing Phoebe was out in the world, unprotected.

Clearing her mind of thoughts of her sister, Sidney sank to the floor and landed with a thump on her bottom. She sat, staring around the room, still sensing the man near. A smile played at the edges of her lips. "It's been a long time since I felt safe. Thank you for that."

She ran her fingers over the edging on the floor as she hummed softly. She hugged her legs to her with her other arm and began to count the number of times she tapped the floor. The habit was a hard one to break and had developed soon after her arrival at the hospital.

Some time passed before Sidney sensed the male presence sitting next to her. She didn't need to see him to know he was big and strong. They all were. She also guessed he was handsome. The race of men seemed to lack anything even close to substandard as far as looks went.

"If you're thinking of showing yourself, don't," she said, continuing to tap lightly. "It's enough I'm letting you this close to me."

Cool breath skated over her cheek. "It's enough for now, Sidney."

A smile danced on her lips. She hummed the same hymn Barry had sung to her and tapped until her eyelids grew too heavy to keep open. Giving in to sleep, she leaned against a warm, strong shoulder and sighed.

* * * * *

Aland lifted Sidney's sleeping form and laid her in her bed. It broke his heart, knowing his kind had instilled that amount of fear in her. He slid in behind her, somehow managing to get his large frame on the tiny bed as well. Spooning her, he held her close, drawing in the scent of her hair. He wanted to whisk her away, then and there, but it would raise too many suspicions. It wouldn't do to have the human authorities on a manhunt for his mate. It wasn't as though humans allowed their escaped mental patients to roam freely. Already he'd have enough to do keeping her safe from his kind. Having to hide from her people too would never do. He had to get her released even if it meant manipulating the minds of the people holding her. If she was officially free of the hospital, she wouldn't have to live in fear of being discovered and taken back. Though, he got the distinct feeling she actually kind of liked being tucked away from the world. He hoped he was wrong.

He put his lips to her ear and whispered softly to her, "You can trust me, Sidney. I'll get you out of here and protect you."

She wiggled against him, her hand finding his. She laced their fingers together. "I know," she said, her voice so low it was barely there. Her rhythmic breathing signified

she was still asleep and it warmed him to know she responded to him. The truth of her words did something to him as well.

He could only guess the horrors his kind had filled her with. For her to admit to trusting him was a huge step. More than he'd dreamed possible.

Time ticked by slowly as Aland held her, cradling her in a protective manner, all the while keeping his power up and at the ready to avoid being seen. Sidney moaned and twisted in her sleep. She rolled over, nearly falling from the bed but he caught her to him. Her breasts pressed to his chest and she exhaled softly, her hand finding his hip.

He gritted his teeth, tipping his head back, willing himself to keep from touching her. It would be wrong and he knew it. Still, the desire to taste her mouth on his, to dip a finger into her cunt was all consuming. He'd pleased her with his power before and each lick of it drove him madder with need. She'd come with a passion that both shocked and pleased him.

"Sidney," he whispered, unsure why.

Her pink tongue darted out and over her lower lip before she nuzzled her head to his neck. Their bodies seemed to conform to one another as though they were longtime lovers, used to sharing tight sleeping quarters. It was strange. He'd never before been as at ease with a woman or felt the need to provide comfort in such a way. He wondered what it was about her that broke him so easily.

Because she's made for you, jackass.

He ran his fingers through her silky black hair, loving the feel of it. Her lips pressed tiny kisses to his collarbone and he stilled, wondering if she was awake. She caressed his chest. "Don't let them take me," she pleaded, her voice sounding sleep-heavy.

"He's dead now. He can't hurt you again." Aland wanted to hit something as thoughts of the renegade coming for her came to him. It took him a moment to realize he was still holding her hair, almost yanking on it now. Releasing it, he kissed her forehead and she lifted her head, her lids fluttering open momentarily before her lips met his.

Fire exploded within him. His hand returned to her hair, this time curling in it, assuring she remained close to him. Her kisses continued and his power flared as it had earlier when he'd sat next to her by the door. His magik seeped out and over her, caressing her body with its mystical tendrils.

"*Une zeena*," he hissed, wanting her spread out before him, ready and willing to truly accept him—all of him. Because of who she was to him, he already knew her body would want him. It was natural. He wanted the woman to want him as well. But the woman wasn't ready for that just yet. Maybe she never would be at a point he could perform the ritual necessary to tie them together for all time. Aland couldn't worry about that now. His only concern was Sidney's well-being and giving her some portion of pleasure. Thankfully, his centuries had taught him patience.

His flesh felt every caress of his power on her skin. It was as if he were truly touching her. Her nipples tightened as her breasts swelled. Her breathing grew shallow and she whimpered, nipping at his collarbone more.

Grudgingly, Aland was about to pull back and flash away, hating himself for his weakness, when a power separate from his own appeared, radiating from Sidney. It latched onto his, combining forces. Suddenly, it was his body being caressed by power. His cock responded, hardening to the brink of explosion. It felt as though he were buried in a tight, hot pussy. One that molded like a glove to his dick.

"Fuck," he whispered, pushing his head back onto the bed.

The feeling increased and Sidney cried out next to him, finding release with his power. Hers stroked him, pulled him to the edge, and then sent him crashing over the edge into the oblivion. With a shout, he came, his cock erupting in his jeans.

Never had anything remotely close to that happened to him before. His friend Sirius had spoken of bonding with his mate prior to actually meeting her in the flesh. He talked of feeling as if he were with her, their bodies one when they were really nowhere near one another. He'd always thought Sirius was making more out of the bond than truly was.

Clearly, he was wrong. The load of come in his jeans proved as much. If she could drive him to that point without even really meaning to, he was a goner.

Chapter Two

Sidney sat in the gathering room, tapping her fingers on the table while she looked out the window. She'd long since worn her nails down to nothing out of nervous habit. Thoughts of Phoebe and her cousin Heather filled her head. She worried often if they were safe, hidden from the men from the stars. It hadn't taken long for Sidney to understand they were targets for the magik men. Her father had been instrumental in educating them to just how dangerous the men could be. Then again, her father also seemed to think each of his girls was destined to wed one of them so she wasn't positive what to believe.

"Sidney?"

She turned to find a pair of cobalt-blue eyes staring down at her from the face of an incredibly handsome man. Blond hair, cut close to his head, skin that looked to be permanently kissed by the sun, not to mention the stubble-covered, squared jawline just enhanced the intense masculinity oozing from him. All the makings of Mr. Right.

The white, long-sleeved pullover shirt he wore drew attention to his broad shoulders and conformed to his well-defined muscles. Dark blue jeans, snug in all the right places, left little to Sidney's imagination. And while she had never considered herself short, next to his six-foot four-inch frame, her five foot nine felt positively petite.

The man was a ten in her book.

Pushing her hair behind her ears, Sidney tried to hide the fluttering feeling that generated from the pit of her stomach as she looked up at the man.

He smiled, his lips full and oh-so kissable. He touched the back of the chair across from hers. "This seat taken?"

"Yes," she said, her lips twitching as a smile tried and failed to form. "By my invisible friend. You'll have to find another."

The man arched a brow. His blue eyes crinkled with mirth. "Oh really? Invisible, huh?"

"That's right." She licked her lower lip, waiting for his response.

"So, how do I stack up against your invisible buddy?" he asked, making desire pool low in her belly. "Think I have a chance in hell at getting you to ask him to move?"

Sidney beamed. It wasn't often someone played along with her. Most let her be, assuming she was telling the truth—that she firmly believed an invisible friend sat with her. After all, she was locked away in a mental ward. It would stand to reason she'd have invisible friends who not only paid her late night erotic visits, but who also came during visiting hours.

Right?

The man nodded before bending and pretending to whisper in her invisible friend's ear. He winked at her before sitting down. "He says I can sit here."

"Then, by all means," she motioned to the chair, "sit."

Walter, a man who was admitted to the facility a week or so after her, wandered toward her table. He bent and looked beneath the table before standing quickly. "Oh dear. Oh dear. Oh..."

The sexy man across from her simply stared at Walter. Sidney smiled and stood, putting her hand on Walter's shoulder. "It's okay. I put Rainbow in her cave this morning when I found her running in the hallway."

Rainbow was Walter's name for his pet dragon. The dragon only Walter could see and hear. He lost her often and it never ended well for him. Sidney learned long ago to ease his tired old mind or risk watching the orderlies hold him down to sedate him.

Walter looked up with his pale grey eyes and blinked back tears. His wiry white hair stuck out in all directions. "Rainbow's safe?"

"Oh, she's more than safe, Walter." Sidney smoothed his hair down and straightened his bathrobe. There was nothing she could do about his mismatched

slippers. One a bunny, the other a duck. "She's eaten two cows and a sheep already. Then I took her to the waterfall and gave her a bath. You know how messy she can get after eating. Last time I checked, she was taking a nap."

Walter pulled on her and she bent so he could hug her. Patting her back, he nodded, his face full of emotion. "You're a good girl, Sidney. A real good girl." He turned and faced the rest of the room. "Sidney found Rainbow!"

A round of applause broke out from the residents, each one expressing their gratitude. In their own strange way, they were a family of sorts. Taking care of one another was what helped Sidney get through the days. She watched Walter head off toward the other side of the room, mumbling all the way about Rainbow and how good a girl Sidney was. When she sat back down, she found the sexy man staring at her with a smile on his face.

"Yes?"

"You gave a dragon a bath?"

She stilled, not remembering having addressed Rainbow as anything other than Rainbow. The topic of her being a dragon had not come up. "I'm sorry but I didn't catch your name or," she narrowed her gaze on him, "the reason you're sitting with me instead of a family member."

Ralph, who lived under the illusion he was a superhero trapped in the body of a middle-aged man, put an arm in the air and did his battle cry. He wasn't going to harm anyone but he liked doing it every hour on the hour. You could set your watch by him.

The sexy man across from her glanced at Ralph. "What is he doing?"

"He's Super Ralph. Haven't you heard of him?"

The man snickered. "Can't say as I have."

"You will," she said, smiling coquettishly. "He'll be famous."

"Oh, I'm sure."

Ralph hopped off a chair and proclaimed himself hero to all. The orderlies were used to him and knew his antics would end soon. He used to wear a bed sheet tied around his neck to act as a cape, but after getting caught in a shut door and nearly strangling himself by accident, the staff took his sheets away. The funniest part of it all was what Ralph used to use as his sword. They actually had to put him in a one-piece outfit for over a month to keep him from whipping *it* out to rid the world of the enemy.

"There certainly are some colorful people here," the man said, his smile warm, inviting.

"Did you expect anything less?"

"Ah, Detective Werner, did you find who you were looking for?" Dr. Sander Marmora asked, his lab coat hastily thrown over his light blue dress shirt. While he was always in dress attire, it was often rumpled. She knew he started his day out fresh and tidy, but by mid shift his tie was normally long gone, at least one button was undone and his lab coat was all but forgotten. He smiled and extended his hand to the man across from Sidney.

A detective? Wonderful. They were her least favorite type of police.

She lifted her legs and put her bare feet onto the seat with her, hugging her long legs close as she stared at him.

"Call me Aland," the detective said, glancing toward Sidney. "And yes. I found who I was looking for."

Marmora's gaze snapped to Sidney. He was young for a doctor and not bad on the eyes. His features were darker than Aland's, which she normally preferred in a man, but he lacked that certain something that left her stomach feeling as if butterflies had taken up residency in it.

"Sidney, are you okay, hon?"

"Hon?" Aland echoed, and if Sidney didn't know better she'd have said he sounded jealous.

Marmora stiffened as he shook Aland's hand. "Yes, sorry. Sidney and I share a special bond. She was my first patient and I was her first—"

Sidney tipped her head and stared up from beneath hooded lashes. "He was my first shrink. My first head doctor. My first—"

"You with the endless line of things to refer to me as." Marmora snickered. "How are you feeling today?"

She pinched her pinky toe as she shrugged. "Fine. Only six other voices are in my head today. I think it's progress. Don't you?"

Aland lifted a brow. "You hear voices?"

"No." Marmora drew up a chair and sat next to Aland. "Sidney rather enjoys keeping me on my toes. She tests the waters as often as she can."

"Well, in my defense, they are such lovely," she lifted her leg and skimmed her foot seductively over the edge of the table, making sure to lick her lip in the process for effect as her foot finally moved over his, "toes, Doctor."

Marmora loosened his tie and cleared his throat. She enjoyed pushing the limits with him. Always had and more than likely always would. Aland didn't appear to be as amused with her behavior. He looked pissed.

She laughed wickedly and raked her hand down her face lightly. "What? The nice detective doesn't like to play the 'hearing voices' game? But he'll play with my invisible friend? Sad. Very sad."

Drawing up her power, she let it trickle out and over the table, toward Aland. The minute it touched his hand, he jerked it back. Odd. Humans normally had no idea she was manipulating things around them. She pressed on and Aland locked gazes with her.

Detective.

She pushed the thought at him, knowing he'd hear it, as they always did. Humans tended to register what she said as their own thoughts, not hers.

Aland remained poker-faced.

Detective. Detective. Are you drawn to the crazy girl?

No response.

Do you want to touch her?

A light sheen of sweat broke out on his brow. Sidney hid her amusement.

You do. Don't you? You want to explore her and have her do the same to you. You want to taste her. Taste her cunt. Lick her before you fuck her.

Aland swallowed loud enough to hear from across the table.

How bad do you want to fuck her, Detective?

He cracked his knuckles as his breathing increased.

"Sidney?" Marmora leaned forward and touched her shoulder gently.

Aland's gaze locked on the doctor's hand and Sidney knew then just how jealous of the doctor he was. Suppressing a grin, she put her hand over the doctor's and placed her cheek upon the top of her hand. She let out a breathy sigh. "Mmm, yes, Doctor? You want me?"

Her gifts allowed Sidney to pick up on just how much the good doctor did want her. He'd spent the greater part of ten years doing his best to ignore his desire for her. She gave his hand a tiny squeeze and pushed her power over him.

Send the detective away.

He can try but it won't work.

Sidney drew in a sharp breath as a deep male voice sounded in her head. She glanced at Aland, positive she'd imagined him speaking telepathically with her as she could do with others.

Marmora stood and removed his tiny wire-framed glasses. He set about cleaning them on the end of his lab coat, something he did whenever he was nervous around Sidney. He seemed far away for a moment and Sidney watched him closely. The look on his face was one often worn by others when she was manipulating them with her

mind. The problem was, she wasn't doing anything to the doctor at the moment. But someone was. "Uh, Detective, I'll join you in announcing the good news. Release day is always a case for celebration. Mary Sue didn't give me the name of the—"

"Sidney Fisher is the patient I came to speak with, Doctor." Aland's blue eyes flashed with what appeared to be water so quickly that Sidney was sure she had hallucinated it.

Release day?

"I have nothing to discuss with you," she said, standing quickly.

"Sidney," Marmora stressed, his tone patronizing. "Hear him out."

As she stared at Aland, she saw his eyes swirl, seeming to fill with brilliantly blue water that receded quickly, and knew her worst fear had come true. Reason left her. Her inner senses went haywire with alarm, refusing to signify if he was friend or foe as they had with the mysterious man who had paid her a late night visit. Taking a chance without knowing could mean her life and the lives of those she loved. She jerked back from the table and pressed her body to the window. "H-he's one of them! He's one of the men who come from—"

The orderlies moved in from all directions as Marmora tried to call them off. They ignored him, their first objective to keep him safe. Their second to follow his orders.

"Sidney, no, this is Detective Aland Werner. He's not—"

She leapt over the chair she'd been in and scrambled out of the reach of an orderly. "You're one of them!"

Aland put his hands up as if to say he was no threat but she felt it then, his power, buzzing over the air. He most certainly was one of them. A star man.

Two more orderlies attempted to grab her. Sidney jumped onto a table, accidentally knocking over a fellow patient's card tower on her way to the next table. Walter appeared, clapping and cheering for her. Others followed his lead. Soon the entire room had patients acting like a cheering squad. An orderly grabbed her and Walter tapped

the man's other shoulder, causing him to look away. Sidney broke free and crawled under a table just in time to see the orderly lunge at Walter.

Ralph pretended to soar through the room, bumping into hospital staff while saving Sidney from the "man". He climbed onto another chair and tipped off, managing to take out an orderly by accident as he fell.

Sidney emerged from under the table quickly. Her power flared, sending a chair hurtling across the room. It narrowly missed hitting the orderly, instead forcing him away from Walter. "Who threw that?"

No more, Sidney.

She spun to find Aland standing behind her.

No more power. They don't understand. Someone will get hurt.

Shocked to find him addressing her mentally, Sidney never noticed the orderlies converging on her. They seized hold of her, lifting her up and off the ground.

Aland was suddenly there, thrusting them away from her. "No!"

"Mister," an orderly, who was relatively new, said. He was as tall as Aland and looked to be every bit as deadly. "You better back off. She's dangerous to herself and everyone else around her when she gets in one of her moods." The orderly grabbed Sidney's arm roughly and jerked her against him.

Aland glared at the man. "Release her now or I'll —"

"Detective!" Marmora shouted. "It's okay. Sidney won't be harmed. You have my word." He approached and pushed past the orderly closest to her. He touched her cheek lightly. "Sidney?"

Terrified of what Aland would do to the doctor, Sidney kept her gaze locked on him. "I want to go back to my room."

The heavy-handed orderly took hold of her once more, a daring look in his eyes. "I'll take her back to her room, Doctor."

"Like hell you will!" Aland made a move to come at the man and Marmora intervened.

"Detective, I'm afraid I'll have to ask you to leave now. We can discuss a possible release at another time. I'm sure you can see Sidney has suffered a setback."

The orderly pressed his mouth to Sidney's ear and let out a sick sounding laugh. "That's right. Say goodbye to your savior, *human*."

No. It couldn't be. The orderly was one of them too?

"One word and I'll kill every human in here," he said, his lips still pressed to her ear.

She tensed, knowing he could easily carry out his threat. Her gaze swept to Walter who was still clapping and singing a song about what a good girl Sidney was and how great a hero Ralph was. The thought of him or Ralph being harmed in any way terrified her. She swallowed hard and nodded.

Aland shook his head. "Sidney..."

The orderly jerked her harder to him. "Time to go."

Marmora put his body in front of Aland's as the orderly led her out of the common room. He gave her a hard shove when they reached the empty hallway and she tumbled to the floor. The orderly was on her in an instant, ripping her up and off the floor with one hand. His eyes swirled with what looked to be water and she whimpered, knowing better than to scream and bring help running to their death.

The orderly grinned and the sight sickened her. He raked his gaze over her and it settled on her thin hospital-issue top. He used his free hand to take hold of one of her breasts. His grip wasn't kind.

She flinched and he smiled wider. "You like my touch."

Sidney, frantic to get him further from the others, tried to nod her head but found it wouldn't cooperate. She put a palm to his chest, her breathing off the charts as fear kept her in its hold.

The orderly squeezed her breast more. He became so bold as to lift her flimsy shirt and touch her bare skin. He pushed her against the wall and fondled her. Her nipples responded and she closed her eyes tight, hoping he'd decide to take her to her room where she could fight back without the risk of someone hearing and running to help.

He rubbed his body against her, grunting and sounding entirely too pleased with himself for her liking. His hot mouth came down on hers but she refused to open and return his kiss. He didn't seem to care as he continued to grope her, feeling her breasts, pinching her nipples and grinding against her.

The orderly went for the top of her pants and she cried out, struggling against him for the first time. He shoved her harder to the wall and laughed, his gaze narrowing on her. "I like them feisty."

"Sidney?" Marmora's voice cut through the hallway.

She drew in a sharp breath. "No! Doctor, no!"

He was suddenly there, ripping the orderly away from her and displaying strength that shocked her. He slammed the orderly into the wall and turned to her. "Ohmygod, Sidney. I didn't...I had no idea he...Sidney."

Shaky and scared, she yanked at her top, pulling it down. She glanced up, meeting the doctor's chocolate-brown gaze. She burst into tears and he was there in a heartbeat, pulling her close and stroking her back.

"Shhh," he crooned, "I've got you now."

Sidney accepted his embrace and buried her head against his chest, thankful he wasn't harmed. His arms were muscular, more so than she thought.

"Sidney, I'm so sorry, hon," he whispered. "I'll have him dealt with right away. He'll never touch—"

Marmora was ripped away from her and tossed aside as if he weighed nothing. The orderly stood there, fuming as he glared at her. "I told you what would happen if they came."

"Don't hurt him, please."

"Sidney, run!" Marmora shouted.

She did the opposite. She rushed the orderly, throwing herself at him. It was the equivalent of hitting a brick wall and she bounced off, but it was enough to hold his attention. "I won't go with you! Ever!"

"You can and you will," he said evenly. Power bristled around him, causing a low buzz to sound in the air. "When I'm through with you, you'll be begging me to take you away. The Gatekeeper from the common room was a fool to leave you unguarded. He'll regret it when he realizes you've mated to another."

The end of the hall began to swirl and Sidney knew what was happening. The man had opened a portal from her world to his. She'd seen it done many times over the course of her life and knew if she dared to go through, she might never return.

"What the —?" Marmora pushed to his feet and tried to come to her. "Sidney!"

The orderly spun around and slammed the doctor into the wall, head first. The crack the doctor's head made when hitting left Sidney feeling sick. She tried to get to him but the orderly blocked her path. He laughed and reached for her. She dodged his grasp, getting behind him and kicking with all her might. It wasn't much but it was enough to knock him off balance and to send him tumbling through the portal he'd opened. It closed behind him quickly. No trace of it remaining.

Sidney dropped to the floor next to Marmora and pushed his dark brown hair back from his face. His glasses were broken and she lifted them off him gently. Calling upon her powers, she put her hands to the sides of his head, doing her best to ignore the steady flow of blood from his nose and ears, and focus on healing him. Her power moved through him and he jerked slightly. She pressed on, knowing he'd die without her assistance.

"What's going on?" a nurse asked, rounding the corner. "Doctor? Oh no! What have you done? Doctor?"

Sidney knew the portal was closed and no one was in the hallway but her and the doctor. She also knew she'd be blamed for what happened. None of it mattered so long as Marmora lived.

She thrust more healing energy through him just as additional orderlies appeared. They yanked her off her feet and dragged her down the hall to her room. There was no point kicking and screaming. She already knew she'd be strapped down and meds would be administered. What she didn't know was whether or not Marmora would live.

Chapter Three

Aland sat in the passenger side of the unmarked SUV and stared out at the darkened city streets. Sirius sat next to him, munching on a chicken salad sandwich his wife had packed for him. “Think this asshole will show himself?”

The asshole Aland was referring to was a man they’d been watching for several months. Neither really cared if they busted the guy or not now that the fact renegade warriors from their realm were on the loose – all else seemed almost trivial.

“Do anything interesting lately?” Sirius asked, his gaze saying he knew more than he was letting on.

Aland shrugged, unsure he wanted to reveal he’d gone to see Sidney. They’d discussed it and had decided to wait and release Sidney together—with Phoebe and Heather in tow. The idea had seemed like a decent one at the time but the more Aland thought about Sidney rotting away in a mental ward, the less he could tolerate waiting until they formed a plan. With Heather being out of town, he didn’t want to wait for her return or for anyone else to get together and decide what was best for his mate. That was his job. “No. Nothing exciting.”

“Hmm.” Sirius took a sip of bottled water and cast a sideways glance at Aland. “Sure about that?”

Aland let out a long breath. “Spit it out.”

“You went to see Sidney, didn’t you?”

Denying it was pointless. “Yes.”

“Go well for you?”

Aland clenched his fist. “Seeing as how she’s not with me at the moment, no. Didn’t go so well.”

Sirius choked on his water and pounded on his chest. "Guess not."

Rubbing his hands over his face, Aland thought back to Sidney. "You should see her, wasting away in there. It took everything in me not to pick her up and carry her out."

"Why didn't you?"

He glanced at his friend. "Because your words of wisdom played in the back of my mind, warning me of the consequences of her vanishing from there. You're right. I don't need the humans on a manhunt for an escaped mental patient. An APB on my mate would be the topper on all this, for sure." He grunted, hating having to bend on the matter when all he wanted to do was say fuck the system. It wasn't that easy.

Sirius chuckled him on the shoulder. "That was smart."

Aland laughed, nervous energy abounding. "Man, you should have seen some of the people in there. One guy spends his days looking for his pet dragon. Another thinks he's a superhero."

Sirius was silent for a moment. "What about Sidney? Has ten years in there left her..."

It would have been easy to take offense to Sirius' question, but Aland didn't. They'd been friends too long, been through too many battles to let something like that come between them. "I honestly don't know. I don't think so. But she's damn manipulative. It's like..." He paused. "Like she almost wants to stay there."

"She's had ten years to create a safe zone, a place she can do what she needs to do to stay protected from the renegades."

"Is she safe?" Aland closed his eyes and thought of the horror on Sidney's face when he'd lost control and allowed his eyes to swirl. "Seeing them have to gain control of her wasn't pleasant from my point of view. I can understand why she'd be scared there, but, Sirius, I read the night guard when I was there. He's a good man. He cares for her like a grandfather or something." He sighed. "I just hate knowing she lives in fear, warranted or not."

"You'll change that for her."

He nodded. "Yeah. I will."

"One question though?"

Aland prepared for a lecture. "Shoot."

"What the hell are you doing sitting here with me when you could be with her? I mean, I know I'm good-lookin' and all but you're really not my type."

"She's terrified of me." He sighed. "She knows I'm not human and she thinks I'm a renegade. I know the same asshole who went after Phoebe two weeks ago made a play for Sidney at some point too but, Sirius, he's dead. He can't hurt her ever again. I don't know how to make her understand I only want her safe. Admitting I kill things didn't seem like the smartest option at the time but I did stress he's dead and can't hurt her ever again. Fuck." He ran a hand through his hair. "She confuses me in a big damn way."

Sirius was quiet a moment before nodding and scratching his chin. "You're normally a patient guy. Draw on your skills and spend as long as it takes to make her see she was created for you to protect, for you to love. I do know one thing."

"What's that?"

"Sitting here with me isn't going to help your cause any. It's not like I'm going to kiss you or marry your sorry ass. I have a wife and trust me, Aland, you just don't compare," he said with a snort. "You should be with Sidney, not me."

He was right.

Aland drew upon his powers and blinked out of the car, appearing on Sidney's level at the hospital. He kept his power up to be invisible as he strolled with purpose toward her room. She'd sense him, he was sure of it, just like the first night he'd come to her. It had been his reasoning for leaving before. He'd already upset her enough and knew she needed time to calm down. His hovering about would have done nothing

more than agitate her already fragile state more. Even as powerful as he was, he couldn't hide his presence from her.

He stepped through the wall but her room was empty, the bed untouched. It was late and she should have been in there. Remembering her setback and the way the orderly had dragged her away, a sick feeling came over him. He let his power loose, scanning the floor for her. When he sensed her weak, barely there energy signature, he had to fight to keep from roaring with anger.

He ran down the hall, following her signal. As he stepped through another wall, he came face-to-face with the last thing he wanted to see—Sidney, strapped to a bed, appearing not only heavily medicated but seriously bruised and battered as well.

He went to her quickly, laying a hand on her forehead and pushing healing energy through her. It was then he sensed the power of another male—a renegade. It wasn't fresh but it was strong enough to indicate that a male had attacked her in the last twenty-four hours.

Aland was about to undo Sidney's restraints when he heard footsteps in the hallway. He waited as a key jingled in the lock on the door. The door opened and Aland's teeth set on edge when he saw it was Marmora.

The man stared around the room, looking slightly paranoid as he approached Sidney's bedside. Horror slid over his face at the sight of her. The doctor moved to her side and began undoing her restraints, shaking his head. "I'm sorry, Sidney. I should have believed you. I should have sensed something was different about you."

Aland stiffened.

The doctor withdrew a vial of something from his front pocket and administered a shot of it to Sidney. She came to, appearing groggy at best. She blinked and looked up at the doctor, confused. In a matter of seconds she was gasping and fighting to be free. "Go! You have to go! He'll be back and if he knows you're alive, he'll stop at nothing to kill you. No witnesses, Doc."

Marmora touched her cheek, sending a jolt of jealousy through Aland. "Sidney, I'll be damned if I go and leave you here. Not after what I saw." He undid her straps and eased her to a seated position, touching her bruised neck lightly. The concern that shone in his eyes was deeper than that of a doctor and his patient. The man had feelings for Sidney on some level. Aland just wasn't sure how deep they ran. He did know they needed to end, here and now. He'd not share his mate with anyone. "Are you well enough to walk?"

She narrowed her gaze on him. "Why?"

"Because I'm getting you out of here."

She gasped. "No. I can't go. I have to stay. I can control them here."

Marmora shook his head, seeming befuddled. "I watched the wall open up and try to swallow you, Sidney."

Aland froze. The renegades had made another attempt on her and he hadn't been here to protect her.

The doctor had.

I'm her mate. It should have been me.

Sidney pulled away from the doctor, shaking her head, fear exuding from her. "You have to go. They'll kill you and it won't be quick. Those men are evil, twisted and ruthless."

"Are they even men?" Marmora asked, striking a nerve in Aland. "He made the wall open."

She took a calming breath. "They're not human, no. But they are men. He opened a portal to his realm, Doc. It's part of what they can do. Added strength, the ability to heal almost instantly, depending upon their sign, they can control certain elements along with wielding what I'm starting to think are endless amounts of magik."

Aland was shocked to hear she knew as much as she did of his kind.

Marmora took her hands in his. "When you first came here you kept screaming they were trying to take you and your sister. What do they want with you?"

She averted her gaze, her shoulders slumping. "At first, I didn't know. I just knew going with them would be a bad thing and that I had to do something to keep my sister and my cousin safe. Now, after years and years of dealing with them, I still think going with them would be a very bad thing because I know what they want and it's not something I'm willing to give them."

Marmora nodded, his face tight. "Sidney, we have to go to the authorities about this."

An amused laugh fell from her. "And tell them what? I tried that ten years ago and it landed me here. If you go spouting off about men from the stars, they'll lock you away too, doctor or not. You know I'm right." She pushed lightly on him. "Go. Please. Run far from here and stay safe. You're a good man. You've watched over me for ten years and I don't want to see you hurt again."

"Again?" the doctor asked and Sidney looked away, refusing to answer.

The door to the room opened, revealing a nurse. Her eyes were wide as she took in the scene. "Doctor? How? You're in intensive care? She attacked you. She fractured your skull."

"Leva, I'm fine. Sidney wasn't the one who attacked me."

The nurse made a move to enter the room.

Marmora put a hand up and the door slammed shut, locking the nurse out. He jerked. "What the hell was that? What just happened?"

Aland wanted to know the answer to that as well.

Sidney took the doctor's hand in hers. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean it. I just wanted you to live. I didn't know it would pass to you too."

"W-what would pass to me?"

She lifted her free hand and wind began to swirl around them. As fast as it started, it stopped. She bent her head. "He threw you into the wall head first. Blood was coming from your nose, mouth and ears. I just...I didn't want you to die, Doc. I didn't mean to pass it to you. All I wanted to do was heal you as best I could."

Aland sensed the nurse rushing to get backup and decided it was high time he showed himself. The minute he uncloaked his presence, Sidney lurched back, screaming.

He put his hands up, signaling he was no threat to her. "Sidney, I'm here to help. I want you safe. I want to take you to Phoebe and Heather."

Marmora rounded on him. "Detective? You're one of them?"

"So are you if you're able to absorb her power like that," he said frankly. "We don't have time to figure it out now. We have a mess to clean up. Humans aren't permitted to have knowledge of our kind and we're about to have a whole bunch of them in here."

"Why am I not surprised you have a mess here?" Sirius asked, appearing next to him out of thin air. He grinned. "I brought someone who might help Sidney trust you."

In a flash, Phoebe was standing there, her long dark hair whipping around her. Aland watched as Sidney saw her sister. She shook her head and backed into the corner. "No. This isn't real. It can't be..."

Phoebe bent. "Sid? It's real. Please trust Aland. He would never hurt you. He's one of the good ones Dad always told us about."

Aland could hear the emotions in Phoebe's voice, her strain to keep from breaking down at the sight of her sister.

Marmora moved around, putting himself between Sidney and the rest of them. She let him come close, infuriating Aland. She put her arms around the doctor's neck and Sirius turned, holding Aland back.

"Sidney, I know Phoebe," Marmora said. "I know it's been a long time since she paid you a visit and I know it's anything but normal to pop out of thin air, but she is

your sister and I'm positive you love and trust her. If she says to trust them, I think you should."

Someone pounded on the door. Aland sighed. "Shit, I have got a big mess to clean up with the humans."

Sirius patted him on the shoulder. "Ah, I'll lend a hand seeing as how I lost interest in the stakeout. Phoebe?"

"Yes?"

"Convince Sidney to trust Aland because I don't think I'm going to be able to convince Aland to leave her here a second longer."

"Damn straight," Aland said frankly. "Let's go wipe their minds of this and then get the hell out of here."

"My thoughts exactly." Sirius headed toward the door.

Aland stopped, hating that he needed to protect the doctor too, in order to get on Sidney's good side. "Sirius, we can't wipe the doctor's memory or leave him behind. He put himself at risk to save her and in the process, absorbed her power."

Sirius stilled. "What?"

Aland simply stared at his old friend. The look was enough to tell him it was more than true.

* * * * *

Sidney watched as the detective and his friend passed through the wall. Dr. Marmora gasped, swaying slightly. She held tighter to him, offering unspoken support.

He exhaled slowly. "They just walked through the... Sidney?"

"I know," she replied. "They can do that."

"Oh," he mumbled, his eyes wide. "This is commonplace for you then?"

A tiny laugh escaped her. "Kind of, but I'm a little afraid for you and nervous about what you think of me. I don't want you to fear me because I can see them and..."

"Shhh." He kissed her forehead and eased her to her feet. "I trust you, Sidney. We've been through too much together for me not to."

She stared at her sister. "Phoebe?"

"I'm sorry I haven't been here, Sid. I am. I just couldn't stand seeing you this way. And for the longest time, I thought I was crazy because I was hearing a voice in my head." She blushed. "Turns out it was Sirius all along."

"The man with the detective?" Sidney remained close to the doctor.

Phoebe nodded. "Yes and, Sid, he's my husband now."

Her jaw dropped. "You married one of them?"

"Only just. This is new to me too, Sidney. Sirius finally made himself known to me and everything is happening so fast. He tried to get me to come here right away and tell you the news." Phoebe cleared her throat. "I needed time, Sid. Time to find a way to tell you I'm in love with one of them but mostly..." she paused, "I needed time to gather the nerve to face you after not coming for so long."

"Baby sister," Sidney said, emotions lodging in her throat. "As much as I've missed you, I do understand. Trust me. I do." She continued to hold Marmora. "What I'm having the hardest time with is the fact you're married to one of them."

Phoebe glanced at the doctor but spoke to her. "Sirius is a good man, just like Dad said. You remember Dad's stories, right? Remember how he'd tell us that while many were bad seeds, a few living among us humans weren't? Sirius is one of the good guys. So is Aland. They'll do anything to keep us safe from the renegades."

"Renegades?" Sidney asked, still clinging to the doctor.

"The ones who try to pull us through the portals. The ones who attack us."

As her sister's words registered, Sidney gasped. "They came for you again? They tried to take you?"

Nodding, Phoebe locked gazes with her. "Yes, but Sirius and Aland were there. They kept me safe, just like they'll keep you and the doctor safe."

Sidney stiffened at the feel of another presence in the room with them. She drew in a sharp breath, yanking her sister closer to them. She pushed Phoebe and the doctor against the far corner of the wall a second before the renegade who had come for her before reappeared. He wasn't in orderly attire. He had on what most of the star men did when they came—a dark robe, open down the front, leaving his sculpted torso showing. His leather pants were open on the sides but laced all the way up each leg. They molded to his muscular, powerful legs. Markings showed on his body—the signs of the zodiac. Or, in Sidney's view, signs of the enemy.

"Sidney!" Marmora yelled, trying to come for her.

Thankfully, Phoebe held him back.

The renegade tipped his head, staring at the doctor. "You should be dead."

"And you," Sidney charged him again, drawing on her power this time, "should learn to leave well enough alone." She hit him and he fell backwards. She went down with him too, punching him as hard as she could. Her hand stung but she ignored the pain, striking him again. With a worried breath, she released a wave of her power. When it slammed into him, the sinister smile upon his face died. He blinked up at her, grabbing hold of her hips and steadying her on him.

Vaguely, she heard her sister yelling for her husband and Aland.

"You will make a prized wife." The man rolled with her, putting him on top. He bent his head and bit her lip hard enough to draw blood. "Say my name, Sidney. I want to hear it fall from your lips."

He tugged at her mind, using his power in an attempt to peel the layers of her mind away. She'd had enough attempts like this in her life to know the signs of it and to ward it off. She focused, invading his head instead.

"Your name is Boraine," she whispered, hate hanging from her every word.

He seemed shocked with her knowledge even when he requested she pluck his name from his mind. It was the opening she needed to gain the advantage. Bringing her knee up with a speed other humans did not possess, she connected with his groin.

Boraine howled and went to the side. She was up within a second and kicking him in the side. She twisted at the sound of Marmora's shouts for her. It was the wrong thing to do.

Boraine grabbed her leg and jerked. She went down hard. He lunged for her and she turned, coming up fast, striking him in the midriff with the entire weight of her body.

Sidney remained focused on the renegade, needing to keep her sister and the doctor safe. Marmora moved past her, attacking the renegade full force. Much to her surprise, Boraine's head jerked back and blood pooled at the edge of his mouth. Marmora didn't give up. He went at the renegade again, knocking the man far from Sidney. The doctor fought with skill and precision. She'd never pegged him as a fighter. Clearly, she'd been wrong. Still, to take on a star man was a feat she wouldn't have believed had she not seen it with her own eyes.

Aland and Sirius ran through the wall, and the minute the renegade spotted them, his eyes widened. He brought his hands up and something deep within Sidney told her if she didn't intervene, things would end badly. She charged, grabbing hold of Marmora as Boraine's power rose around them, locking them in and the others out.

Sirius was there, holding tight to Aland who was trying to get to Sidney. She shoved as hard as she could, knocking Marmora through the power, whispering words she didn't recognize as he crossed the threshold. He made it through without harm. She was left alone with Boraine.

He came toward her, gracious enough to look impressed with what she'd done thus far. "It would appear you've decided to join me willingly. Your Gatekeepers can help you no longer."

"Sidney, no!" Aland shouted.

"He'll kill himself to get to you!" Phoebe yelled, her gaze landing on Aland, her words meant for Sidney.

Unable to bear the thought of Aland or any of the others coming to harm for her sake, Sidney took matters into her own hand. Bending her head, she spoke words she didn't know in a language she knew only a little of—the language of the star men. Water began to seep into the room, filling only the area she and Boraine were in.

He turned in a circle, his gaze first going to Aland and Sirius and then to her. "This cannot be. A female Gatekeeper does not exist! You cannot possess this gift! You are but a human with enough psychic gifts to make you an acceptable mate to our kind. You are not actually one of us!" He came at her fast, knocking her into the water. He pushed her upper chest and submersed her in the water. She kicked him in the groin and he released his hold on her. She came up gasping for air and pissed.

Narrowing her eyes, she began to circle him, turning the tide of the battle. She became the aggressor, knowing he wasn't expecting as much. Her lower back burned and she hissed, going to a knee, dunking her back under the already waist-high water. She came up and tugged at the back of her pajama bottoms. Her sister's shocked intake of air alerted her something was off.

"Sirius, look at her back! You and Aland have those marks on your arms!"

"So do I," Marmora said, his voice tight. "Someone get her out of there. That maniac is going to kill her."

"I wouldn't be too sure of that," Sirius replied.

"Sidney!" Aland yelled. "Pull back on your power now! You've sealed the portal and you'll both drown if you don't stop."

She heard her sister's shouts for her. She knew Aland was trying to get to her and that Marmora was there, aiding him. She never took her gaze off Boraine. Finally, a laugh bubbled up from her.

Boraine's brows met. "You are out of your mind!"

"Yes," she said. "I am."

She floated up, as did Boraine.

“Unlock the portal, Sidney,” he pressed, swimming for her. He grabbed her hair and ripped her under the water level. When he pulled her head free of it, his eyes were swirling with liquid. “End this! We may control the element of water but we do not have gills. We will not survive...”

Sidney drew upon more of her power, forming a current specifically aimed at Boraine. It yanked him under, pulling him against the wall and pinning him under. She swam, diving under, going right for him. Her chest heated, wanting air, but she didn’t surrender. She remained in place, wanting him to see her until the very last moment. His eyelids fluttered shut and his body jerked violently.

Sidney released her hold on the portal then, allowing it to open once more. Water flushed away fast. Boraine fell to the floor, his body limp. She turned him and tipped his head back before pushing on his chest, expelling water from his lungs. He was still alive. If he wasn’t, the power around her would have faded away.

He spat and coughed, throwing up water. He stared up at her, confusion creasing his brow. “You could have killed me.”

“Not my style,” she said, moving back and kicking with all her might, shoving him through his own portal. The power around her dropped instantly and Aland was there, scooping her up and off the floor. He bear-hugged her. She was soaked to the bone but he didn’t seem to care.

She panicked and broke his hold, reaching for the one person she trusted most in the room.

Marmora.

The doctor opened his arms wide and hugged her, kissing her temple as he did. Aland’s narrow gaze landed on the doctor and it was plain to see he was more than jealous.

Sidney almost went to him to calm his concerns but she found herself staying close to Marmora. “Sander,” she said softly, calling him by his first name, something she’d never done before.

He pulled her against him, hugging her tight. "I will never be able to apologize enough for thinking this was all in your head, Sidney."

Sidney sank into Marmora's embrace and shook. The events of the day had taken their toll on her. She felt the heavy weight of someone's stare upon her and knew without looking it was Aland. The strangest urge to run to him all but consumed her. She resisted, staying close to Marmora. The doctor had been a close friend for ten years. He was safe.

Something in Aland's haunted expression warned that while he'd never physically hurt her, he would certainly do things to her body she'd never forget.

A shudder ran through her. Marmora rubbed her arms. "You're wet and freezing. Let me grab a jacket for you."

"No," she said, clinging to him. "I just want to go. Please."

Phoebe came to her. "We're going, honey. Come on."

Chapter Four

"Where did you learn to do all of that stuff?" Phoebe asked.

Sidney remained close to Marmora, having not left his side since they'd been ushered from the hospital. Sirius and Aland assured them things were handled and the humans had implanted memories to think Sidney had been released and that Marmora had taken an extended leave of absence to assist on a case across the country. She didn't question how they did it, mainly because she had similar gifts.

"Honey?" Phoebe touched her hand. "You've been tucked away in that place for ten years. How did you learn to fight?"

She slid her damp hair over her shoulder before putting her head to Marmora's upper arm. He was in Sirius' clothes after his shower and Sidney wore her sister's. She'd never seen him in anything other than his dress clothes. It was odd. What was even stranger was the fact he had the identical tattooed band around his arm that Sirius had. She was willing to bet Aland had it as well. The symbols were ones she'd seen enough of over the years. They marked the men from the stars.

Phoebe lifted her hand. "Sweetie, talk to me, please. You've gone quiet and it's scaring me."

She thought about her sister's question. "I learned from the men who come for me. Some I actually just kind of knew. The rest I've picked up along the way."

Her sister's lips pressed in a thin line.

"Exactly how many renegades have come for you?" Sirius asked, Aland close at his side, still glaring at Marmora.

Shrugging, Sidney exhaled slowly. "Two hundred and eighty-three."

All eyes came to her.

Marmora cleared his throat, wrapping his arm around her. "Sidney counts when she's nervous. It's common for —"

"The insane," she finished for him with a wicked grin.

He touched her chin. "You're not insane."

"I liked it better when you thought I was," she admitted. "It meant you were safe from them. They're ruthless, Sander. They'll kill you to prove they can. To them, we're like cattle."

"Not to all of them," Phoebe scolded. "I've told you that Sirius and Aland aren't like the others."

Marmora grunted. "Apparently, I'm one of these *things* too."

Aland lunged for him. "We're not things, Doctor, we're —"

Sidney's sharp intake of breath stopped him from actually touching Marmora. He drew up short, his blue gaze landing on her. He closed his eyes and backed away from the doctor. "Shit. I'm sorry. I just, well, we're not things."

"I know," she said. "He needs time to wrap his mind around this. It's new to him. I've known about your kind since I was little and I'm still having difficulty believing the majority of you are good and this lot are the bad apples of the bunch. They're all I've known. Try to see it my way."

"He will and so will my husband." Phoebe gave them hard looks and the men drew up straight. "Good boys."

"Yeah, well I don't know how good Aland's going to continue to be if your sister keeps hanging on the good doctor there," Sirius said, crossing his arms over his chest. "If that was you, I'd have killed the man already."

Sidney's anger spiked, as did her power. It flared, thrusting Sirius backwards. He crashed into the kitchen counter and stared wide-eyed at Sidney. "Oh shit."

"Did my mate just knock you on your ass?" Aland asked.

"Mate?" Sidney shivered and tried to mold herself to Marmora. The men who came for her always talked of mates, and hearing Aland use the term brought all the feelings back to her.

Marmora kissed her temple. "Shh, Sid, I've got you. You'll be all right. I won't let anyone hurt you."

"And what the fuck are you gonna do to stop it?" Aland narrowed his blue gaze on him. "You may have our blood in your veins but you're not a full blood and you're not a warrior."

"Seems to me," Sidney said, her voice hard, "he's the only one of the two of you who has actually protected me, so tell me again who the warrior is and isn't?"

Aland jerked at her words before pivoting and storming out of the house. Pain lanced her chest at the knowledge she'd hurt him. It hadn't been her intention yet the words had fallen free of her all the same. She knew she should take them back but she stood her ground, confused by the way he made her feel and by the events that had taken place.

It was all so overwhelming.

Sirius cracked his back and looked at Phoebe. "Can you ask your sister to control her temper?"

"I could but she has every right to be mad. Aland keeps going all alpha-male jealous on Sander when all the man has done is be there for my sister for the past ten years. Even when he was staring into the rather shocking reality we aren't alone in this world, he didn't abandon her. He came to her and he did everything he could to protect her. I saw him sweep her out of the way and take on that renegade with no concern for his own safety, Sirius."

Sidney stared at the back door, her chest still tight. Every muscle in her body tightened with the need to rush after Aland. Touching Marmora, she stared at the door Aland had exited through. Caught between the man who had been there for her for so long and the man she knew would be there for her in the future, Sidney gave in to the

bizarre pull. She inched from her position near Marmora and stood. He tried to stand as well. She shook her head. "I need to talk to him."

"No," Marmora stated flatly. "He's pissed at me and I'm not letting him take it out on you."

Sirius caught Marmora's arm. "Listen, Aland is a lot of things. A man who would ever raise his hand to Sidney in anger isn't one of them. You don't get our ways but trust me when I tell you she is the one person you can safely say he would never harm."

"It's true," Phoebe pressed.

Sidney rushed out of the back door and into the night. She instantly felt sick to her stomach and nervous. The space was too open, too intimidating. After spending so long staring at the same four walls, she wasn't used to freedom and the vastness it presented her with. She pushed onward, shivering in the night air, partially from the coolness and partly from fear.

"A-Aland?"

A strong hand touched her shoulder and she nearly screamed. Turning, she found his familiar blue eyes there, soaking her in. She tossed her arms around his neck and clung to him. He was tense at first and then slipped his arms around her, pulling her close. "I can feel your fear, *une zeena*."

Nodding, she stayed pressed to him. "It's so big here. So open."

He rubbed her arms, chasing away the chill. "Is your doctor friend going to come charging out here and save you from me?"

She pressed her mouth to his, shutting him up. His tongue found hers, circling it artfully. She tilted her head, giving him better access to her. By the time she realized what she was doing, they were eating hungrily at one another. She followed his lead and there was no doubt in her mind the man was an expert at seduction. His kiss alone was damn near sexually intoxicating.

He huffed against her lips, his head pressed to hers. "What are you doing, Sidney?"

"Um, kissing you?"

"That's not what I mean and you know it," he scolded. "This, out here with me when it's pretty fucking obvious you're in love with Marmora. This isn't a game."

She could have taken offense but she didn't. Instead, she met his gaze. "I don't know what I'm doing out here. All I do know is the minute I knew I hurt you by saying what I did, I had to come to you. I couldn't not."

The edges of his mouth lifted upwards. "You feel the pull too then?"

"The pull?"

"Don't worry about it right now." He continued to rub her arms. "For now, I'll be happy with the fact you came to me." He glanced around. "I know this was a big step for you, Sidney. I can feel how uneasy you are out here like this, totally exposed."

"I could leave the hospital without taking my body," she confessed.

He tilted his head. "What do you mean?"

"When I'm asleep, I dream but they're not really dreams. I'm really doing what's in them."

He gasped. "It was you I felt brushing past me in the halls the first night I came to you."

She nodded.

"That's a rare gift among our kind." He touched her cheek tenderly. "I also get the sense you shared that information with me for a reason."

She bit at her lower lip. "I don't know why I did. All I know is it's something no one else knows about me, not even the men who come for me."

He stared at her for what felt like forever. "You're beyond special, you realize that, right?" He reached out, his fingers skimming over the markings that had appeared on her skin. "Very fucking special."

Sidney swallowed hard and inclined her head. "I don't feel very special at the moment."

"No?" he questioned, tugging her to him. "I could change that."

She just bet he could.

She snuggled against him. "Tell me why I want to be held by you."

"Because your heart already knows who I am to you."

"You think I'm your mate?" she asked, no accusation in her eyes. "Others have said the same thing."

"But they weren't me." He gave her a chaste kiss.

She smiled against his lips. "No. They most certainly weren't you."

"Want to tell me more about how you called forth the element of water today?" His transition into a topic she didn't want to discuss was worthy of an award. "Have you ever done anything like that before?"

"Yes."

He bent, his eyes meeting hers. "This whole conversation thing is helped tremendously when both parties actually converse."

"And this is you being totally open and honest with me?" The smallest of laughs came from her.

He flashed a sexy grin. "It's me being honest. Totally open? Hmm, maybe. You first, okay?"

"Fine. You asked for it." Sidney pressed tighter to him. "I was little when it first happened. Maybe nine or so. It was hot out and a drought had hit the area hard. Phoebe and Heather wanted to go swimming but our mothers said no, we couldn't that day. The next thing I knew, the back porch filled with water. It stayed there, contained, but there was no logical explanation for it. We laughed, splashed and carried on like silly little girls until my mother walked out and gasped. I felt it then, my hold on the magik slipping. It was then I realized fully that I wasn't like other kids."

"No," he agreed. "I suppose you weren't."

She put her hands over his and squeezed. "Aland, I need for you to know something. Sander is my friend. He's actually my best friend. I'm closer to him than I am to my own family. I love my parents and Phoebe and Heather, but they weren't with me day in and day out. He was." She held firm when he attempted to pull away. "You're letting your temper kick in again."

"I don't really like knowing my mate is in love with her therapist."

"I do love him," she confirmed.

Aland's jaw set.

She lifted his hands to her face and kissed his palms. "I love him like I do Phoebe and Heather. Not exactly, but close."

"Wait." Aland lifted her face. "Are you telling me you love him like family?"

"Yes." It was on the tip of her tongue to confess to feelings she shouldn't be having for Aland. She shouldn't care for him like she did. Love shouldn't even be entering her mind in regards to him, yet it was.

He closed his eyes a moment before opening them, fighting his emotions. "Thank you."

"For loving him?"

He gave her a knowing look. "For clarifying exactly what it is you feel for him. You have my word, Sidney, that I'll do everything I can to protect him even though I don't particularly like him much."

She laughed and planted tiny kisses on his face. "Thank you. Thank you. Thank you." Pausing, she stared up at him. "Wait, does this mean you think they'll still come for him?"

"Unfortunately, yes." He drew her closer to his body. "Sirius and I talked a little while the two of you were cleaning up. He thinks we should take Marmora to our realm, to people we trust who can train him to protect himself the right way and to wield his magik effectively."

The air whooshed out of her lungs. "You want to take Sander away? To the same place those renegades are always trying to take me?"

"Shh," he soothed. "Think about it, Sidney. Is he better off here, with a limited number of us to train him and keep watch over him or is he better surrounded by hundreds upon hundreds of warriors of our sign—our brethren?"

"He's better off with me! I'll keep him safe. I won't let anyone—"

"You're scared to death to be out here, in the open, out of a fucking padded cell," he snapped. "What are you going to do to help him?"

His words sliced her to the quick. She rocked out of his grasp and nodded without really knowing why. She stumbled back from him and stared around at the night.

Aland made a move to grab her and she shook her head, flashing power at him, knocking his hand away. "Sidney, I'm sorry. I didn't mean it. It just came out. I can't think clearly with you. This fierce need to claim you and know you're protected clouds my better judgment and stupid shit falls out of my mouth."

She narrowed her heated gaze.

"Tell me what you're thinking."

"Can't you tell me?" she asked, still glaring at him.

He gasped. "You'd really feed me to Walter's dragon?"

"If she was real," she nodded, "yes." Staying mad at him wasn't something she seemed to be able to do.

His mouth slanted over hers quickly. His kiss was hot and branding. "Mmm, I know Phoebe wants to take you to your parents' house and then make you stay there for the night but, Sidney, it's not safe just yet and I'd rather have you at my house. With me. They can't protect you. I can."

"I hardly know you," she whispered against his lips.

He opened his mind to her and she swayed in stunned disbelief at the swell of information that came over her. She saw him as a boy, playing with another child with

wooden swords, running across a vast stretch of vibrant green grass. She saw him at all the stages of his very long life and a feeling of loneliness settled over her. Sidney knew it wasn't hers. It was Aland's. What he'd felt for over a century. At least until he'd met her.

He didn't close his thoughts to her. Instead, he kept the link open, nudging her mind gently. "Show me, Sidney. Let me know you fully."

Afraid of how he'd view her, she resisted at first, before giving in and allowing him to share in her memories. He rummaged through her broken mind, tightening, making odd noises before exuding rage. He jerked back from her, his breathing harsh and irregular. "I will hunt and kill every last one of them! Every renegade who ever dared to come for you, I'll —"

She touched his hand. "Aland."

He kept ranting.

She eased her hand up his arm. "Aland."

He stilled.

"Take me home with you. I'm exhausted and I'm not ready to see my parents just yet. As much as I love Phoebe, I can't do this tonight. I can't be what she wants me to be."

"What about Marmora?" he asked, a glint in his eyes.

"Will Sirius protect him?"

"Yes."

"Will he mind if Sander stays for at least the night?"

Aland hid his smile. "No. He won't mind." He reached out with his mind to his old friend. *Sirius, my mate wants me to take her home with me. She also wants you to babysit the doctor.*

Consider it done, Sirius replied.

Aland stared down at the beauty in his arms. She wasn't aware, but by coming to him when she sensed his unease and by sharing information with him about herself, she was doing as destiny had foreseen long ago. She was taking the tiny steps toward becoming his mate in every sense of the word.

He hated himself for his jealousy of Marmora. He tried to remind himself that the man saved Sidney's life and long before that, was her friend. It didn't help any. Had he only been human, Aland could have felt secure in the knowledge he was the better man. No human could stand up against his kind. Learning Marmora was something more, a mix of sorts, meant he was a real competitor for her heart and hand. Fate be damned. Aland wasn't the man she'd been comforted by for the past ten years. He wasn't even the man who had protected her from the newest threat but he would be the man who would be there from here on out.

Chapter Five

Sidney tossed and turned, unable to sleep in the vast room Aland had put her in. It was his bedroom, she was sure of it, but that didn't change the fact she couldn't find solace. She thumped her head against the mattress and balled her fists. This wasn't how she pictured freedom to be.

The bedroom door opened partway and Aland peeked in. "You okay?"

"No," she admitted freely. "I can't do this."

He entered the room and she closed her eyes in hopes of ignoring the fact he was shirtless and wearing a pair of loose, silk pajama bottoms. It didn't help. The image of him like that was now burned into her brain.

Her entire body lit with desire and she hit the bed several times.

A manly chuckle sounded above her head. Her eyes snapped open and she stared at Aland, his nose close to hers as he bent over the bed. "Are you going to spend the rest of the night beating up my bed?"

"No," she said, nodding slightly, making him laugh.

His laugh rolled over her, bringing heat with it. She arched to him, her body on fire. She wanted him to touch her but didn't have the courage to ask him to. His tongue slid out and over her lower lip. "You don't have to ask, *une srecota moje*," he said softly. "When you let me into your mind, you opened a direct path between us."

She tensed. "You hear everything I'm thinking?"

"No, not everything but I sense when you're distressed or when you want something." A sly grin splayed over his handsome face. "And Sidney, you want me, don't you?"

More than I should.

She swallowed hard, nodding slightly.

He traced a finger over her cheek. "I want you too."

She licked her lips.

Aland went to work, undressing her with painstakingly slow detail. She whimpered, desperate for more. How much more, she wasn't sure. All she knew was she wanted him in all the ways he would have her.

Cool air stroked her body as she lay naked beneath him. Never had she felt so utterly exposed. It had little to do with the lack of clothing and everything to do with how he seemed to see through to her soul.

His sexy smile eased her fears as he bent, trailing kisses over her torso. "So beautiful."

She ran her fingers through his hair as he lowered himself, going eye level with her pussy.

"You shaved?" Aland asked, already seeing the answer for himself.

"Yes." She blushed. "Phoebe came into the bathroom at her place and gave me everything I'd need. She thought it would help me feel sexier and that you might like it. She, uh, walked me through what to do. It's not like the nurses at the hospital ever pulled me aside, handed me a razor and said, shave your cunt, crazy lady."

He chuckled. "No. I wouldn't think they'd do that."

She licked her lips.

"So, I take it this means you're willing to accept me," he said. "Since you did this," he nodded towards her cleanly shaven mound, "because you thought I'd like it?"

"Do you?"

"Fuck." He inhaled deep, her scent making him crazy with lust. "Dammit, I wish your sister hadn't suggested it. It was bad enough as it was. Now all I want to do is lick your pussy until you scream my name and then lick it some more." He knew he was coming on too strong and demanding too much from her. She'd been held away from

the world for so long. While she was experienced in dealing with his kind, it wasn't sexually.

She wiggled beneath him. "Aland."

"Hmm, *une srecota moje?*" he inquired, rubbing his chin over her smooth, hairless mound.

"I trust you."

Those three words did him in. He eased a finger into her tight channel and as he met with resistance, he stared up the length of her. "Sidney, this will hurt at first. Then I promise to give you nothing but pleasure."

She nodded. "I know."

He dipped his head and used his other hand to expose her clit. The pink bud was swollen, ready and waiting for him. He slipped his lips over it and circled it with his tongue. She stiffened and then cried out, moving her hips against his face. He worked her clit more, waiting until he sensed her close to orgasm before pushing his finger through her virgin membrane. Her cunt pulled at his finger, wanting it deeper.

Sidney tensed and Aland continued his sensual assault on her. Cream flooded her heated channel and he'd never tasted anything more divine in all his life. He added a second finger, stretching her tight little pussy more. She accepted him and wiggled on his fingers. "Aland."

Lifting his head, he licked his glistening lips as his gaze met hers. "Tell me what you want."

"I-I don't know," she answered. "Everything."

A devilish gleam sparked in his eyes and he chuckled as he put his mouth over her clit once more. He'd give her everything and more. Her sweet cream slipped over his tongue once more and he moaned into her cunt. His dick ached, swelling with the need for release. He adjusted it with one hand while holding open the lips of her pussy with the other.

Gods, he could fucking eat her all day and never tire of her.

Sweetness.

Goodness.

Perfection.

Aland slipped his tongue into the warmth of her entrance and her vaginal walls seized hold of him. Swept up in the moment, he brought his hand up, his finger dipping into her wet recess, gathering cream. He ran his finger downward, finding her puckered rosette.

Sidney squirmed against him, grunting as he continued to sample her pussy. He traced the rim of her anus and dipped his head lower, licking the same path his finger had taken.

She nearly shot off the bed.

He pinned her in place with his free arm by placing it over her midriff. He toyed with her anus more, making her gasp.

“Aland, no.”

Moving his finger aside, he slipped his tongue into her ass. Her protest died on her lips and she bucked, driving herself onto his tongue more. Aland’s cock throbbed, wanting to be buried in her. Her tight ass held his tongue and he fucked her quickly, slipping his tongue in and out of her. He added his finger next, spreading her ass little by little.

Sidney’s legs clamped down on his head, holding it in place as she tensed. A straggled cry ripped free of her and cream trickled from her pussy. He knew she was coming and the feel of her anus contracting on his finger only proved as much.

A grin of pure male pride shone on his face. “Yeah, you like that, don’t you, baby?”

Her breathing was choppy as she nodded. Aland repeated the steps, loving the feeling of her ass as it clamped down on his tongue as he pulled wave after wave of

erotic pleasure from her body. She was so eager for more, so willing to let him have his way with her.

It drove him mad with need.

When she shuddered in completion once more, he slid up her body quickly, taking hold of his cock in the process. He pressed it to her soaked cunt and pushed in. He wanted to impale her with his shaft, fuck her like a depraved man but he knew better. It was hard enough, stretching her tight pussy. She winced under him and he captured her lips, kissing away the discomfort, before finally settling deep within her. She fit him perfectly, as he knew she would.

Sidney grabbed at his back and wrapped her legs around his waist. "Uh, Aland. Please. More."

Smiling against her neck, he obliged, giving her what she wanted. He began to pump slowly at first before taking it to another level. He rode her body with precision, assuring his lower abdomen rubbed her clit as he thrust into her. Her cunt had him in a death grip and he knew he'd die a happy man.

He lost himself in the moment, pumping, thrusting, hammering into her body. At some point, his legs tightened and his sac drew up. He knew he was close to exploding. He lifted her leg higher and slipped a hand around, cupping her ass cheek at first. The action caused his cock to drive deeper into paradise.

Sidney thrashed on the bed and he rode her full on. He slipped his hand down more, his finger teasing her asshole once more as he fucked her pussy. Her leg was pinned all the way up but she didn't complain. If anything, she seemed to enjoy it.

Animalistic need guided his actions as he plunged his finger into her ass, driving his cock deep. She cried out, her pussy grasping his shaft as she came. She went limp in his arms as he continued to thrust in and out of her cunt.

Aland didn't want to stop. He wanted the feeling of being in his mate to last for eternity. She bit at his earlobe, the feel of her nibbling on the sensitive flesh making his balls tighten with anticipation of release.

"Une mukko," she whispered.

Hearing her refer to him as husband did him in. Aland thrust deep and his entire body went stiff as his balls exploded. Seed jetted into her, bathing her silken depths. He didn't pull away, hell, he couldn't. He kept coming as he said the words he knew would forever change their lives, words that would bind their hearts and souls. His power flared as his cock continued to release. Her power rose to meet his and he grunted, his body shaking.

Mine.

Yes, her thoughts came to him. *Yours.*

His left hand, ring finger, burned but he ignored it, focusing instead on kissing the woman who was now his wife. When he was done, he remained in place, his cock nestled within her and her blue gaze on him. She looked content and that was saying something for Sidney. She'd known so much sadness.

She kissed him gently and eased her foot up his leg. "Is sex always like that?"

"No," he said with a laugh. "I take that back. It might be like that every time with us but no, it's never been like that before for me."

She traced her fingers over his back. "I don't want to hear about you and other women."

"Good, because I don't want to talk about me and other women. I can assure you there will never be anyone but you."

She laughed, slightly mocking him. "Really? You can? How is that?"

He lifted his hand—the one that had burned—and held it up for her to see the tattooed band that had appeared while making love to her. She stared harder at it and gasped. "The symbols—they mean you're...we're..."

"A mated pair," he finished for her.

Her desire cooled instantly. She pushed on his chest. "Off."

Baffled, he drew back. "Sidney?"

"Please."

"Just because we've bonded doesn't mean I'll force you to do anything you don't want to do," he said, refusing to leave the sanctuary of her body. He understood she wasn't equipped emotionally to deal with everything that had been tossed in her direction but he also knew he couldn't and wouldn't walk away from her or what they had. "I can't just walk away from you. Even if you weren't in danger, I couldn't just forget meeting you and go on with my life. You're it for me, Sidney. You are my life."

"Because some twisted version of Fate deemed it so?"

He slipped in and out of her again, more aggressive than before. Soon, she was clawing at his back to try to counter the effects of him riding her in such a manner. Her body climbed quickly toward an orgasm and Aland suddenly stopped moving. A silent plea came from her as she tugged on his back.

"No. Not until you admit you feel it too," he said, attempting to coax an admission from her.

She shook her head. "I feel nothing."

"Liar," he shot back, reaching down and grasping his cock. He worked it out of her and rubbed the tip over her clit, teasing her more.

"Aland."

His expression set in stone told her he wasn't about to give on this. If she didn't admit to what she felt when she was with him, he was going to keep her at the edge of coming and deny her release.

Sidney tried to rub her clit but Aland's power wrapped around her wrists, pulling them up and over her head before pinning them in place. She struggled, her jaw dropped. "You can't just use magik to hold me to the bed."

"Really?" The look on his face said he could and he did.

"Please."

"Not until you admit it."

She bucked against him. He held firm, refusing to give. "Argh."

Aland blew lightly over her nipple and raw need pooled at her low belly. Gods, she wanted him. Craved him. Loved him.

The reality settled over her and she went still, trying to figure it all out. When he'd shared himself and his memories with her, she'd seen it then—exactly the type of man he was. When he wasn't trying to exert his dominance over his mate, he was actually thought of as a funny guy. She'd only seen a bit of his quirky sense of humor but from what she'd glimpsed in his mind, she knew enough to know she liked him. He was fiercely loyal to those he loved and she understood he'd never take another above her. She also knew he'd die to protect her.

They were all qualities any woman would want. Not to mention, she would never have to hide who she truly was when she was with him and he'd never look at her with pity in his eyes, assuming she was insane for believing in things greater than what others did.

Aland slipped his cock head in and out of Sidney in a lazy fashion, his thoughts acutely tapping into hers. It was hard to keep from shouting in joy as she rationalized why she was feeling what she was. He didn't need to run down the pros and cons. He knew the minute he'd first seen her image frozen on a television screen that he was born to love her. When he'd held her in his arms for the first time, his head and heart came to an understanding—he would have her no matter the cost and he would love her for as long as he lived.

Her gaze was penetrating as she stared up at him. "Damn you."

He slid his cock into her all the way and she gasped.

He chuckled. "Damn me for what?"

"Hmm?" she asked, moving under him, swaying her hips in a pleasing way.

"You said damn me," he reminded her. "I just wanted to know why."

"You showed up out of nowhere," she grunted, still taking his cock as he pushed into her again and again. "And pulled me from what I know, what I understand and dammit if you didn't make me love you in the process."

His heart soared and as did his magik. With a satisfied shout, he pummeled her sweet body, ripping satisfaction from it once again as she too came with a start. Finding release as well, he withdrew and lay on the bed, dragging her against his body. "Mmm, damn you too, then."

"What?" she asked, her breathing still heavy.

"For making me fall in love with you too."

He could sense her happiness at his words. It made it all the better because he knew them to be absolutely true.

* * * * *

Lying on his side, Aland watched his wife as she came from the bathroom, the morning light spilling in through the partially gapped curtains. Even freshly awake, Sidney was stunning. She did things to him he couldn't even explain. Hearing her rhythmic breathing in the wee hours of the night as she slept peacefully near him, had left a silly smile gracing his face until sleep claimed him as well. Waking near her had done the same thing. He had to wonder if it would ever wear off. Having gone so long alone in life, he doubted it would.

She met his gaze, pink staining her cheeks. "You have that look in your eyes again."

"What look?" he asked, doing his best to appear innocent.

"The one that leaves me on my back, taking you deep."

Laughing, Aland eased out of bed and went to her, unabashed in his nudity. Sidney lacked clothing as well, making it impossible to resist touching her. She smiled and tried to get away from his grasp but he caught her all the same, pulling her back toward the bed once more.

He sat on the edge and stared up at her before turning her to face away from him. Licking his fingers, he stared down at her. Aland reached down and dipped his fingers into her pussy, readying her for him. She squirmed and her jaw fell open as lust shone in her eyes. Cream coated his fingers and he smiled before pulling her down onto his cock until she was seated fully on his lap. She cried out as his cock speared her.

Reaching around, he cupped her breasts, tugging on her nipples as she began to move up and down on him. "That's it, *une srecota moje*, ride it. Just like that."

She bounced on him and he watched her breasts jiggling. Their reflection in the mirrors above the dressers, flanking them, painted an erotic picture and he held tight to his orgasm, when all he wanted to do was explode in her again. Fuck, she felt good. Her tight cunt wrapped around his cock, pulling on him as she went up and down. Her grunts matched her movements, increasing in volume each time she sank all the way onto his cock.

"Aland," she panted, moving faster.

He caught her hips. "No, *une srecota moje*. Nice and slow. I like seeing your ass wiggle." Tracing his fingers over one of her cheeks, he nipped at her back, knowing he'd never get enough of her. He parted her cheeks and rimmed her anus with a teasing finger. She tensed and he slapped her ass cheek lightly. She rode him harder then, her long hair skimming her lower back.

Aland pressed his finger in her ass and she clenched around it. He nearly erupted then and there. Her pace grew excruciatingly slow. He ground his teeth, pumping up and into her while easing his finger into her ass more.

She came and her orgasm sent him crashing over the edge. The lips of her pussy fluttered around his cock and he let go, jetting seed into her, his finger going deep.

Sidney remained still, her body shaking from the aftermath of her orgasm. Each time with Aland was so intense she wondered if she could actually handle him. She knew she wasn't experienced like other women he'd been with, but he seemed pleased enough with her.

"Sidney," he said, pinching her nipple with one hand as he drew his finger out of her ass. "I'm more than pleased."

"You're doing it again." She stood slowly. His cock made a wet sucking sound as she moved off it. Facing him, she pushed her hair back. "You're in my head without me knowing."

He glanced at the tattooed band of zodiac symbols on his left ring finger. "I can't help it. It's a side effect."

"Of?" she asked, sinking to her knees in front of him. She raked her nails down his inner thighs just enough to make him shudder, but not enough to do actual damage.

His fingers found her cheek. "You're not ready to hear the truth of it all. When you are, I'll tell you."

Eyeing his wet cock, she grinned mischievously before taking it in one hand. She leaned, licking it. The fact it wasn't hard allowed her to take all of him in her mouth. She was gentle with him, enjoying the taste of their combined juices.

He exhaled slowly, his fingers curling in her hair. He helped to guide her actions as his cock hardened in her mouth, forcing her to take less and less of it. Before long, both hands were necessary to handle the base of his shaft, even with his cock head hitting the back of her throat.

Aland jerked and began thrusting upward, fucking her mouth from his seated position. He pushed her head down, forcing her to hold him a moment. She gagged and guilt crept over him. He was pushing too hard and too fast with her but he couldn't seem to help himself.

Sidney bit lightly at his cock, wicked delight reflecting in her eyes. He released his hold on her and she took the lead, going deep on his cock again. Her throat convulsed around his cock and his hands automatically went back to her hair. He held her there, pumping upwards for a moment. When he released her, she came off his cock and smiled, taking a deep breath.

"You like that?" he asked, his blue gaze intense.

Nodding, she took him in her mouth once more. As he hit the back of her throat, he lost control. His sac drew up and his cock exploded in her mouth. She drank his seed down, her eyes full of wanton lust and power. She had a way about her. One he'd never tire of.

She licked his shaft and slid up next to him. He pulled her back, cradling her body to his. "Mmm, *une srecota moje*, I think I've met my match in you."

"Okay, I give," she said with a tiny giggle. "What does *une srecota moje* mean?"

Aland grinned and cupped her neck, bringing her mouth closer to his. "It means my joy or my happiness."

The look on her face was precious. "If I'm your joy, you're so very screwed, buddy."

Tipping his head back, he laughed. It faded the second he sensed another near them. He glanced toward his bedroom door and stiffened as he found Marmora there, the man's eyes wide and filled with hurt.

Aland wanted to attack him for daring to enter his home and to spy upon him and Sidney in a private moment, but he knew better. To attack him would be to attack a man Sidney trusted fully. Besides, Marmora looked to be in enough pain after having witnessed Aland making love to Sidney.

Sidney gasped, using Aland's body to shield her own from Marmora. Aland didn't bother telling her the man had most likely looked his fill. "Sander?"

Marmora pivoted and raced down the hall.

Sidney was up, grabbing one of Aland's shirts and running after him before Aland could comment. With a curse, he too got up and grabbed clothing.

Chapter Six

Sidney came to a grinding halt in Aland's kitchen. Marmora was there, his head bent. He looked up at her. His glasses were off and his eyes were rimmed with red. He raked shaky hands through his hair and expelled a long breath. She'd never meant to drag him into her mess. Guilt assailed her and she padded toward him. He looked up and leaned back in his chair.

"Enjoy yourself?" he asked, his tone mocking. He'd never spoken to her in such a way before. She tensed and he shook his head. "Dammit. I'm sorry. I just...this is a lot to deal with, Sidney."

"I know."

He snorted, running a finger over the edge of the kitchen table. "Yeah, I'm thinking you're the only one here who does fully appreciate just how overwhelming this stuff is." He locked gazes with her. "Sirius wants to take me with him and have me meet others like them. What do you think I should do?"

"Why, Doctor," she said, adding a fake Southern drawl. "The patient is suddenly the one givin' advice."

He granted her a smile, motioning to a chair next to him. She sat and he took her hand in his. "I trust you, Sidney. I don't know Sirius or Aland but I know you. I know you'd give me your honest opinion no matter if I wanted to hear it or not."

She found herself easing closer to him, wanting to give him some sort of comfort through these trying times. "I can't tell you what to do. I can tell you that they won't ever stop coming and if you don't know what you're doing, you won't last long against them. All I really know, with all my heart, is that I want you safe."

He leaned, his mouth slanting over hers before she could protest. His kiss was hot and scorching. When he drew back she could have sworn power passed between them. She eyed him. "Sander?"

"That was me telling you goodbye," he said softly.

Her throat constricted. "You're leaving? If you're out in the world alone they'll..."

He cupped her hand once more. "I'm going to let Sirius take me to this training facility he told me about. He swears Aland will be able to reach me if you need me, not that he would bother but it's nice to know all the same."

"Oh," Aland intervened, "don't be too sure about what I will and won't do there, Doc. That li'l lady next to you has a major soft spot for you. While I may not like it, I understand and respect the fact you've taken care of her all these years. If making sure you're safe and informed makes her happy then it's what I'll do."

She maintained her composure. It was hard.

Marmora winked and then stood, kissing the top of her head in the process. "Sirius told me we needed to leave soon if we were going."

She grabbed his hand and squeezed it tight. "Be careful."

"You too," he replied, grazing his knuckle over her cheek. When he released his hold on her hand, a little piece of her heart broke. She cared deeply for the man and always would. That being said, she wanted what was best for him. She remained in place as he exited the kitchen.

Aland approached, wisely refraining from commenting on the kiss she was sure he'd witnessed. He grabbed her arms and yanked her up and out of the chair. His lips crashed down on hers, stealing the very air from her chest as his tongue invaded her mouth. His kiss was hot and branding, as she was sure he'd intended it to be.

Turning her, Aland pushed on her upper back, forcing her head down and her ass up. She knew what he was about to do right before he actually did it and she had to admit she was turned on.

He pulled her bottoms down, revealing her ass to him and freed himself from the confines of his jeans. The next thing Sidney knew, she was grabbing hold of the table, bracing herself as Aland drove home. His cock rammed deep, filling her to the point she thought she'd break in two. She gripped the table, her jaw going slack. For a moment, she forgot to breathe. Taking him deep, she panted, doing her best to be silent when all she wanted to do was scream for him.

He grabbed her hair, tugging as her pussy clenched his cock. He leaned over her and she looked back. Aland took her mouth savagely, still thrusting into her. It was primitive yet effective. His message was clear.

She was his and he would not share.

Arching, she came in a fiery wave. Her entire body spasmed and he kept going, kept pushing her over her crescendo. She whimpered, her pleas barely there but her body coming with an intensity that scared her. How could she crave a man this much? How could she feel so much for him already?

He rammed into her, holding firm as he too found release. His breathing was shallow and his fingers dug painfully into her hips. She didn't care. All that mattered was the feeling of absolute and utter bliss he'd brought about.

With a tender kiss to her neck, Aland pulled partially out of her, stroking his cock with his hand to assure he filled her fully. When he was done, he adjusted himself, zipping his jeans before helping to pull Sidney's pants up as well. She was pliable in his hands, her actions loose.

He turned her to face him, a question instantly forming upon his face. "Sid?"

She touched him tentatively. "What have you done to me?"

"I've loved you, *une srecota moje*," he said, lacing his voice with calming power.

She sank against him and he embraced her. "Could you love me again?"

"With pleasure but first," he kissed her, "didn't I promise to take you out for ice cream?"

Mandy M. Roth

Laughing, she snuggled closer to him. "I'm willing to take a rain check on that. For now."

The End

About Mandy M. Roth

Mandy M. Roth grew up fascinated by creatures that go bump in the night. From the very beginning, she showed signs of creativity. At age five, she had her first piece of artwork published. Writing came into play early in her life as well. Over the years, the two mediums merged and led her to work in marketing. Combining her creativity with her passion for horror has left her banging on the keyboard into the wee hours of the night. Mandy lives with her husband and three children on the shores of Lake Erie, where she is currently starting work on her Master's Degree.

Mandy welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and e-mail address on her author bio page at www.ellorascave.com.

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