



# Prophecy

Tianna Xander

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The Prophecy  
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# *The Prophecy*

*By*

*Tianna Xander*

## *Dedication*

*To Kevin: My love, my life, my real life hero.  
This one is for you.*

*And yea shall she possess the Heart of Terrna. The very stone I have created to carry that which is mine.*

*Yet the stone shall not be the salvation of Terrna, only she who possesses it. Find the woman who possesses the Heart of Terrna and ye shall find the savior of your world.*

*The people of Terrna will serve her as Queen, for she shall be Queen. Bound to the rightful Heir, she shall prevent the cataclysm, caused by the death of the sister, Tomar. If the rightful Heir should find her quickly she shall have the power to reverse the death of the sister and all will be right with the world.*

*Shall she find happiness with the Heir; the world shall see peace for one thousand generations. Shall she find unhappiness; peace shall last only as long as she lives.*

*The gathering of evil is upon us. The others of the Sorcerers Guild of Nasha will entrap the evil while I make my escape to protect that, which one-day will save the world. Yea the legends be true, for I have seen it, so shall it be.*

## Prologue

“You can’t be serious old man!” Niklas Voortag slammed his fist down on the table in front of him, his intense gaze made his companion tremble. “What old woman told you this tall tale, my mother?”

The older man, unmistakably uncomfortable under such deliberate scrutiny, cleared his throat several times before telling his fantastic tale. “Many, many years ago,” he paused, then took a drink from the mug that sat before him. “Before the great uprising, a spell was cast by a great sorcerer. He spoke of a...a Prophecy.” He paced back and forth, obviously apprehensive. His gaze wandered around the room. It was apparent he feared to make eye contact. “This Prophecy, has already begun to come to pass.”

He paused again, lifted his mug with trembling hands to swallow another draught of the strong brew. He shifted himself in his seat—a vain attempt to make himself a little more comfortable. “The Sorcerer was Morwyyn.”

At the mention of this name, Niklas, High King of *Terrna* stiffened. Morwyyn had been feared by all of their people in the time of the uprising.

"Morwyyn cast a spell to always protect the rightful heir to the throne, until the year of the death of the sister, Tomar." He cast a nervous glance toward Niklas.

"He did this to protect us before he disappeared. The Sister will soon spin from her orbit, and *Terrna* will be overcome by the very evil Morwyyn sought to stop, if the Prophecy is not brought to fruition." His eyes, stance and very manner pleaded with his king.

It was a fantastic story. Not one Niklas was prepared to believe without evidence. "May I see Morwyyn's scroll, Trinaugh?" He held out his hand, knowing the disbelief was clearly written on his face.

Trinaugh pulled a crumbling parchment from the worn bag he carried and handed it gently to Niklas. As the Keeper of the Light, only himself and his assistant ever knew of the prophecy. Until now. It had been passed from one Keeper to the next for generations, until the rightful heir must be told. Trinaugh, and others like him, had lived and died, protecting this secret for centuries.

With growing trepidation, Niklas took the faded, tattered parchment from the wizened old man and began to read. His look of disbelief dissolved to a mask of resignation. Some of the predictions had indeed already come to pass.

What would it be like with Tomar gone? Would they even survive? He left the scroll on the table. Strode to the window and looked at the twin moons of *Terrna*. The identical glowing spheres lit the courtyard below with a soft silvery glow. The leaves on the trees glistened, the flowers in the courtyard shining with health under the watchful eyes of the twin moons.

"So it is true," he spoke with quiet resignation. Niklas exhaled heavily and collapsed into his chair. He poured a large draught of ale into his mug, then rested his head in his hands and waited for the words written by Morwyyn, an eternity ago, to sink in.

Trinaugh stepped beside him and laid a gnarled old hand upon his shoulder. Compassion lit his eyes. "Only if you fail will the evil prevail. Only then, must we leave here as the others did during the uprising, find an uninhabited world and begin again. Even then, the evil may follow."

Niklas looked up into Trinaugh's kind gentle eyes. He knew his own were stricken with a myriad of emotions. Pain, loss, fear, resignation. All were a part of him. All were battling for supremacy within his heart. The resignation won. "So, I am to be married within twelve months of the death of the sister. It shouldn't be difficult. I have mothers throwing their daughters at my head daily." He gave a careless shrug.

Trinaugh still looked distressed.

Niklas noticed this and immediately began to feel uneasy. He glared at Trinaugh. "Why does your countenance scare me, old man?" he said through clenched teeth. He felt a muscle tick in his jaw. *Very much more of this good news and I just might start to get giddy!* Gods knew he wasn't eager to marry an unknown woman at an unspecified time, lose his freedom forever and most likely have to put up with incessant nagging for the rest of his days. Yeah, *that* sounded great! It was right at the top of his list of things to do. He rolled his eyes.

Trinaugh grimaced and wrung his hands. He



obviously hated that it was he, after so many centuries, to lose favor with his king. That it was *he* who had to give Niklas this bad news, which just kept getting worse. "You have not read the entire scroll, Your Highness. You cannot marry just anyone. It is your queen who will fulfill the prophecy. *She* will make it possible to destroy the evil forever." Trinaugh shuffled back to his chair and lowered himself onto the seat.

The old man took another gulp of ale and turned toward Niklas, his hands trembling. *If he keeps that up, Trinaugh is going to be as drunk as a Doobian Botan trainer after a winning race*, Niklas thought wary. It couldn't be good news if he had to have so much of that false courage to spit it out.

"Her hair will be the color of a Minauk in winter and her eyes the color of the jewels upon the handle of the sword of Lintau."

Niklas's raised his brows at the description. The color of a wintering Minauk indeed! The black in summer, gold in winter cow-like animal was rare. The only thing that even came close was the gold brought from the planet called Earth.

The dark blue of the jewels was also unique. Nothing on this world matched their color. Nothing natural anyway. So far they had only been successful in producing it synthetically. The sword, procured long ago, had belonged to Morwyyn. No one was certain of its origin.

"Don't be preposterous! There is no woman on this world who could have hair and eyes the color you describe." Niklas snorted, aware his eyes flashed angrily. He stood so abruptly, his chair slid across the

floor before tipping over onto its side. Everyone on this world had dark hair and eyes. Their skin was a natural golden brown, which gave the appearance of a perpetual tan. "Should I search the entire Galaxy for such a woman? My time would be better spent here, fighting the evil that frightens you so!" Niklas roared.

"You must go!" Trinaugh cried. "The blood of millions could be on your hands! She carries the key to our salvation. Morwyyn predicted that you will recognize her." Trinaugh shrugged, it was a barely perceptible movement that Niklas nearly missed. "I do not know how. But you must find her, even if you must search a hundred worlds, a thousand. I have already made preparations. I have advised the Council that you intend to take an extended tour of the Galaxy. There is a replication device on your vessel, which will make anything you may need."

"Am I to just vanish then?" Niklas raised his brow.

Trinaugh's shoulders slumped. His lips drew down at the corners. The usual twinkle in his eyes gone, replaced with the dull shadow of weariness that made him look older somehow.

"You have known and trusted me all of your life, Niklas. Will you stop doing so now?"

Niklas pushed a hand through already disheveled hair, looked at the man he could have easily called father and wondered where the time had gone. When had Trinaugh gotten so old? "No. I cannot stop trusting you now, old friend. I will go." Turning, he began to walk toward the device that would send him to his ship, then stopped when he felt Trinaugh's hand upon his arm.

"There are many worlds we have peopled. They should be among the first you search. As you already know, many vessels were sent out into the great unknown during the time of the uprising. We have records of some that were sent to us before we lost contact. The coordinates have been programmed into the computer on your vessel. Make use of them and of your time wisely and you shall be triumphant."

Trinaugh continued with the very last of the prophecy, the very last of the Keepers' knowledge. "There are no writings of this in Morwyyn's scroll. It is a verbal record, which has also been passed through the centuries." He tried to convey the importance of this to Niklas. "If you find happiness with her, you two will be able to halt the death of Tomar entirely." Trinaugh clasped his hand. "Go now, Your Highness. Find your bride. Good luck and good journey."

## Chapter One

Muffled sizzling sounds came from the street, if it could even be called that. Niklas had serious doubts. *He* would have called it a dirty, pock-ridden ribbon of filth. It appeared as though someone had taken a machine and ruthlessly scraped away the grass and shrubbery in a winding line through the center of town. He sighed and gazed around the dimly lit interior of the bar. Loosely translated, it was called *The Watering Hole*, although he hadn't seen a drop of water in this place.

The glass of dingy brown liquid that sat on the filthy table in front of him held no appeal. Niklas wondered why anyone would choose to live this, then shook the thought off as he remembered they weren't the ones that had made the choice. Their forefathers had chosen, and badly.

He pinched the bridge of his nose and sighed. He was getting another headache. In fact, he should be used to them by now. This trip had been nothing but a headache since they'd left *Terrna*.

Niklas bent his head forward and back, then side to side in a futile attempt to relieve some of the tension in

his neck. *Interesting*, he noted. If he bent his head to the left, he heard faint strains of music. If he bent to the right, he more plainly heard the crunching sounds from his neighbor at a nearby table, eating something that looked disgusting. He wrinkled his nose and looked away. Whatever it was, it had still been moving. “Damn!” He cursed softly, shuddered, then looked around to make sure no one heard him. He didn’t want—or need—more trouble than he already had at the moment.

He couldn’t wait to get off this new hellhole, in a long line of hellholes. But he had to wait, his ship needed repaired. Again. Bowing his head over his unappetizing drink, he swore to himself, watching disinterestedly as the scantily dressed women gave welcoming smiles to dirty *Conque* miners. Some unfastened their tops, displaying their wares. They had given Niklas an abundance of attention when he arrived—because he was clean no doubt. They soon returned to competing for the attention of the locals when they found he wasn’t interested.

The only woman he was interested in right now, was The One. She was out there. If it had been predicted by Morwyyn, no matter how farfetched, it must be true.

Shifting in the hard, straight-backed chair, he checked his communications link. What was taking so long? Niklas pulled a few coins from his pocket and tossed them onto the table. He couldn’t stand it in here any longer. He needed some air. Which world was this again? Ah yes, *Carn*, number fourteen. The traveling was getting on his nerves.

He glanced back at the interior of the bar. He really wouldn't have minded some exercise between the sheets, but had decided against it after one look at the women. He liked his women clean and didn't like sloppy seconds. Besides, empty mindless sex just didn't appeal to him anymore. Niklas shook his head and sighed. He must be getting old.

The street bustled with activity. People ran about in different directions. Two men dressed in black stooped over two men lying in the middle of the road obstructing traffic. The two in black looked at each other, then shook their heads. Each grabbed the arms of a man to drag the two out of the thoroughfare.

There had been a duel. This was a frontier town, the world wasn't developed enough to have the technology they possessed. Off world visitors willing to share technology, had given them phase pistols. Too bad they hadn't shared sonic baths as well.

Niklas tried not to breathe too deeply as he strode through town. He avoided the muddy street. Instead, he walked down the mud-caked wooden sidewalk. He watched as odd beasts of burden pulled carts and walked listlessly around turnstiles. He shook his head. How glad he would be to leave this place.

A movement in a window caught his attention. Glancing up to see a large bearded man in women's lingerie, gazing at himself in a giant mirror, caressing his own nipples, Niklas stifled a laugh and kept walking. It was a long walk back to the ship. But he could honestly say he'd seen everything the town had to offer—and it wasn't much. After leaving the town behind him, Niklas walked through the country,

enjoying the scent of sweet clean air. The trees, not unlike *Terrna's*, had leaves a bluish-green color instead of deep green. The grass was tall and lush, not green, but a strange tawny-color.

With just a few farms on the outskirts, the odds of finding The One here was too low to make the trek worthwhile. He would leave and go onto the next world. Niklas stopped, wanting to feel that this was the right decision. He raised his hands to the sky, closed his eyes and cleared his mind.

*Look toward the blanket of stars called the milk of the Goddess. Her people know it by another name. Look there and you shall find what you seek.*

The voice washed through him. Made him feel weak, yet strengthened him in such a way that he felt invincible. It had been a message from the Goddess. Her power humbled him. Niklas looked to the sky and gave thanks. Digging a coin from his pocket, he buried it in the soil at his feet, waiting as the power drained from him into the ground where it belonged. He straightened, feeling much better. Even the headache was gone.

When he reached the ship, he found that all hell had broken loose. The crew bustled about with phase pistols in their hands. "What's going on here?" He placed a restraining hand on the arm of one of the ship's engineers.

"It was Ornos, Your Highness. He has been caught sabotaging the ship. Cholo found him in the engine room, setting a bomb. He intended to strand us all here. Or kill us. I have to help them search." She indicated the nearby woods where just about every one

of his crewmembers milled about searching the underbrush.

"Minra." Niklas called her name, wanted to draw her attention. She turned, her flashing eyes distressed. "Has anyone checked the rest of the ship to make sure there are no other hazards on board?"

She nodded absently, scanned the woods looking for Ornos. "Yes, Your High—"

He interrupted her impatiently. "You know not to call me that, Lieutenant. I am your Captain, nothing more. You should call me Niklas." When she looked ready to disagree, he added, "Sir Niklas if you must, we cannot afford to frighten away the very person we seek, can we?"

Minra shook her head, her mouth twisted in a wry grin. "I suppose you're right, Your...Sir Niklas. But I am going to be horribly uncomfortable with this."

"Not any more uncomfortable than I am with marrying a woman I have never met." Niklas chuckled. The sound suggested humor where there really was none.

Minra conceded his point. She excused herself to help the others search for Ornos.

Glancing around, Niklas frowned. There didn't appear to be anything out of order on the ship, but one could never tell. "Damn it!" To be on the safe side, he was going to have to use the security device. Niklas hated that irritating voice, constantly telling them all was well. Still, it was a small price to pay for their safety, he thought with a sigh. Striding to a console that controlled the security device, he immediately felt he should be far away from that particular station. He



looked at it for a while, perplexed but the peculiar feeling persisted.

Niklas turned and headed to his quarters. There was a security lock on his door, a habit that had stood him in good stead throughout the years. The captain's cabin was always locked with a complex pass code he changed often. Entering the code, he approached the security console at the opposite end of the room. He eyed the sonic bath wistfully for several seconds, really wanting to wash away the layer of filth that covered his skin, but something prodded him, told him this was more important.

Sitting in front of the console, Niklas waited as the air in the seat adjusted to his body's tensions. The cushion infused with heat to ease the pain in his lower back. Niklas typed the pass code to access the security system, hearing several warning beeps as soon as the program was activated. A female voice announced over shipboard speakers.

"Warning! Warning! Explosive device found! Sonic bath, location High King's quarters. Warning! Warning! Explosive device found! Security console one, bridge. Warning! Warning! Explosive device found! Storage compartment three, storage compartment seven, storage compartment nine." Silence for a few moments, then in a calmer voice. "Explosive devices disabled and extracted, transported and detonated. Risk to ship now zero, all is well."

Niklas heaved a sigh of relief. He still wanted to wash, but now eyed the sonic bath with suspicion. Hadn't his crew said they searched for more signs of tampering? Why hadn't they used the security device?

Why the Sonic Bath and not the Security console?

He thought for a moment, then knew. The bath had been acting strangely. He'd asked Ornos to take a look at it. When Ornos came to repair it, the other man had made it clear he would rather work alone. Niklas never left his rooms while Ornos worked. A situation had never come up to take him away from the maps and charts at his console. Ornos couldn't have gotten in at any other time with the magnetic locks in place. He set the explosives in the bath because he couldn't get to the console. Ornos had probably installed timers on the devices so they would explode after he left the ship. Either that or he hadn't considered that Niklas would use one of the crew baths to cleanse himself, before calling for the repair.

Pacing the perimeter of his quarters, Niklas couldn't help but wonder if others were sent to stop him? He sat on the bed, felt the familiar comfort of the soft air cushion and his *Carboda* quilt. His mother had commissioned the quilt from the witches of *Nasha* when he was a child. The witches had constructed it to protect him while sleeping and give him comfort. It was not unusual for a family member to purchase such a quilt for a loved one. The power of the witches of *Nasha* was legendary.

He fingered the soft material, needed some sense of comfort, of safety. The soft velvety feel beneath his fingers relaxed him. The soft muted colors brought a sense of stability, of security. He looked down to the swirling pattern and felt himself drawn into the moving tapestry, his anxieties floating away.

Slowly, he undressed, looked down at his smooth

muscular chest marred by only one scar and smiled as he remembered how he had received it. His cousin had been angry about something. They had been wrestling when Niklas accidentally pushed him into a large outcropping of rock. Haron received a large gash on the side of his face and grabbed a sharp rock plunging it toward Niklas's chest. Niklas's father had found them and pulled them apart.

After instructing the crew to give up their search for Ornos and concentrate on getting back into space, he stepped into the sonic shower. "Clean." Groaning with pleasure, Niklas put his hands on the opposite wall, leaning across the width of the small room. Delighted to feel the dirt dissolving to nothingness he reveled in the fact that the next thing he smelled would *not* be the body odor of the person at the next table. His entire body tingled as the dirt lifted from his pores, leaving a sensation not unlike gentle hands softly skimming up and down his bare body.

After his shower, Niklas dressed in a flight suit. He wanted to leave this planet as soon as possible. Resetting the magnetic locks, he strode toward the bridge, nodding to the people he passed and acknowledging their gestures of respect with a smile. He bumped into Cholo, the chief engineer.

"Ornos has been sabotaging the engines as well, Highness. We found broken engine parts, along with new in his rooms. He has been undermining us the entire time."

Niklas shook his head. Would they never remember to call him by his given name or even Captain? "Is the engine repaired?" He needed to know. They couldn't

afford to stay here much longer.

"Oh yes, Sir! We are about to bring them back online any minute. The repairs took no time at all when we found the good parts in Ornos's quarters."

Niklas laid a hand on his shoulder and gave him an encouraging smile. "Very good, Cholo, I knew we could all count on you." He left Cholo smiling proudly in the corridor.

The large bridge held several consoles. Niklas sat in the seat at a security console and brought up the star maps. Looking toward the star system called the milk of the Goddess, he found one inhabitable planet.

He checked the information. It was old, but most likely still accurate—after all the first fourteen planets hadn't changed much over the last hundred years. Why should this one be any different? He punched the codes to get subliminal programs and set the disks aside.

Niklas looked around the bridge. Everyone was at their stations. Reba, the communications engineer, sat with her back to him, headphones against her ears, listening for who only knew what. Occasionally she would reach across her console to adjust the frequency of the long-range radio.

Rodel, his pilot, sat at the flight controls. He'd had a rough night by the looks of it. He was about to fall asleep. Rodel looked toward Minra with bloodshot eyes. She was running a diagnostic program. He caught her attention and winked. Minra smiled and blushed.

Niklas bit back a smile. There was no guessing at what *they'd* been up to last night. He leaned back,

watching the large viewscreen and admired the beauty of an endless expanse of space. Stars streamed by, lengthened by the sub-light speed. Niklas had three weeks before they reached the planet. It wasn't a lot of time. He snatched up the subliminal disks and headed for his quarters. He had a lot of work to do.

It would take the next few weeks to make sure he was ready to go to the surface as soon as they arrived at the planet. Niklas knew he was running out of time and had very little to waste. He devoured disc after disc, listening to the music while he showered, while he ate, dressed, worked and slept. He lived and breathed the Earth languages—all of them. When he arrived, he would be ready to go to the surface to search for his bride.

He had been so caught up in his effort to learn the languages that he was mildly surprised to find the time had passed so quickly and they were entering an orbit around the planet.

"Raise the shields and engage the veiling device! Radar and sensor devices are present. Change our trajectory. Rodel, put us behind the moon. I hope they didn't see us."

Niklas glanced toward the security officer who reacted so quickly to their dilemma. "We'd better hope they didn't see us, Hale. They appear to be advanced enough to put up a fight. And since they haven't been contacted in so long, that is a distinct possibility," Niklas commented, his expression grim.

"Uh, Sir? I don't think you're going to like this." Reba was listening to the radio again, her hand pressed to her ear, a frown on her face. "They are very

advanced and the possibility of finding The One here could be very high, but..."

"What do you mean, I'm not going to like that? If the possibilities are high, that is good."

Reba eyes didn't meet his, a sure sign of her nervousness. "Sir..." She paused to take a deep breath and nervously lick her lips. "The possibilities are so high, because there are billions of them, Sir." She looked like she wanted to flinch away when he turned toward her clearly agitated.

"Excuse me?"

"There are billions of people on this planet, Sir. I don't know how we will ever choose the right place to begin our search. Perhaps we should leave and search the other less populated worlds."

Niklas frowned at her suggestion. He would be able to cover more ground, if he left and went to the other worlds she suggested, but then again, a world, which had Morwyyn helping it, would have flourished.

"No. We'll stay, at least for a while. We are already here. It would be more of a waste to leave and have to return." Niklas sighed, hoping he hadn't just made a huge mistake. "Find out how out of date our information is. Get some information up here and put it on discs fast." If this took very long, he wasn't going to be happy. Not happy at all.

Niklas was not pleased. It hadn't taken long to find that their information was no longer useful. It was so out of date, to call it obsolete was an understatement. To coin a colorful Earth phrase, he was pissed! He paced in front of the communications console, waiting

for the verdict from Reba.

How long could it take to do some catching up? There were new phrases to learn. New slang and colloquialisms, it was like learning a new language. Again. He didn't want to sit back and do nothing, but it had been his designated job since they'd maintained an orbit behind the single moon. Niklas paced, stopping every few steps to scowl at Reba.

She ignored him. After nearly a year of serving on the vessel, Reba knew his moods were mostly show. After an hour of interminable pacing, he noticed her attention and nearly pounced on her. "What did you find? Do we have enough information to learn so I can go down to the surface?" His hands held her arms. He hated this waiting—hated wasting so much precious time.

"I have something we can load onto a subliminal disk. There is so much to learn, we need to run a routine scouting mission to learn it all."

Niklas squeezed her shoulders, released her. "How long is that going to take?" Shoving his hands in his pockets, he looked at the ceiling and closed his eyes, trying to gain some measure of self-control before he glanced back at his communications engineer.

Reba tilted her head and looked at him as she reached up to tuck a stray lock of hair behind her ear. "As you know...Sir, a routine scouting mission usually takes about two weeks. If we put everything on disks as soon as we receive it, you should be able to function very well down there in sixteen days at a maximum." She sat stiffly, obviously steeling herself against his temper.

Sixteen days...then approximately three months for the return trip left only a year to find The One if Trinaugh's calculations about the death of the sister were correct. He could only hope he had enough time.

Niklas lowered his head and stared at his boots. He'd never felt so helpless in his life. Would he ever find her? The thought of losing his friends, his family, was staggering. Even if they moved off world, he would still lose his home and everything he had grown to love through the years. Niklas had already made the commitment to marry the one that possessed the power to save his world. Even at the cost of his own freedom, quite possibly at the cost of his happiness.

It was a small price to pay to save millions of lives. Wasn't it?



## Chapter Two

“It sucks!” Brianna O’Neill looked at her friend and scowled. “You can’t possibly want me to recite *that*.” She climbed out of her old recliner and stomped over to the desk in the corner of the room.

“What’s wrong with it?” Amber asked, sliding out of the worn overstuffed chair to walk into the kitchen.

“It sucks. That’s what wrong with it.” Brianna picked up the crumpled piece of paper, tempted to launch it across the room. “Earth, air, fire and water, bring to me what you aughter? Ugh! You like it, you use it. I want my spell to be a little more romantic than that.” She balled the paper back up and flung it at her friend.

“Well, if you can do better, be my guest.” Amber dodged the flying paper then took a drink from her third strawberry daiquiri. She scowled into the glass when it made a slurping sound. “Empty again,” she said with a sigh, then placed the rim to her lips and tapped the bottom to get the last of the crushed ice from the glass.

Brianna shuffled through a collection of spiral notebooks. “Where is that?” She stumbled and fell

against the small lamp on her father's scarred, paper-covered desk.

"That's it. You're cut off," Amber announced, laughing drunkenly.

Brianna snorted. "In your dreams, sister. It's *my* blender."

"Okay, okay, so you're not cut off." Amber waved her hand in the direction of the desk. "We'll cut off the lamp. It can't seem to stand up straight anyway." She watched with a smile as the lamp fell to the floor.

Cringing, Brianna watched as it slowly stopped rolling on its light-blue shade. "Whew, at least the bulb didn't break." She curled her bare toes into the carpet, then went back to dig through papers.

"What are you looking for anyway?" Amber asked from the kitchen. She plopped more strawberries in the blender and turned it on. The noise shattered the calm of the house and, Killer, Brianna's Yorkshire Terrier, raced in to bark at the noise.

"Hey, put some drink mix in those. I want more than fruit and alcohol this time," Brianna called over her shoulder as she rummaged through the cluttered drawers in the desk.

"Aw, come on, those were the best ones!" Grumbling, Amber grabbed the bottle next to the blender and read the label.

Brianna rolled her eyes, shook her head, then turned her attention toward a pile of spiral notebooks in the corner.

"What's a jigger?"

"I think it's a shot," Brianna answered absently, back to digging through piles of papers, before turning

her attention back to the desk.

"Shot?" Amber repeated with a blank expression. She shrugged. "Oh, okaaaay. Do you have any syringes?"

"What?" Brianna looked up. "What *are* you doing in there?"

"Oh, nothing. Do you have any syringes?"

Brianna shook her head. "That's what I thought you said. I really hate to ask this, hon, but what do you need a syringe for?"

Amber heaved a sigh. "You said a jigger is a shot. Well, this calls for two shots for each drink..."

"Good grief, Amber. Shot glasses!"

"Oh, right." She tossed Brianna a sheepish grin. "I knew that. I was just testing you."

"Why don't we just forget the drinks? I think we've had enough anyway. I don't want to recite this spell drunk off my butt and end up with a jerk or something." Brianna pulled a thick page of homemade paper from the drawer and stroked the frayed edges thoughtfully.

"I found it." Using her thigh to shut the drawer, she frowned down at it when it stuck halfway shut. Pushing harder, she almost fell across the desk as the drawer closed. "I definitely don't need any more to drink," she muttered.

"Found what? You never told me what you were looking for in the first place." Amber walked back carrying two more daiquiris and handed one to Brianna.

"I found the spell I wrote to bring love into my life." She sniffed the glass suspiciously. "Did you put mixer

in this?"

Amber nodded, giving her an innocent look. "Of course I did. I even used the shot glass. Aren't you going to read that to me?" she asked, changing the subject. Her eyes were wide and her red-gold brows nearly at her hairline. Brianna wondered what she'd been up to in the kitchen.

She made a face holding the paper behind her back. "I don't know why I should. You make fun of every single spell I write."

"Like the last one?" Plopping back down onto the chair, Amber rested her crossed legs on the coffee table and pushed a melon-cucumber scented candle aside with her toes.

"What one?" Brianna shot her a confused look. "And put your feet down, before you break something." She pushed at her friend's legs.

"The one you threw at me earlier." Amber pulled her feet down and stood.

"I didn't write that! *You* did."

Amber shook her head and grinned. "You wrote that last year and asked me what I thought about it. You said once you were ready you were going to recite it to bring love into your life." She jerked her thumb in the direction of the ball Killer had picked up. He tossed his head, throwing the paper into the air so he could chase it.

Brianna cringed. "I don't even remember writing that." She bent, picked up the little dog and gently extracted the paper from his mouth. He growled, obviously not overjoyed at having to give up his new toy. She set him back down onto the faded rug beneath

her feet.

"You probably blocked it. I know I would have." Amber shivered, showing her distaste for the awful rhyme. "*Now* do you see how much you've grown over the past year?" She wandered across the room and grabbed a handful of grapes from the fruit bowl on the dining room table.

Brianna looked down, smoothing her hands over her hips and thighs. "Hey, I haven't gained any weight!"

Amber crossed back to the desk and rolled her eyes. "Spiritually, hon. You've grown spiritually," she soothed. She wrapped her arm around Brianna and they walked toward the patio.

"Oh, sorry." Now it was Brianna's turn to feel sheepish. "Well, I suppose I should let you read it. You did stop me from using that last disaster." She handed the paper to her friend.

Amber read the spell and her brows shot back up. "I'm impressed, this one is actually kind of good."

The two women stepped through the sliding glass doors onto the small concrete patio. They inhaled the delicious aroma of a nearby barbecue the cool autumn breeze carried into the yard. An elusive scent of paint tickled Brianna's nose and she heard the sound of someone hammering in the distance. "Everything's ready. Do you think we can cast now?"

Amber frowned. "Well, we really shouldn't do it drunk. That's just asking for trouble." She sucked her bottom lip between her teeth and nodded. "But with you, I think we just might have to. It's the only time you don't seem to have that corncob stuck up your

ass." She smiled drunkenly then hiccupped.

Brianna scowled as she donned her robe. "I beg your pardon. I am *not* drunk. I'm just a little tipsy." Deciding to leave the corn cob remark alone, she tightened the sash on her black ritual robe.

"Yeah, okay, whatever." Amber straightened her own robe, and pulled her pentacle from beneath it. The jewel in the center glowed dimly in the waning sunlight.

"Drunk, tipsy, shit-faced. It's all the same to you, right?"

"Hey! I represent that...I mean I resent that remark." Brianna grinned, then shook her finger in Amber's face. "I thought you were going to quit swearing. It's not very attractive you know."

Her friend made a face as she inspected the already prepared circle of candles. The altar within faced the east, decorated with two small statues, a dish of sea salt, patchouli incense, a red, white and pink candle and one small earthen dish of water.

Amber stepped to the altar and made a few corrections. "The incense representing air should always be in the east, the candle representing fire in the south, the water in the west and of course the salt for Earth in the north. Let's do this." She looked at the sky. "The moon is even in the right phase. You really did your research for this one, didn't you?" She turned her gaze toward Brianna. "I'm impressed." She stumbled over a candle. "I think it was a good idea to set the circle outside though. That way, we don't have to worry about burning the house down."

"Why do you think I wanted to do it out here?"

Brianna asked dryly. "Besides, it's so beautiful and I love to look up at the stars." She inhaled deeply, loving the combined scents of someone grilling and the Colorado blue spruce that grew in her back yard.

They lit the candles and called the four-corners, each taking two. Brianna raised her arms to the sky and spread her feet wide. Inhaling deep, she centered herself calmly and pictured the energy flowing from within her to empower their circle. She envisioned the wind blowing her hair, her robe plastered against her body, the sash whipping behind her in the wind.

"Guardians of the East and elements of Air, I ask for your presence within this circle. May you step within with love and trust to lend your distinct energies to protect this magical rite."

Amber followed suit in the South. Setting her feet apart, she raised her arms. Brianna pictured a fire as bright as the sun, as hot as fire from the dragons of legends as she moved to the West quarter.

Raising her voice, Amber tilted her head back and said, "Guardians of the South and elements of Fire, I ask for your presence within this circle. May you step within with love and trust to lend your distinct energies to protect this magical rite."

Brianna raised her arms in the West. Picturing the sea, she conjured a vision of mermaids and mermen. They danced in the waves, playing, gathering sea foam and blowing it at each other. "Guardians of the west and elements of Water, I ask for your presence within this circle. May you step within with love and trust to lend your distinct energies to protect this magical rite."

For Earth, Brianna envisioned a herd of bison

cantering freely across the open plain. In her mind's eye, she watched as elves and gnomes played with the bison in the field.

Finally, Amber stepped to the North quarter and raised her arms. "Guardians of the North and elements of Earth, I ask for your presence within this circle. May you step within with love and trust to lend your distinct energies to protect this magical rite."

Together, they asked, "Oh, Great Mother, she who knows all, sees all, is all. Please attend this rite and lend us your immense power, that we may be successful."

"Okay, hon. It's your show," Amber whispered.

Brianna closed her eyes and took a deep breath. *I hope I don't make a fool of myself.*

She lit the candles, red for passion and pink for romance and raised her arms to the sky, a wand in her right hand. She inhaled deeply and exhaled slowly through her nose. For the first time, she felt the magic possess her. It sobered her instantly. The euphoria of the alcohol, no longer inhibited her movements. Swaying, she began to recite her spell.

"Reach for my heart, you know it is there.  
Though we're apart, we two are a pair.  
You feel it within me, my heart beating true.  
You know I am here, just waiting for you.  
Come to me, come to me, find me some way.  
Though we may be worlds apart,  
You will find me some day.  
Please, Great Mother, send him to me.  
In love and light, I ask thee



and it harm none, so mote it be!"

Brianna screamed the last of the spell. The words felt as though they were ripped from her soul. Power moved through her body like a thundering pulse and she felt the force of the energy leave through the tip of the wand. She could actually see the energy swirling in the air above her head, before it shot through the sky and into space. It startled her so much she almost lost concentration. But the last few years of practice and self-discipline paid off and she was able to finish the spell without faltering.

The residual energy caused the hair on her arms to stand on end. Her scalp tingled as static built up in her hair, the electric charge crackled loudly in her ears. The evening had grown darker and, as the power shimmered around her, tiny sparks surrounded them like fireflies.

Brianna looked at Amber, who stared at her as if she'd just sprouted another head. "What?" she asked warily. With her luck, maybe she had sprouted another head. Or a tail. Goddess knew stranger things had been known to happen around Amber. She yelped and turned around, trying to get a good look at her rear.

"Don't you see it?" Amber whispered and looked up.

"See what, the energy? Of course I saw it. You said if I did it right, I would see the energy leave my wand through my mind's eye." Brianna said. She still twisted around in an attempt to see behind her as her robe swirled around her ankles.

"What in the world are you doing? Stop that!"

Amber reached out and gave her a swat. "Watch it. You're going to catch yourself on fire." She pulled her from the edge of the circle, rubbing the smoldering hem of Brianna's robe in the dirt.

"You're supposed to see it with your *mind's* eye, Bri. Meaning visualize it. I saw it with my two eyes," she whispered, pointing at her face. "Oh, Bri, I think this is going to work in a *really* big way."

## *Chapter Three*

“What in the world was I thinking?” Brianna moaned as she pulled her full length, black dress from the closet. “I should slap myself for even coming up with this stupid idea in the first place!” She laid the shimmering, black satin dress on the bed. She’d dressed up as a witch for the last five years. Once, when she’d decided not to dress the part, the entire neighborhood had a fit. So, for the last three years, she’d dressed in the black wig, hairy wart, green face and blackened teeth to please her neighbors, not herself.

“My heart just isn’t in this anymore. I should tell them all to kiss my butt,” she grouched. “I’m a real Witch, not a story book hag sent here for their entertainment.” She heaved a sigh and headed for the shower with her dog, Killer, close at her heels. She looked down and smiled. “You’re such a good boy. You told me you want outside, you good doggie.” She bent down and patted him on the head before she carried him to the living room to let him out into the back yard.

It wasn’t long before Killer became involved in a

harmless investigation. He sniffed under the shed and started barking. Brianna shook her head with a sigh. She probably had mice under there again.

Heading back toward her bedroom, she made a detour to the small entertainment center that held her TV and stereo. She clicked the stereo on, her favorite new age music flooded the room. In the bathroom, she reached into the stall and adjusted the temperature of the water as she hummed along with the music. Letting out a sigh when she stepped into the tub, she groaned with pleasure as the hot water cascaded down her slender frame, washing most of the soreness and kinks away. Brianna began to sing along with the music as her fingers massaged her scalp with her favorite, *Berry Explosion* shampoo. She vigorously scrubbed her body with the matching body wash. The sweet berry scent never failed to make her feel clean and feminine. Muscles still sore from having to bend and scrub all day, protested as she bent to turn off the water. Too bad there wasn't time for a good long soak in the tub.

The phone rang. Flinging the lavender shower curtain aside, she ran still dripping to answer it. Snatching up the cordless unit from her bedside table, she answered with a breathy, "Hello."

"Hey, Bri, you *are* still coming over tonight, aren't you?" It was Amber. They went to the Witches Ball together every year.

"Of course," she replied, glancing at her clock radio. She shivered slightly, wishing she'd thought to grab more than one towel. "I'll be ready for trick-or-treat by six. It should be over by eight, and I can leave then."

You don't mind waiting, do you? We should still have plenty of time to socialize." She hurried back into the steamy bathroom, picked up the hand towel on the counter and wiped steam from the mirror.

She studied her delicately carved face critically, noticing tiny imperfections, that to her, were enormous. Her small nose turned up at the end, a trait that had never struck her as being particularly attractive. Her mouth and full pink lips, which her first and only boyfriend had deemed extremely kissable, looked too...well, too something. Her mouth turned down at the corners and she stuck her tongue out at her reflection.

"No, I don't mind waiting," Amber said. It sounded like she spoke around a mouthful of food.

Brianna made a face. She was probably eating again. How in the world could the woman eat so much and stay so small? She walked back into the bedroom to get dressed. "I'm not going to wear the green face paint again. It took too long to wash it off last year." She juggled the phone and the bath towel as she dried off, scrubbing ruthlessly at her already pink skin with the towel in an effort to hurry.

"Even then, there had been green streaks down the side of your face." Amber sniggered. "And a green tinge to your skin that made you look like you were ready to barf."

"Don't remind me." Brianna grimaced at the memory. Shaking her head adamantly, she added, "And I refuse to miss the limbo contest again. I spent entirely too long in the bathroom washing that gunk off."

"I wonder if Pan is going to be there in his sheepskin leggings again this year."

Brianna groaned. She could hear her friend's teasing smile. They both had been very surprised to see him, in all of his naked glory, last year. Closing her eyes, she shook her head. "Don't *even* go there."

"There is just something about a man wearing sheepskin leggings and nothing else that really gets my heart pounding."

"Oh shut up, Amber! I couldn't help it. I'd never seen a —"

"Sorcerer's staff?" Amber's laugh was infectious and Brianna smiled, in spite of herself. Would the woman never stop teasing her about her reaction when she'd seen Pan nearly naked from the waist down?

Brianna half grimaced and half grinned at the memory. Leave it to Amber to bring it up. She'd be carrying *that* particular monkey on her back until her friend found something even more embarrassing to razz her about. "I couldn't help it. I'd never seen one so big, before."

"Neither had I. But no one heard me say, *Oh my God! Is that thing real?* I thought I was going to die of embarrassment."

"You were embarrassed? It wasn't me, who said, *Honey, don't mind her. She's a virgin and doesn't know what she's missing.* I was completely mortified." Not to mention embarrassed by the fact that her friend was correct.

Amber laughed. "I was serious! You shouldn't knock it till you've tried it, Bri."

Brianna felt the familiar heat rush to her face. "I

knew I never should have told you I was still a virgin. I knew it, yet I told you anyway. How dumb is that?" She managed to wiggle into her black dress while holding the phone to her ear, then looked into the mirror over her dresser. "You know, it's a shame. Tonight is the only night I can wear my pentacle on the outside of my clothes. Everyone expects it on Halloween," she said, smoothly changing the subject. She slipped on a moonstone pinkie ring, along with some of her other magical jewelry and searched another drawer.

"What did I do with that stinking wart? I'll never forgive myself if I've lost it. The darn thing cost me a fortune because it looks so real." Brianna dug through the dresser drawer searching for her box of Halloween makeup. She frowned, reached over to the window and pulled open the blind. She closed the first drawer and opened another.

"But then again, you couldn't be the witch if you didn't have that ugly old wart," Amber added sagely.

"I suppose. I'll have to give that some thought. It's not a bad idea." Biting her lip, Brianna rummaged deeper and found her makeup case. Making a face at the green paint, she shoved it to the back to be ignored. She pulled out the wart and sighed. There was no way she'd ever be lucky enough to lose it. And she'd never be able to bring herself to throw it away. It had cost too much.

Removing the small plastic box from the drawer, she opened it and withdrew the very realistic and nasty looking hairy wart. She stuck it to her cheek next to her nose and grimaced at her reflection. "Well, I

found it." Her disappointment was evident.

"Why don't you tell them you lost it? Or the dog ate it?" Amber asked, impatiently. She obviously didn't understand Brianna's need to do something she abhorred just to fit in.

"You know I don't like to lie. It's bad enough that I lie about my religion. There *has* to be some sort of bad karma attached to lying," she replied. Brianna heard what sounded suspiciously like a snort on the other end of the line.

"Only because we both know what would happen if our so called *friends* found out what we really are. Besides, you don't lie about it," Amber reasoned. "You're like me. You act as though you're Christian like everyone else. You just don't tell them you're not."

Brianna shrugged, rationalizing their behavior. She applied her lipstick, blush and mascara, then smiled. Her neighbors were most likely going to have something to say about the softer side of the witch this year. *Too bad!* "I know. They'd most likely make life so miserable here, we'd want to move."

"*Have* to move, is more like it."

"I'm not wearing the green face paint this year. I don't care what they think." Brianna smiled at her reflection.

"That's it, girl! Don't let them tell you what to do," Amber cheered.

"Maybe next year I'll just conveniently be out of town. It would be nice." Brianna walked to the old vanity that once belonged to her mother and sat down to don the hated wig.

"They ought to be glad you do this at all, Bri. After



all, this is the Eve of our New Year, the day we honor our deceased loved ones. I wouldn't even go to the ball if they didn't hold an open circle."

"I know. I wouldn't either, even though I love going. It's always such a blast." Brianna brushed her hair and left it to tumble carelessly down her back. "Hang on a sec, Amber." She set the phone down. She'd almost forgotten to do one of the most important things of the evening.

After retrieving her old Besom and the new one she bought each year, she cast a circle and cleansed them both. She empowered the new broom with energies to remove negativity from her sacred spaces. The old one was cleansed, removing all energies from it so she could dispose of it properly. Its last use would be to carry around the front yard as a part of her costume. She picked up the phone. "Thanks for holding. I almost forgot to bless my new broom," Brianna said, feeling sheepish.

"I thought I heard you cleansing something. So, is the old broom going to go with you to scare the kiddies tonight?"

Brianna shook her head, forgetting for a moment that Amber couldn't see her. "I'm not going to scare anyone. I don't want these kids to have the same misconceptions of witchcraft their parents have because of me."

"Good idea, Hon. I'm gonna let you go. Be at my house at eight."

"Okay, see you then." Brianna set the phone in its cradle and walked across the bedroom. She opened her jewelry box, removing a smaller intricately carved

wooden case. From that, she withdrew a pendant on a chain. The necklace had been in her family for generations, passed down through hundreds of years. The upside-down, heart-shaped stone was unlike any other Brianna had ever seen. When touched by anyone, other than herself, the stone would lose its glow for months. It was almost as if it had some inner power meant for her alone.

She clasped the silver chain around her neck. The stone fit snugly between her breasts, below the pentacle. When the two brushed together, the pendant vibrated slightly and grew warm. Tilting her head to the side, Brianna stared at the old pendant as it rested between her breasts. She reached up to finger the stone. That was strange. She frowned. It had never done that before. Then again, she'd never worn the two pendants together before either. Brianna, always too apprehensive to wear the heirloom, feared the chain would break and she'd lose it. It just seemed right to wear the necklace tonight.

She checked the clock again. Where had the time gone? "Darn it! I only have fifteen minutes to eat." She hurried into the kitchen. The setting sun sent a soft orange glow through the window. It shone on the clean white countertops and floor, lending light to the dim room.

Killer raced in when she opened the door. His little rear wagged frantically as she opened a can of food for him and filled his bowl.

She pursed her lips. "Now what am *I* going to have for dinner?" She turned and opened the refrigerator door. The light from the interior cast a shadow on the

floor. A low growl formed in Killer's throat as he followed the shadow around with an intent stare.

\* \* \* \*

Two hours later, a shivering Brianna rushed into the house for her cape. "I don't believe I forgot to grab my cloak!" The never-ending stream of children hadn't given her an opportunity to retrieve it, before. She ran to the closet and pulled out her beautiful black velvet cape. It was the one thing she'd splurged on when creating her Magical tools. She'd seen a red one just like it in a movie and had wanted one ever since. It took forever to find the right pattern, and even longer to muster the courage to cut the expensive black velvet. Never had she spent so much on one thing. Although she knew if she took care of it, it would last a long time.

Brianna bent and patted Killer on the head. "I'll be back tomorrow, sweetie. Be good," she said, smiling when he growled with his little face stuck in his bowl. Stepping out on her porch, she closed the door and rattled the knob to make sure it was locked. Gathering her cloak close, she started the short walk to Amber's house, a few blocks down the street.

When she first learned of The Craft, she had been pleasantly surprised to find that a wise woman lived so close to her. She first found out Amber was a witch three years ago. She had in fact, spotted her in the occult section of a New Age bookstore. They had become fast friends after that.

She peered down the darkened street. It was quiet

now, eerily so. A dense fog rolled down the street. It leeches into corners like a living thing. It was good that all of the children finished with trick-or-treating, were tucked safely in their homes counting their booty. She could imagine them with sugar highs, little hands and faces covered in chocolate. They would be sticky and sweet, smelling of sugar, chocolate and dirt.

She loved children—even wanted a dozen or so of her own. She only needed to find the right man to share her life with, which, of course, was why she had resorted to casting a spell in the first place. Today had been the twenty-eighth day. Since spells usually came to fruition within a full moon cycle, it was a safe bet that hers was another resounding flop. The spell, even with the power she'd seen shoot from her wand, apparently hadn't worked. She was no closer to having found her soul-mate than she'd been last month. Her shoulders drooped at the thought.

Avoiding an especially thick patch of fog on the sidewalk, she crossed the street. She had no desire to be caught in the mist tonight. There were too many stories about what can happen on all-hallows-eve when the veil was thin. Her step quickened. Though she knew most of the stories were just that, she still didn't want to take the chance of stepping through an ethereal doorway to another world.

A strange sound came from the old Harper place next door to her house and made her jump. Curiosity caused her to slow her pace. No one had lived there since before she'd moved to the neighborhood. Over the years, the house had become a rundown, ramshackle roost, for stray animals and lusty

teenagers. It needed to be torn down or renovated. It gave the impression of having been a beautiful home at one time. It now just gave everyone the creeps.

No one wanted it. Mr. Harper had gone berserk and brutally murdered his wife there. It had been that very thing, which caused the property values to drop enough for Brianna to keep the house she had inherited from her parents. The taxes had been too much for her before.

Brianna peered across the street in an effort to see through the dense fog. All the while she called herself a busybody with nothing better to do than poke her nose into other people's business.

She poked anyway and hoped she wouldn't have a reason to regret it. A light bobbed around the interior. Someone was inside with a candle or flashlight. It was probably just kids making out again. Suddenly, the lights on the first floor came on.

"Did someone finally buy the old place?" Her voice sounded strange, almost disembodied. The fog distorted the intonation, lent it an eerie quality. Curious, Brianna wandered closer to the rambling old house. It was one of only a handful of two-story houses on the block. The steps up to the porch, over the crawl space, needed work. Some of the boards were missing and the rotted handrail needed to be replaced.

Brianna crossed the street, her feet dragging, even as her gaze was drawn to the patch of light on the front porch that spilled through one of the tall windows. It was almost as if some unseen force pulled her toward the house, like a compulsion. She walked blindly, still staring at the light in the window and didn't notice the

rapidly approaching figure through the fog.

"Oomph!" The breath was forced from her lungs. It felt like she'd been run over by a freight train. Only it wasn't a train that ran her over at all. It was the man who stood towering over her. Brianna inhaled sharply and looked up at him. She was tall, but he was even more so. He was at least a half a foot taller than her five-foot nine-inch frame.

He held Brianna's shoulders in a firm grip, where he had grabbed her when they bumped into each other. She swallowed thickly and tried to ignore the sexual awareness accompanying his touch. The aura of power that surrounded him was strong and almost frightening.

"Excuse me," they said in unison.

Brianna was grateful for his quick thinking. She certainly would have fallen, had he not caught her. She swallowed thickly, attempting to ignore the rush of heat racing through her bloodstream at his touch.

His warm hands, rested against her sensitive flesh and he absently massaged the hollow above her collarbone with his thumbs.

She looked up. Way up. *Whooo boy!* The man was tall—the tallest she'd seen in a long, long time. His thick, ebony hair gleamed blue-black in the feeble light from the street. Cut short, it was wavy and stuck up in all directions, as if he continually felt the need to rake a worried hand through it. His face was ruggedly handsome, framing a strong jaw, straight nose and firm sensual lips that held the promise of passion. Brianna couldn't help it. She stood and stared, unable to tear her gaze away from this perfect specimen of

manhood.

The man's snug jeans encased oh-so-long, muscular legs like they'd been tailored for him. Perhaps they had. They certainly left very little to her imagination. At least she hoped she wasn't imagining the nice size of his package. If Amber was right, and size was everything, well, this guy had it all.

His shirt, a button down of an indeterminate color, which was difficult to see in the subdued light, was opened at the neck and revealed a small portion of his smooth, muscular chest. She was almost sorry he was wearing a shirt. Oh, to have all of those muscles she could see rippling beneath the shirt plainly visible.

*Yum!* Brianna unconsciously licked her lips as she felt her temperature rise. She actually had to make a deliberate effort not to fan herself. Clearing her throat, she tilted her head back and smiled. She really liked that in a man, having to crane her neck so she could see him, that is. There weren't too many men in the world she could literally look up to.

The man stood still, studying her intently. Brianna watched, spellbound, as emotions chased through his expression, swirling through the depths of his dark eyes.

She cleared her throat, reluctantly stepped from his gentle embrace and finally gained his full attention. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to bump into you. I was just surprised to see lights on in this old house." She bit her bottom lip to keep herself from babbling.

The man smiled. His straight teeth a brilliant display of white in his shadowed face. "I am sure you were," he nodded toward the house. "I have heard that

no one has lived here for nearly five years.” He tilted his head to the side and looked at it critically. “It is a shame, really. It is still very beautiful inside, even though it has been neglected for far too long. Would you care to—” he offered as he extended his arm toward the house.

“I can’t,” she interrupted. “I’m expected at a friend’s house. We’re going out together.” She smiled apologetically. “I hope to see you tomorrow though. Perhaps we can have coffee then. I live next door to you there.” She pointed to her house. “I’m Brianna O’Neill, welcome to the neighborhood.”

He dipped his head, almost regally. “It is nice to meet you, Brianna. Please forgive my lack of manners. I am Niklas Voortag.”

The man had a strange, but beautiful accent. His English, though formal, was flawless.

Her eyes widened as she glanced at her watch, “Oh, my! I really have to run. It was nice meeting you,” she called back with a wave as she disappeared down the street. Her steps echoed in the night and the cape billowed behind her. The sweet smell of berries lingered in the air as she walked away.

\* \* \* \*

Niklas stood watching as Brianna hurried down the dark, mist-covered sidewalk until she was totally surrounded by the dense fog. He shook his head and his mouth twisted wryly. Just his luck! The first female he’d been remotely attracted to for the last five years ran away from him. She wasn’t the most beautiful



woman he'd ever met, though with that huge hairy growth on the side of her nose. Yet, there was something about her that attracted him.

Inhaling deeply, he breathed in her sweet scent and smiled. She smelled very nice, too, which was more than he could say for the women on some of the worlds he'd visited recently. He stuck his hands into the pockets of his new jeans and sauntered toward the place he would be calling home for the next few weeks.

He'd no sooner stepped into the house before he heard a shriek overhead. He started toward the stairs at a run, looking up just in time to watch Minra, his engineer, fly down. Her nut-brown hair was in disarray as wisps of cobwebs framed a face nearly as white as the blouse she wore. He reached out to steady her as she appeared ready to topple over any second.

"There is a furry beast up there!" she shrieked and pointed at the stairs. "I'm not going up there again, not until it's gone. I don't know what it is, but when it looked at me and opened its mouth, I saw razor sharp teeth." Still trembling, she pulled free, wrapped her arms around her middle and rubbed her biceps. She did a nervous little dance and her whole body shook. "Get Cholo down here to take care of it." She blushed, lowering thick, dark lashes. "Or Rodel."

A sound caused them both to look up. Minra squeaked with fear and moved to put herself behind Niklas. She grasped his waist and looked around him to the carpeted stairs.

He grinned, tempted to remind her who he was. The thought made him wonder what kind of reaction he'd get. He'd grown very fond of the crew over the

last year of travel. Sequestered aboard the ship together for so long, they had become a family of sorts. "No need for them, Minra. I can handle this creature."

He didn't bother to tell her he knew exactly what it was. She would have known had she spent more time using the subliminal discs, which was a situation he would address at another time. Niklas approached the stairs quietly. He didn't want to startle the little creature. Sitting down, he ignored Minra's sharply drawn breath, held out his hand and crooned softly to the shiny black animal.

It crept cautiously toward him as it sniffed the air. When the animal was in his lap, he began scratching it behind its ears and under its chin. Soon it began to emit a strange humming sound, similar to the vibration made by the *hoverpods* on *Terrna*. This must be what the subliminal disks had referred to as purring. Niklas stood and walked toward Minra.

She backed up a step, held her hand out in front of her as if to ward him off. She shook her head, obviously still afraid of the little creature.

"It will not harm you. The domesticated ones do not attack unless provoked," he said softly, still petting the cat. He rubbed a particularly good spot under its chin. The animal tilted its head back and closed its eyes. "Feel how soft his fur is," he whispered. "I have never felt anything like this before." His big hand gently stroked the silky fur. The cat let out a pathetic little mewling sound and tilted its head to the side in ecstasy.

Tentatively, Minra reached out and touched the silky soft coat of the cat and her eyes grew wide with

undisguised amazement.

“If you take him in your arms and hold him gently, he will not hurt you. Carry him into the...” Niklas paused, tried to remember the word. “Take him to the kitchen and give him some of the milk we picked up this morning. I think they are supposed to like that.”

Gingerly, Minra took the cat from him, cradled it in her arms and left.

He turned in a slow circle, studying the empty room. On this world, this area would be considered spacious. It was barely the size of a bathing chamber in his palace.

There was plenty of work to be done here. Looking down, he saw bits of paper and cigarette butts on the floor. A dark stain marred the beautiful wood under a broken window, where it had begun to rot. The kitchen wasn't modern, even by Earth standards. He couldn't add a replicating device even if it had been. According to the information they'd gathered, *replicators* weren't available on this world.

Niklas didn't know what they would do for food. He had never handled raw foodstuffs before and he didn't dare eat anything Minra prepared, unless he suddenly became suicidal he thought with a grimace.

On any other planet, he would have contacted the government for permission to dock or just set the ship down in an unpopulated area, if they weren't advanced enough to contact. He couldn't do that here. This world loved warring and there were too many airplanes, which could fly over any remote area and spot his ship. Even though Niklas knew he would win any armed conflict, he didn't want it to come to that.

As it was, the crew had to leave him here with Minra, until they could find a permanent way to fool their radar. Right now, the *Conquest* remained well hidden behind the planet's single moon.

Niklas leaned against the doorjamb, resting his head on the cool wood. The subliminal disks had been extremely out of date. It took Reva forever to gather the data they needed to make sure everyone, especially him, would be able to function on the surface like they'd been born here. There were still a few, Minra for example, who needed to spend more time with the revised discs.

He shook his head. Too long since a scout vessel had been sent. Earth was so far out of the loop of contacted worlds, it had been ignored for over a hundred and fifty years. That must never happen again. He had been prepared to appear on the surface carrying a replicated weapon based on past information. He would have been arrested, and with no identification, would have had a very difficult time getting himself out of *that* predicament.

Niklas rubbed the back of his neck. He could feel another headache coming on. They were becoming far too regular. So much so, it was beginning to feel strange to not have the familiar sore neck and ache between his eyes. He'd need to lie down soon, a circumstance he awaited with mixed feelings. When he slept, he dreamt of a woman calling to him. Whenever he tried to force her image through the haze of his subconscious mind, he woke abruptly. The headache always preceded the dreams. Stopping by the kitchen, he needed to inform Minra that he was going out. She

leaned against the counter, watching the cat drink milk from a small bowl, turning when he entered the room. "I'm going to go out for a walk. I'll try to find something to eat while I am gone."

Nodding, she hitched her shoulder. "Be safe, sir."

He inclined his head and stood in the hallway for a minute studying her. It was too bad she wasn't much of a cook either. There wasn't a better engineer in the fleet, but when it came to more womanly pursuits, she was at a loss.

Since his feet were his only mode of transportation, at the moment, he walked toward the main road. Oddly enough, it was called Main Street. It seemed as though he'd been walking forever when Niklas finally found a place with merchants. He sighed, relieved to see the muted light of neon signs glowing stubbornly through the fog.

He entered the shopping center, followed his nose to the nearest restaurant, his mouth watering at the wonderful scents. Niklas read the sign and tried to remember the word *pizza* from the subliminal disks. A flat disk-like pie made with vegetables or animal flesh. It didn't sound very appetizing, but it smelled good. He shrugged. It was worth a try.

Paying for it wouldn't be a problem. Out of necessity, the first place they found was a coin shop that bought gold doubloons. He had several thousand of the strange coins that had been taken from a sunken ship a few hundred years ago. Scout ships often acquired money this way. They used it to purchase items from planets where off world currency wasn't accepted or would cause unwanted questions, like this

one.

The man in the shop had been clearly astonished when faced with the two perfectly preserved Brasher doubloons.

Having turned a peculiar shade of green when Niklas told him he wanted it in cash, he'd laughed. "Cash? What makes you think I have so much here in cash?"

The man produced it though. The shifty look in his eyes told Niklas the man was taking advantage of him, but he didn't care. He had more of them and he needed the money fast.

Now in possession of nearly a half million dollars, the fifty thousand he had used to purchase the house and the ten thousand for identification and a social security number left him with most of what he'd gotten. Now he could begin searching for his bride. After he ate, of course. A man had to have his priorities. Niklas, feeling out of place and unsure of what to do, watched the man in front of him.

"I'd like a small pepperoni to go," the man said, his gaze glued to the menu. "And give me an order of breadsticks to go with that."

Niklas smiled. It seemed some things were universal. It shouldn't be a problem when it became his turn.

Finished with the other gentleman, who had decided to sit down and watch a car race on the TV provided by the restaurant, the boy behind the counter looked at Niklas and asked, "Will you be dining here or is this to go?"

He looked around. Happy to see the clean tables, he

smiled. "I'll eat here. I'll have one small pepperoni please."

After paying for the pizza and something to drink, he chose a seat, then folded his large frame into the small booth and waited to be served. By the time the boy finally came from behind the counter with the pie, Niklas was starved. He took a minute to savor the delicious scent of the unusual creation before him.

The tangy, spicy scent made his mouth water with anticipation. Picking up a fork and knife, he served himself a strange wedge shaped slice. He cut into it with the knife, lifted the piece to his nose and sniffed it experimentally. The smell of melted cheese and crisp pepperoni assaulted his nostrils and his empty stomach protested with a grumble.

"Well, I guess I have to try it sometime. At least it smells good and it isn't still moving," he muttered before he placed it in his mouth. He closed his eyes. The first bite was delicious. There was nothing like it anywhere else in the known star systems. This was definitely one thing he would make sure made it back home. *I'll have to ask Shona to come down and learn how to make it. Or possibly just take one of each kind up and have it programmed into the replicator if all else fails.*

He returned to the house with another pizza, having bought one for Minra. Niklas knew she would appreciate not having to eat her own cooking as well. Dropping the square box on the table, he left her with her dinner and went into the other room to read the electronic copy of the scroll he carried with him.

Trinaugh, *Terrna's* current keeper of the light, had insisted he take it in case it could be of some help in

finding the one he sought. The woman would have the hair and eyes he knew to look for, but she would also possess the Heart of *Terrna*. It was a heart-shaped stone pendant the size of the tip of a man's thumb, reputed to be infused with some mystical energy and a small part of Morwyyn's power. Yet, the scroll said the stone was not the key to their salvation, the woman was.

*And yea shall she possess the Heart of Terrna. The very stone I have created to carry that which is mine.*

*Yet the stone shall not be the salvation of Terrna, only she who possesses it. Find the woman who possesses the Heart of Terrna and ye shall find the savior of your world.*

*The people of Terrna will serve her as Queen, for she shall be Queen. Bound to the rightful Heir, she shall prevent the cataclysm, caused by the death of the sister, Tomar. If the rightful Heir should find her quickly, she shall have the power to reverse the death of the sister and all will be right with the world.*

*Shall she find happiness with the Heir; the world shall see peace for one thousand generations. Shall she find unhappiness; peace shall last only as long as she lives.*

*The gathering of evil is upon us. The others of the Sorcerers Guild of Nasha will entrap the evil while I make my escape to protect that, which one-day will save the world. Yea the legends be true, for I have seen it, so shall it be.*

"Did you discover anything useful yet?" Minra sat down next to him, a slice of pizza on the plate she carried.

"I think so," he nodded. "There are stories here, legends about a man named Merlin. I think it may



connect with Morwyyn." Niklas shifted in his seat to face Minra. "Morwyyn left *Terrna* to protect The One when he, and others like him, disappeared. I think the mythology of this planet tells us where Morwyyn went." He was excited that he'd finally found something. All of the research they'd done and this bit of legend, nearly a thousand years old, appeared to be his first real clue.

"They were known only on this world as the Arthurian legends, as if they never really existed. Morwyyn had been called Merlin. Perhaps it was a slip of the pen, or perhaps he changed his name to protect The One. She must be a direct descendant of the great sorcerer." He smiled glad to have finally found a piece of evidence which proved that Morwyyn had actually come to Earth.

"With the great knowledge and power that Morwyyn possessed, he saw the death of *Terrna*, along with the means to save her, in his own far-removed great-granddaughter. He'd had to escape to this world to protect that which he possessed—his seed." Niklas took a deep breath and reached over to pick up a map of the Americas. "It's going to be difficult to find her, unless we get extremely lucky. Because either many people here contain his blood, or there are many descendants of the Fey here."

He tossed the map aside, stood and began to pace across the big colorful rag rug they found in the attic. "You know the stories. He was the only human with golden hair and blue eyes on *Terrna*. Someone once said his coloring came from the fiery power within him. Others were sure it was because he was half-fey."

He paused, turning to look back at Minra. "I don't know which, but it doesn't matter. The only thing that does matter is that she is here."

Niklas noticed there were many blondes here, whether they were descendants of Morwyyn or of the Fey would remain to be seen. Still, only one of them held the power to save his world. If only he could find her.

## Chapter Four

Brianna hopped up the three steps of Amber's porch. She couldn't wait to tell her about their new neighbor. "Whew! What a hottie!" She reached up to knock.

"Who's a hottie?" her friend asked with a scowl as she pushed open the screen door. "And why do you always insist on knocking? If I've told you once, I've told you a million times. Just come on in. You don't have to knock, hon. You're family."

"Sorry. I keep forgetting." Brianna beamed at her. "I just met our new neighbor, and boy, is he something." She emphasized her words by fanning her fingers in front of her face. "I thought I'd expire on the spot just looking at him."

Amber smiled, crossed her arms over her chest and leaned lazily against the doorjamb. "He's real eye candy huh? Please tell me you weren't talking to him like you are right now." She bit her lip, obviously trying not to laugh.

Brianna hesitated and wrinkled her brow in confusion. "Why, what's wrong?" she asked, her head bowing as she surveyed the front of her cloak.

Amber reached over her shoulder. Her slender fingers brought a few stringy strands of black hair forward. "I can't believe you didn't remember you were wearing *that*." She shook her head. "I swear, Bri, sometimes I think you'd forget your head if it wasn't attached."

Brianna's cheeks flamed when she realized what Amber meant. She still wore the witch makeup. Namely, the hairy wart and blackened teeth. "Great." She slapped her forehead with the palm of her hand. "The first man I've met in ages that I'm even remotely attracted to, and I have to be in my Halloween get-up." Scowling, she rushed past Amber and headed toward the bathroom, disgusted with herself. No wonder he'd looked at her the way he had. It hadn't been admiration. It had most likely been horror. The wart she had looked real, very real.

Brianna swore under her breath, horrified that she'd been in such a hurry, she'd forgotten to remove the makeup she'd grown to dislike so much. It was a good thing she'd decided against the green face paint. Or maybe not, at least with the face paint, he would have been able to tell she was in costume. "Geeze, wearing just the wart, I must have looked like some horror movie housekeeper or something."

"Storybook hag," Amber said, in a singsong voice from the other side of the door.

Making a face, she stared at herself in the mirror, totally horrified she'd made such a stupid mistake. Brianna shook her head. It was just like her though. Flighty, forgetful, just plain stupid! She heaved an exasperated sigh. "It's Halloween, for goodness-sake. I

am not going to worry about it," she vowed, then snatched up the toothbrush she kept in Amber's bathroom and scrubbed furiously at her teeth. She couldn't be more irritated with herself. Usually, she was more diligent about her appearance, but she'd been in such a rush...

Placing the toothbrush back in the holder over the sink, Brianna inspected her teeth critically in the mirror. Much better! She smiled wide showing off her gleaming white teeth. With the wart tucked safely in her purse, and all of the black removed from her teeth, she looked more like herself again. She blushed, watching as her cheeks turned an unbecoming shade of pink and thought of her new neighbor. What in the world must he think of her? He had to know she'd been in costume. She shrugged. There was nothing that could be done about it now. Why agonize over it? And if she kept telling herself that, she just might start to believe it.

Brianna groaned and removed the knotted wig. Reaching over to her right, she hung it from the knob on the cabinet next to the sink and gave her head a good scratching. The cheap wig always made her head itch, like she had fleas or something. Returning her gaze to the mirror, she made a face. It looked horrible after being confined beneath the wig for two hours. Borrowing Amber's blow dryer, she brought her shining golden hair back under control. Wispy bangs fell in a perfect arch over her smooth forehead. A length of luminescent silk cascaded freely down her back, contrasting with the black dress. The golden waves glistened and reflected the light as she walked.

"Hey, I don't look half bad like this," she said to herself before joining her friend. Amber sat tapping her foot against the edge of her coffee table. It was the only outward sign of her discarded patience. She stood as Brianna entered the room and donned her own handmade cape.

"Are you *finally* ready to go?" Amber's finely arched brows were raised in question.

Brianna bowed her head and nodded slowly. Boy was she going to have a hard time living this down. She looked up from the floor, giving Amber her first look at the revised hair and makeup.

Amber whistled, "You're going to knock them dead tonight, Bri. You look marvelous."

Brianna beamed at her. "You look great, too, Cyndy."

Amber scowled at her. "Don't call me that anymore. It doesn't do a thing for me. My new name has helped me develop more patience." She glanced at her watch. "If we leave now, we'll still be able to make it in time for the limbo contest." She turned, picked up the two overnight bags sitting in the foyer and headed for the door.

Brianna climbed into the passenger seat of Amber's fluorescent green Neon and fastened her seatbelt. It was one thing she *never* forgot to do, especially if her friend was driving. Amber had the fearless heart of a racecar driver.

Amber put the car in gear and mashed on the gas, leaving skid marks in her driveway on the way out.

Brianna gripped the armrest as her friend stomped on the gas pedal and they careened around a corner,

just missing the curb. She honked at a young couple, holding hands as they ran across the street.

"Stay in the crosswalk, you boobs!" She made a face. "I swear, Bri, it's getting to the point that the people around here cross the road anywhere they want with no thought for the traffic."

Closing her eyes, Brianna took a deep breath, only relaxing her death grip on the armrest to adjust her seatbelt. "Well, if you weren't speeding, maybe they would have seen us coming."

"I wasn't speeding." Amber shot her a surprised look. "I always drive fifty through here."

Brianna smiled wryly. "Maybe you do, sweetie, but that sign you nearly mowed down back there was a speed limit sign that said twenty-five. You have *seen* speed limit signs, haven't you?"

Amber waved her hand. "Yeah, but that's only for daytime, when the kids are out. I'd never drive that fast through here then. That's why I take the expressway." She honked at a slower moving vehicle, jerked her car to the left and shot through an intersection.

Brianna took a deep breath and counted to ten. You just had to love Amber. She loved life, excitement and she loved to drive fast. Real fast.

Amber glanced her way. "What?"

"Oh nothing." Brianna waved her hand toward the rear of the vehicle. "I just thought since you didn't stop at the stop sign back there, you might want to stop for the flashing lights in your rearview mirror." She was looking behind them through the passenger side door mirror.

Amber frowned. "What flashing li— Oh, God!" She glanced at Brianna, a panicked look in her eyes. "Did I really just run a stop sign?" She chewed on her lip nervously and her gaze darted from the road to the mirror and back. Slowing down, she turned on her blinker, steered into a parking lot and pulled into a space. The police car, with its flashing lights, sped past them with the siren blaring.

Brianna shook her head with disgust. "You're so lucky, I swear. If I would have been driving, I'd be getting a big fat ticket right now."

"Good thing it wasn't you driving then, huh?" Amber waggled her eyebrows and grinned. She put the car in gear and stomped on the gas pedal.

"This is a welcome sight after that wild ride," Brianna muttered when they pulled into the parking spot at the conference center and shut off the engine.

"Did you say something?" Amber looked at her curious.

"I said, what a wonderful night. Thanks for the ride," Brianna said, thinking quickly. The last thing she wanted to do was hurt Amber's feelings.

"Oh, well, you're welcome," Amber said with a smirk. "Now let's go and have a great time. I hope I can find someone to dance with."

"You probably won't if you're going to insist on doing the robot again. That dance is so old." Brianna made a face. "You look ridiculous when you do it."

"I like the robot," she pouted. "And the moonwalk. I especially like the mashed potato."

Brianna shook her head. "And as long as you insist on dancing like that you're going to continue to have



an awful time finding someone to hit the floor with you."

They walked inside together as they laughed and talked. Brianna was still shaken from the wild ride. She'd been pleasantly surprised to find out she didn't have to pry her fingers loose from the armrest and dashboard where she'd developed a white-knuckled death grip.

They walked through the hotel's opulent lobby and across the ocher marble floor that gleamed in the light from the chandeliers overhead. The lush, potted palms were huge and healthy. Bellhops walked past, pushing their polished, brass carts. A red carpet ran up the center of the wide marble stairs to the concierge on the next level.

Brianna pointed to a sign. "It's this way, in the port and starboard ballrooms." The girls followed the signs to the two huge rooms. They each pulled out their tickets and gave them to the doormen as they entered.

"You know," Amber grabbed a hors d'oeuvre from a passing server and popped it into her mouth. "The Witches Ball is one of only a few Pagan social events of the year. It's mainly for meeting others of similar beliefs."

Brianna nodded. "I remember, you told me. It's also a great place to network or to find other people who may have a particular skill, tool or service." She wrapped her arm around Amber's shoulders. "Thanks so much, for teaching me."

Amber grinned. "I love it and you know it."

With the party already in full swing, costumed guests milled around everywhere. The rooms were

thick with people of all sizes, shapes and magical persuasion.

"There must be at least five-hundred people here this year. What a great turnout," Brianna said, completely awed. The hall was enormous. Glancing around, she took in the beauty of the large room. The black, red and gold carpet beneath their feet was patterned like the carpet in a turn of the century hotel. The chandeliers overhead were immense. They contained a copious amount of crystals, causing the light to prism, sending colorful light patterns throughout the room. Everything looked as magical as you would think a Witches ball should look.

The costumes ranged from the common witch or court jester, to outlandish vampires with blood red capes and filed or capped vicious looking canines.

The ball committee, as usual, rented two conference rooms in a local hotel and conference center. One room held the vendors and food. The other was reserved strictly for the contests and dancing. Both rooms were decorated with a plethora of hanging plants and incense holders. The many witch-balls—silver painted glass globes filled with small pieces of string to trap negativity—were beautiful.

"Do you know what I like the most about the ball?" Brianna asked with a smile.

"What?" Amber turned, her brow raised in question.

"I like the fact that it's air conditioned and it has toilets." Brianna said tongue in cheek.

"Unlike the gathering of the tribes for the spring and fall where we all have to rough it for five long

days?"

Brianna slipped a glass of Coke from a passing waiter. "I like the sleeping on the ground and cooking over an open fire part." She took a sip of her drink. "I really don't mind roughing it, but I would like to have showers and a toilet."

"But that's the best part!" Amber looked shocked that Brianna could say such a thing. "We all save water and electricity when we're there!" She reached out and snagged another hors d'oeuvre from a tray and crammed it into her mouth.

Brianna looked on with disgust. How many of those stupid things was she going to eat anyway? "Maybe, but we deplete the ozone with the use of extra deodorant," she said, giggling.

Amber's eyes narrowed. "Do you feel strange, Bri?" She swallowed her snack and looked around.

Brianna shook her head. "Uh, uh. Should I?" She turned around and looked behind them. She didn't see or feel anything out of the ordinary at all, but then again, she wasn't as sensitive or as attuned to things as Amber was. She watched as her friend snatched two more cheese-covered crackers from a waitress and took a bite. Brianna sighed with disgust. Apparently, she wasn't as hungry either.

"I have a weird feeling, like someone is watching us." Amber kept spinning around, her eyes searching the corners of the room. "Are you sure you don't feel anything?" She stuffed the last of the crackers into her mouth and chewed.

Brianna shook her head, on alert. Amber's feelings were never wrong. If she felt that someone was

watching them, then someone *was* watching them. She scanned the huge room, knowing her abilities were nowhere near the level of Amber's. Still, she should feel something.

Amber placed her hand on her arm. "Don't feel bad if you don't sense it, hon. You're still a neophyte. I have been practicing the craft for years now."

Lifting her shoulder in a halfhearted shrug, Brianna sighed. "I guess you're right, but I still would like to be able to feel like I'm making *some* progress."

Amber stiffened, her grip tightening on Brianna's arm. "Don't look now, but there is a really tall, dark haired guy in the corner wearing a red cape. He hasn't taken his eyes off of you for the last couple of minutes."

Brianna started to turn around.

Amber grabbed her arm, "Didn't I just say, don't look now? We don't want him to know that *we* know he's watching you," she whispered. "I don't know what he wants, but whatever it is, can't be good. His aura is very dark." She shivered, rubbing her arms with her hands. "Let's try to lose him."

Brianna fought the urge to look over her shoulder as they weaved in and out through the dense crowd. She found herself wishing she could read auras as well as Amber. So far, she'd only been able to see the white ring of energy close to the body.

Who was the man Amber saw? Could she be mistaken and it wasn't a creep but their new neighbor, Niklas? Fear kept her from turning around to look. Fear that it was her new neighbor and he meant her harm.

Amber turned to look behind them and heaved a relieved sigh, her hand poised over her heart. "I may have been mistaken. I don't see him anymore."

"Good, can we enjoy the party now?" Brianna asked relieved.

Amber grinned, "Sure thing. We're going to have a great time." She grabbed Brianna by the arm and dragged her through the crowd.

They mingled, talking with others they knew from other events. It didn't take long before Brianna noticed the strange man, too. She was relieved that it wasn't Niklas. "You know, I normally have a blast at these things. But this year I can't enjoy it." She rotated her shoulders. It was almost as if she could feel the man's gaze drilling holes through her back. Shifting uncomfortably, she ignored the insane urge to stomp over and ask the guy just what the hell it was he wanted. She looked over her shoulder. "I'm constantly on the lookout for that strange man. He's been following us around most of the night. Is it just me or does it seem like he's stalking us?"

"I think I made you paranoid. I'm sorry, didn't mean to scare you and make it so you couldn't enjoy the evening." Amber scanned the room. "The man I saw is nowhere in sight." She patted Brianna on the arm. "Come on. I think the Limbo contest is going to start any minute." She grabbed Brianna's arm and pulled her along behind her. "I thought you wanted to enter it this year." They moved through the throng of people, heading for the line to sign the release for the limbo.

"I did," Brianna shrugged. "But now I don't think

that it's a good idea to draw attention to myself." She cast a nervous glance over her shoulder before giving herself a mental shake. Why in the world was she letting some weirdo spoil her night out? She'd paid damn good money to come here and was bound and determined to enjoy herself! She locked gazes with Amber, the determination written on her face. "Oh, I'm here to have fun. Lead on," she said, following her friend through the crowd to join the limbo contestants.

"This line sure is long." Amber leaned out into the aisle, trying to see past the horde of people in front of them.

"Yeah, it is. We'll have gray hair by the time it's our turn." Brianna tried to relax, resisting the urge to look over her shoulder.

"Why can't the waiters come in here carrying trays? It's not like you have to have a plate and sit down to eat what they carry."

Brianna rolled her eyes at her friend's complaint. "You can't possibly still be hungry, Amber. You've eaten more since we got here than I have in the last two days."

The line didn't take as long as they thought it would. Before they knew it, they had arrived at the admissions table and signed the release form to enter the contest. They were walking away from the table to join the game players when Brianna's face turned a bright red. "Oh, my goodness," she exclaimed, "Amber, you're not going to believe this, but look at that guy over there." She put her hands to her cheeks, trying to cool the heat of her blush, then pointed to a man in the corner standing in front of a huge potted

palm.

Amber's eyes followed the direction Brianna was pointing. "What the..." Amber burst into fits of giggles. "Is he doing what I think he's doing?" She shook her head and slapped her cheek in disbelief.

The man, who was dressed as an elemental spirit, swayed back and forth, his jewel-encrusted crown haphazardly hanging from the side of his head as he swayed in front of a potted palm his head tilted back and his eyes closed.

Brianna clapped a hand over her mouth to stifle a giggle when he let out a loud satisfied groan.

Amber leaned closer and whispered, "I wonder how much he's had to drink tonight?" She punctuated her remark with another giggle when the man in question reached back and scratched his rear.

"Judging by the amount he's expelling, I'd say quite a bit." Brianna looked away, her cheeks still pink.

"I don't think I could ever get drunk enough to pee in a potted plant," Amber whispered. "At least I hope I never get *that* drunk."

The man straightened and zipped up his pants. He shivered visibly and his crown dropped even lower on his head, leaving it hanging drunkenly from his right ear as he staggered off. The crown, finally giving up its battle, slipped from his ear and rolled to the floor. The man never noticed the metallic chink as he wandered out of sight, blissfully unaware that he'd given the impromptu performance.

"That was too funny, Bri. How do you spot those things?" Amber laughed. It had been Brianna, who'd brought *Pan* to Amber's attention last year.

She shrugged. "Just lucky, I guess. If you can even call it luck." She made a face. Before long, her attention was captured by the beginning of the contest and it was a long while before she thought of anything but how much fun she was having.

Brianna knew she wouldn't get far in the contest. She never did. When she was younger, she would lose the pole when it was still high enough that all she had to do was tilt her head back. This time at least, she'd gotten to the point that she had to do a back bend, and wouldn't you know it, her breasts had caught on the bar. After they were eliminated, they stayed to watch the others.

It was when the finalists had to start taking a shot of rum before each pass under the bar that the contest got really interesting.

"Look at *him*, Bri, I didn't think he'd make it this far, with *that* costume." Amber pointed at a man dressed as a medieval vampire. He still wore his flowing, purple velvet cape. His muscular legs were really something to see in the tights he wore under his gold jewel covered tunic. "How much do you want to bet that obviously anatomically incorrect codpiece is going to give him troubles?" she leaned over and whispered. They watched as the man tried to bend backward and kneel, while still moving forward under the low set pole. The giant jewel encrusted codpiece hung up on the limbo pole and pulled it from its resting-place. Amber laughed hysterically and pointed. "Do you see that, Bri, the pole is stuck to the codpiece. How is that for a sorcerer's staff?" she whooped with laughter.

The man staggered around and waggled his brows



at the women suggestively as he held the long pole under the codpiece. The limbo judges chased him down trying to get their game prop back. The rest of the contest passed quickly. The winner was Pan, which wasn't surprising, since he won almost every year. The man was a contortionist.

Soon, the two women became aware of the man in the red cape again. He seemed to be everywhere they looked.

"What do you think he wants with us anyway?" Brianna shivered.

Amber thinned her lips and looked at him through narrowed eyes. "I've been afraid to wander too far from you because of him. I don't think it's *us* he's after, hon. I think he's after you for some reason. But we shouldn't let him spoil our fun." Amber pouted. "Let's see if we can ditch him." She grabbed Brianna's hand and pulled her through the crowd.

"I really don't think this is going to do much good." Brianna cast a quick glance over her shoulder. He was out of sight for now, but how long would it take for him to catch up with them again?

A huge swarm of people entered the room and they broke up to visit the vendor stands. Brianna lost her grip on Amber who was pushed ahead of the big group to the other side of the room. Brianna twirled around. Should she try to find Amber? Deciding to let her friend find her, she wandered over to the nearest table and began to look at the items for sale. The table was covered with jewelry made up mostly of turquoise and jet.

An amber and jet necklace caught her eye and she

picked it up to get a better look at it. Brianna was admiring the way it looked on her when she began to feel unsettled again. Turning slightly to the left, she held another necklace up and looked casually into the mirror and stiffened. He was behind her again.

Brianna set the necklaces down and chose a similar, but less expensive, amber and jet bracelet to add to her magical jewelry. She waited for the colorfully dressed gypsy witch behind the table to wrap it and place it in a small bag, all the while surreptitiously watching the strange man.

Brianna left the table and moved to another, casually making a slow circuit of the room. She was afraid that if she tried to make a run for it, she wouldn't get far. As long as she was in a crowd of people, she was safe. At least she hoped so.

She turned furtively, hoping to see that he'd disappeared again. With any luck, he'd had to make a trip to the men's room, but as usual, he was right behind her. The bizarre man would get close when she was by herself. But when she joined Amber or another of her friends here, he would back off. She couldn't shake the feeling that this man meant to do her harm. What was it about him that made her so afraid?

Brianna wished for her earlier bliss when she'd been ignorant of the man's dark brooding presence. He never seemed to get real close, but he was never far from her either. She tried to act normal, completely oblivious to his scrutiny, walking slowly from one vendor to the next, eyeing the exquisite jewelry, the wonderful colored robes and decorations. The hair on the back of her neck prickled with unease. She could

feel him watching her.

"Go away, go away, go away," she chanted under her breath. *Why is he following me?* She closed her eyes and said a quick spell for protection, then surveyed the room, looking for a big crowd of people to get lost in.

Amber strode up behind Brianna and leaned close to whisper in her ear as she looked at some necklaces. "Are we renting a room this year?"

Brianna jumped, then scowled. She turned and swatted the other woman on the arm.

Amber leapt back laughing.

"It's no wonder my nerves are on edge. You nearly scared me to death," Brianna hissed, holding her hand to her chest as her heart pounded against her ribs. She cast her gaze around. "I wonder how much a taxi would cost." She turned to Amber, and worried her lower lip.

Amber gave her a wry smile. "Probably about as much as a room."

"I don't know if we should stay here." Brianna leaned back and forth, trying to get a good look around Amber. The strange man was gone again. He was most likely hiding somewhere where he could see her, but she couldn't see him. "I wish I didn't have to worry so much about money."

Amber nodded. "Yeah, I even feel guilty for splurging once in a while when I buy things at gatherings like this."

"I know what you mean. I keep asking myself if I shouldn't resist the urge and pay a bill or buy a new tire for my car."

"If you put new tires on that rickety, old rust bucket

of yours, the tires would be worth more than the car." Amber swallowed the small square ice cube she'd fished out of her drink. "So, do you want to stay or not? Staying here may be expensive, but it's not as costly as getting charged with drunk driving. I don't know about you, but I've had a few already." She gave Brianna a lopsided grin, popped another ice cube in her mouth and bit down.

Brianna smirked, "A few drinks or a few drunk driving charges."

"Ha, ha, you're such a comedian. Don't quit your day job," Amber teased. "You know very well I've had a few drinks and I don't ever want to get a drunk driving charge."

Brianna wrapped her arm around Amber and squeezed. "Very true. I suppose we probably should stay here. The last thing either of us need is an arrest record." She hadn't had much to drink yet but she planned to have a few drinks later. She made a face. "I guess I just wanted to justify the expense. And you know there's nowhere to camp around here. So we can't even get out the cheap way." There was no need to explain her reasons. Her friend was well aware of her financial situation.

Amber put her cup to her lips, tossed her head back and shook a few more ice cubes into her mouth. She winked, then gave Brianna a conspiratorial grin. "Leave it up to me to think of the perfect excuse." Talking around the ice, she buffed her perfectly manicured silver iridescent fingernails on her sleeve.

"By the way, you *do* know what they say about people who chew ice cubes, don't you?" Brianna said

with a shameless grin. "They say they don't get enough sex."

Amber grinned and winked. "I told you I don't get enough of that kind of action." She turned, her smile faded and the teasing glint left her eyes. "Don't look now, hon, but here's our friend." She tilted her head, a nearly imperceptible movement, not wanting the man in question to realize they were aware of his constant scrutiny.

As they both watched, he nonchalantly ducked behind a silk plant in the corner of the ballroom. He may have been out of their sight, but they knew he was still there waiting and watching.

Brianna looked thoughtful. A slight frown creased her brow. "That's another good reason to stay here for the night. We don't have to worry about being followed home when we leave. I wonder what his problem is."

"I don't know," Amber replied. "But I have an idea. Wait here. I'll go get a room and come right back. We'll leave through the ladies room. If he stays true to form, he'll wait just outside the door. We'll slip out through the other door in the hall."

Amber tossed a look over her shoulder. "Just manage to stay away from him till I can get back. Go tease *Pan* or something." She winked. "Just try not to stray too far from this spot if you can help it. I don't want to have to go searching for you again."

Brianna watched as Amber disappeared into the crowd. She turned and noticed the strange man approaching her, his lips twisted in a parody of a smile that didn't reach his eyes.

She cast her gaze around the room frantically and saw *Pan* joking with two other men in the corner. Brianna hurried up to them. "Hi! How are you all doing tonight?" Batting her eyelashes, she turned toward the man dressed as *Pan* and remarked. "I hope you're not too warm tonight. Although I do have to admit, you looked much more ah...comfortable last year." She winked.

*Pan's* pleasant smile turned into a devastating grin she found almost irresistible. His black eyes twinkled with a devilish gleam. The man's tanned, blond good looks were not lost on her either though Brianna leaned more toward tall, dark, and handsome men.

"I was, until the police made their appearance anyway. The cold plastic benches at the police station were a little hard on the uh..." He cleared his throat. "The tackle. Even through the thin sheet they made me use."

Brianna's cheeks burned. She suppressed a shudder of mortification. What she'd said last year was an embarrassing stain left indelibly in her memory and it returned to haunt her. She hoped he didn't remember her. She gave a slight grimace. "I'm sorry I brought it up. I really didn't mean to be fresh, but..." She stepped closer and whispered, "There has been a man following me around most of the night. I'm trying to stay away from him without it looking like it. You know what I mean?"

He bent his blond head closer to hear her whispered words. There was no way he could have missed the apprehension in her eyes, the fear. The three men looked around slowly. Their combined gazes fell on

the sinister looking man who stood in the corner watching her.

"You mean the Vampire wannabe in the corner, wearing the overdone black eyeliner and the blood red cape?" He was careful not to gesture in any way that would inform the man he was the subject of their conversation. Then, in a louder voice, he said, "What'd you say your name was again, darlin'?" He bent down, his eyes level with hers. "My name is Ethan." He gave her what appeared to be a genuine smile and held out his hand.

"Nice to meet you, Ethan. I'm Brianna. I hope you're enjoying the party." Smiling, she took his hand, letting his big warm fingers envelope hers. She leaned closer, lowered her voice even more, "His aura is off. Can you see it?" she asked, with a worried frown. "And he is putting out bad vibes. I can feel the negativity rolling off him in waves." With her magical antennae finally working properly, she could feel what Amber had felt hours ago.

"Yeah, I see it," he replied grimly, his lips thinned, his eyes narrowing. They watched as the man stopped a waiter, took a handful of crackers from him and pushed him away. "What a real paragon of social etiquette we have here."

Amber walked up behind her, a room key concealed in her hand. "I didn't think you'd really have the guts to talk with him. I was just kidding, you know," Amber hissed in her ear.

"Are you two together?" Ethan asked, clearly suspicious. His dark eyes turned toward Amber. It seemed that he was prepared to protect Brianna, even

from another woman.

"Yes, we're together. Ethan, this is Amber." She turned to her friend. "Amber, meet Ethan." She turned back to him. "I really hate to ask this of you, Ethan, but do you think you guys could distract him enough to keep him from noticing when we leave?"

Ethan grinned, completely disarming Amber, who fanned the napkin she carried in front of her flushed face. "We can keep him busy, can't we?" He turned to his friends who were already nodding their heads. "For a price. Your e-mail address?"

The brief flash of white in his tanned face reminded Brianna that he'd been tanned all over last year. She flushed with renewed embarrassment. Smiling shyly, she stood on her toes and kissed his cheek. "Thanks! I don't know how I could ever repay you."

He grinned boyishly. "Your e-mail addresses would be payment enough. I don't get to meet two beautiful witches every day, you know," he said, apparently unable to keep his gaze off Amber.

Amber smiled and looked him up and down with undisguised admiration. She grinned mischievously and winked. "Right back at ya, stud."

After they exchanged e-mail addresses, they turned toward the bathrooms.

"I'm starting to feel funny, Amber," Brianna's words had begun to slur and she dropped her empty cup onto the floor. It fell near her feet and rolled into the crowd. Brianna began to sway as if she could no longer stand on her own. She looked over at Ethan and waved drunkenly.

"Bye-bye, honey buns." She turned to Amber, who



struggled to keep her from lying down on the dance floor. "You know, his buns do look like honey. I remember. He's tan aaaaall over," she whispered loudly in Amber's ear.

"What in the world did you drink, Bri?" Amber glanced at Ethan and blushed, then turned her attention to Brianna and shook her head in disbelief. "Boy, are you gonna feel this tomorrow." She put her arm around Brianna's waist and helped her through the crowd. They walked slowly, trying not to draw attention to themselves, while Ethan and his friends herded the strange man into a corner, keeping him occupied until they could make their escape.

"Hey look, Amber," Brianna pointed, trying to pull her in the opposite direction. "There's the guy who peed in the potted plant during the limbo contest." She waved. "Hey, sweetie, you need to drink more water! It shouldn't be that yell— Ow!"

Amber pinched her. Hard. She rolled her eyes. "I swear, Bri, if we get out of this alive, I'm gonna kill you for embarrassing me like this." She grunted as Brianna stumbled and she caught the brunt of her weight, then steered her toward the ladies bathroom. "We have to go now, Bri. Do you think you can move a little faster? I don't know how much time those guys are going to be able to buy us." Amber shot a worried glance over her shoulder. "This might be the only chance we have of ditching this guy."

## *Chapter Five*

They rushed through the crowded bathroom exiting through the other side. Even if the man had gotten away from their new friends, he wouldn't have had the time to rush around the long way. They made it into the elevator too quickly to have been followed. Even then, Amber pushed the button for every level hoping to confuse any pursuers. When the elevator doors finally reached the eighth floor, Amber half dragged, half-carried Brianna into their room. She sighed with relief when the door closed, locking them safely inside. Amber leaned against the door panting as Brianna stumbled toward the bed.

"That man was scary! The energy surrounding him wasn't good." She closed her eyes, took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. "His aura was a mixture of teeming grays and blacks, with no vibrant colors to give relief. He looked like evil personified." Amber rubbed her hands up and down her bare arms. "We forgot our capes. I'll call downstairs and have them held for us. We'll get them from the coat check tomorrow." She chewed her lip for a moment. "I don't want to take the chance that he'll be able to follow me

up here if I go get them tonight.”

Brianna nodded and leaned over the side of the bed. “I shink I’m going to be shick.” Brianna’s words slurred together drunkenly, then she lost consciousness.

Waking with a killer hangover, Brianna sat on the edge of her bed, holding her head in her hands. How many drinks did she have? She stood up gingerly, staggered to the bathroom and eyed the toilet, trying to suppress the queasy feeling in her stomach.

The hot shower helped. It made her feel a little better, but her head still felt stuffed with cotton balls instead of brains. She shook her head, trying to rid herself of the incessant buzzing. The strange noise almost sounded like someone whispering. Glancing up at her reflection in the mirror, she grimaced. She looked like hell! What in the world had come over her? She never had more than one or two drinks at a time. She ran a hand over her face and attempted to pry her eyes open, but they didn’t want to cooperate and stayed closed.

Squinting at the counter, she picked up her pentacle and hung it around her neck. The pendant had an unnatural glow and felt strange against her skin. Instead of wearing it, she wrapped it in toilet paper and crammed it into her purse. It had plainly picked up some sort of weird energy last night. She was going to have to cleanse it when she got home.

Brianna left the bathroom and shuffled to her overnight bag. Pulling her clean clothes from the bag, she dressed awkwardly. She blinked down at herself,

then tried to focus her gaze on the other side of the dim room. Amber was sprawled across the other bed. It was a good thing they always got a double. She wouldn't want to share a bed with *that* tireless body on the other side kicking and pushing all night.

Brianna threw a pillow at her. "Wake up, sleepyhead. It's time to go home."

Amber sat up and groaned, pushing the hair from her eyes. "It can't be morning already, give me a few more hours." She flopped back down on the bed, her pillow over her face to block the sliver of bright light that peeked through the closed drapes.

Brianna looked over her shoulder, checked the clock by the phone and sighed, exasperated. "It's ten thirty now. We have to be out of the room by noon or we pay for another day." She waited for a sign that Amber heard her. When her friend just laid there snoring, she walked to the bed, yanked the blankets off and threw them to the floor in a heap.

Amber shot out of the bed like a rocket, crossing her arms in an effort to keep warm. "It's friggin' cold in here, Bri. What's the air set on? Sub zero?"

Brianna put her hands on her hips and gave Amber her sternest look. "I'll turn it off if you'll get in the shower, then get dressed. Or you could just get dressed for that matter. You can shower at home." Her lips twitched and she did her best not to smile. She absolutely refused to do perky before coffee.

Amber threw her a sleepy grin. "And miss being able to use all of the hot water I want? You're kidding right?" She stumbled into the bathroom and turned on the water.

Brianna turned off the air conditioner as she promised and made a quick trip down to the small restaurant next to the lobby, looking for something to eat while Amber showered. She passed a few people she'd met the night before, leaving their rooms. Nearly all of them looked hung over.

"It must have been one hell of a party. Too bad I can't remember it." She sighed, disappointed and pushed the down button for the elevator. Brianna leaned against the wall and wondered if she was even capable of making it down to the restaurant alone. The ding of the elevator made her jump and she straightened.

She stepped through the doors and gave a wan smile to the elderly couple standing inside. A little old woman with silvery blue hair held her teacup poodle to her chest talking baby talk. The older man just looked at her and smiled. Brianna closed her eyes and inhaled the unmistakable scent of *Paul Sabastien*, the fragrance would always remind her of her father.

Brianna swallowed the nausea that rose when the elevator started its downward trek. Leaning her head back, she rested it against the wall, gripped the handrail and squashed the absent thought that perhaps she'd left her stomach on the eighth floor.

When she entered the brightly-lit breakfast room, her first instinct was to run from the light. She cupped her hand over her eyes. "What? Am I some sort of vampire now?" She shook her head and wished for a pair of sunglasses. She slowly walked to the to-go counter and requested a menu.

"Might I suggest our double chocolate mocha

latte?"

"Um...yes, I'll take two of those. I would also like some doughnuts, hmmm...let me think. Two jelly filled, two custard filled and two eclairs."

He rang-up her purchases. "Twenty-one ninety-six, please."

Brianna swallowed thickly and paid the man. When what she really wanted to do was shout, *Nearly twenty two dollars for a half dozen doughnuts and two coffees?* She bit her tongue. The last thing she needed to do was draw attention.

Amber was just emerging from the steam-filled bathroom when she returned to their room. Apparently, as usual, her friend had felt guilty about even thinking of using all of the hot water she wanted. She always said she could never bring herself to stay in the shower more than fifteen minutes because it was a waste of water, and if she even thought about wasting any natural resource she felt guilty.

"Ten more minutes, and I'll be ready to go." Amber said around the doughnut she'd just crammed into her mouth. She ran back into the bathroom, her hands full of clean clothes.

Brianna glanced down into the box. That donut was already Amber's second and she hadn't even taken the time to dry off yet. She shook her head in disbelief. She'd never understand it. The woman was a tiny little thing, but she ate like a horse.

Sitting down with her breakfast, Brianna sipped her coffee and nibbled a doughnut. Looking around, she wondered who decorated hotel rooms. The green carpet was okay, she supposed, if you liked the olive

drab puke look. The beds were standard for hotels, with the headboards screwed into the walls. The big flowered pattern on the bedspread was too much. It almost made her want to barf, which probably wouldn't be a problem if she aimed it at the floor. She shook her head, that wouldn't work. She didn't remember eating an abundance of greens yesterday. Looking up, she sighed as Amber breezed out of the bathroom looking refreshed. How did she do that anyway? She scowled. "You make me sick! How do you do that?"

Amber grinned. "Do what?"

"How do you look so stinking perky when you stayed out half of the night?" Brianna's head was still filled with cotton and the taste on her tongue made her wonder exactly what she'd eaten the night before. Wanting to get the horrible taste out of her mouth, she took a big bite of her doughnut and tried not to gag. She looked down at the box. One doughnut left. Amber had eaten four already? "How much did I drink last night?"

Amber sat at the desk, slipping her shoes on. She straightened in her chair, looking puzzled. "You only had one that I know of. Then you had something to eat and a few more cokes. I was going to ask *you* what you'd been drinking. Boy, were you drunk," she said as she bent to fix her sock inside of her shoe. She eyed the box Brianna still held. "Are you gonna eat that?"

Brianna stood, passed her the box and gave the doughnut another ten seconds to exist.

Amber crammed the last doughnut into her mouth. It lasted about five seconds. She chased it down with

the last of her coffee. "Do you remember the guy that kept following you around all night?"

"I remember he gave me the willies." Brianna shuddered.

"I don't think either one of us could enjoy ourselves because of him." She pressed her lips together, clearly upset. "He gave me the creeps. The man was evil, I could feel it. It emanated from him."

"Me, too." Brianna frowned. "I wonder why he was even there. It was obvious he didn't care about having a good time. He was too busy following us around." She took a small sip from her cup.

"He followed *you* around, Bri. His kind won't usually attend happy go lucky parties like the ball. They can't stand all of the positive energy or something." Amber was on her knees, looking under the bed.

Brianna's brow wrinkled slightly with worry and fear filled her eyes. "You're going to think this is weird, but I can't remember last night. I remember the kooky Limbo contest. Now I know why everyone was staggering around last year when we got there." She grinned. "It makes me glad I didn't make the finalists. I don't know if I could have slammed down a shot of liquor every time it was my turn."

Amber fanned her face. "Yeah, I remember," she giggled.

Grinning, Brianna was glad for that memory at least. "I remember the vampire with the oversized codpiece got it hung up on the limbo pole and staggered around with it, making suggestive remarks." She squinted up at the ceiling and thought for a



moment. "And I remember the guy dressed as Pan won. I think the skin-tone tights were a good move," she chuckled, "a bit disappointing maybe, but still, a good move."

Amber raised a brow, a teasing glint in her eyes. "You don't remember talking with him? His name is Ethan by the way."

"Talking with who, the weirdo?" Brianna shuddered at the thought. His whole manner had made her skin crawl. "I can't imagine talking with someone like that. Did you slap me?"

"No, silly. You actually talked with *Pan*."

"Get outta here! I did not." Brianna was stunned, her mouth hung open in surprise.

Amber nodded, looking like she was enjoying this just a little too much. "Yes, you did. I went to get the room and told you to stay away from the creepy guy. When I came back, you were talking with him and his buddies. They even ran interference for us so we could slip out through the bathroom. They didn't seem to like the way the other guy was following you around either." Her full lips thinned with anger. Her sparkling green eyes filled with contempt. "You know, that man could have slipped something into one of your drinks." She looked thoughtful. "Though I have no idea why he'd want to do such a thing. Or how."

Brianna shot Amber a nervous glance. They both knew that sometimes the ball would attract people with strange ideas of what it was to be a witch. It was said those people had chosen the left-handed path. They didn't follow the Rede, which was to harm none. That there was a chance she could have fallen into the

clutches of someone that perverted the craft in such a way was terrifying.

They gathered their things together in silence, left a generous tip for the maid and closed the door behind them. Brianna was glad that she'd had the forethought to leave a change of clothes with Amber. She'd forgotten to pack some in her rush to get to the ball last year. She'd had to travel home wearing her costume. What looked great on Halloween always looked goofy the day after, especially if you were still wearing it in broad daylight.

She wondered briefly about her new neighbor. His sun-bronzed face was classically handsome as if some unknown Goddess had created him, chiseled his perfect features from smooth bronzed marble with her own divine hands. A perfect specimen to be her consort.

Brianna really hated the way she'd run off the night before. He had been nothing but kind and she'd all but snubbed him. Maybe if she invited him over for dinner or something... She shook her head slightly. No, it was too soon for that. She didn't want to seem pushy. Or worse yet, desperate.

Niklas's handsome face flashed in her memory, the vivid recollection of him came unbidden. He left a burning impression on her mind. She frowned. It was strange how she could recall everything of the night before she arrived at the ball.

Brianna wondered if she *had* been drugged. The thought frightened her. She knew people could do things when stoned that they ordinarily wouldn't do sober. Once, years ago, her best friend had disappeared

at a party. Someone slipped a drug into her friend, Karen's drink, then bragged, laughing about how they'd easily dropped the drug in her soda. They thought it was hilarious.

Her eyes misted and she shuddered. A single tear trembled from her lash and fell to her cheek. She found Karen lying naked on her back. In a stupor, so stoned, she didn't even recognize her best friend. When Brianna helped her dress, she found bruises and bite-marks all over her body. When they went to school the following Monday, everyone was whispering about Karen. How she'd *serviced* several different boys at the party. It didn't matter that they gave her such a high dose of drugs she hadn't known what she was doing. She hadn't even known her own name. After that, no one wanted to talk with her and she was branded the school slut. The thought that something similar could have happened to her nearly made Brianna ill. With her thoughts spinning, the ride back home was a short one.

Amber dropped Brianna at her door so she wouldn't have far to carry the costume and the few things she'd picked up the night before from vendors. She waved as Amber backed out of the driveway and left, tires squealing against the pavement as her car raced down the street.

Brianna wrinkled her nose at the acrid smell of burning rubber and unlocked her door. She greeted Killer warmly and let him out into the backyard. He started yapping almost immediately. What in the world was upsetting him now? She shrugged. No matter, the yard was fenced and he couldn't get out.

She wasn't going to worry about him until she made some coffee. She needed more of the strong brew than the one small cup she had gotten from the hotel—about a gallon more. She set a pot to brew and checked her mail. There was nothing but bills and junk. If they weren't trying to sell something, they were demanding payment.

"There's supposed to be so much more to life," she sighed. "Whatever happened to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness? It seems it's more like live poorly, work constantly and the pursuit of debt management." She twirled around the kitchen, her hands held out from her sides. "What I wouldn't give to have the man of my dreams sweep me off of my feet and take me away from all of this."

"Cow cookies." She stopped spinning and frowned. That was another thing. It appeared her spell hadn't worked after all. "Figures. What happened to a spell usually worked within twenty-eight days?" She sighed, dejected. "Mine never work."

There *were* exceptions. Some spells could take two months. But mostly, the time frame was a pretty constant twenty-eight days. One full moon cycle. Yesterday had been day twenty-eight. "So much for all that energy I saw leaving my body. I was sure it was going to work this time, too."

Brianna always knew she'd never find her actual dream man. Ever since she'd been a little girl, the man of her dreams had come from outer space. "Like that's ever gonna happen." She shook her head and rolled her eyes. She would have accepted a close facsimile though. There was a lot to be said for a flesh and blood

human male. Especially if said human male was approximately six foot six and a tower of extreme male perfection.

Brianna put her hand to her head, nearly overcome with a sudden wave of dizziness. Maybe someone *had* put something in her drink last night. She'd never felt so worn out in her life. Forgetting about her coffee, she dragged herself to bed to lie down for a moment. She really wasn't feeling well.

*Rap, rap, rap.*

*"Ton que'lla ist tu bai!"*

"Huh?" Brianna sat up with a frown. She definitely wasn't going to get any rest with the work going on next door. The sound of hammering carried across the yard into her bedroom. She got up to close the window just in time to see a man fall off a ladder.

He screamed something in a foreign language and hit the ground in a cloud of dust. Another man tripped over a pail of paint. The entire five-gallon bucket tipped over, spilling royal blue paint across the weed filled lawn. There was more cursing. At least she assumed it was cursing, since it, too, was in a foreign tongue.

"It's like watching an episode of the Three Stooges," she muttered, her chin in her hands, elbows resting on the sill.

One man would pick up a two by four, turn and knock someone else off a ladder. Or conk someone on the head. Another man stepped on a hoe. The handle flipped up and struck him in the chest, he was just lucky he was tall. It was hilarious. If Brianna didn't know better, she would have believed they were

cursed. Although she was sure incompetent was a better word.

Crouching, Brianna watched with morbid curiosity for a few more minutes. It wasn't everyday you got to see a comedy show like this. Searching the yard, she noticed Killer wasn't making a sound. That, in itself, was remarkable. He barked at *everything*. Yet, there he sat, in the middle of the yard, staring through the fence watching the comedy of errors construction-company next door, his head tilting from one side to the other as he watched.

Brianna was startled when the man she'd met the night before came out of the house and called to the people in the yard. "English, remember to speak English here."

One of the workers called out, his voice heavily accented. "We cannot work here, Niklas!" He flung his arms about him frantically. "This place, it is cursed! We should leave here and never come back. Or *we* will be cursed."

Niklas scowled, looking around the yard at the broken wood. Blue paint crept across the lawn toward the flowerbeds and the railing for the balcony hung drunkenly from one corner. He shook his head and stepped quickly from beneath the swinging balustrade. "It is not cursed," he growled, pointing at them. "Every one of you are bumbling idiots!" He shook his head with disgust as he gazed around the yard, taking in the damage. "I take you from your regular jobs and you become total incompetents."

Brianna watched as he ran his fingers through his hair, causing it to stand on end in an adorable way.

Her fingers itched to smooth it back down, feel the silky softness of his unruly hair between her fingers.

“Put the tools away for today, you fools. You’re going to have to use the disks tonight. Or you will draw too much attention to yourselves.” Niklas paused and stood very still for a moment as though he knew they were being watched. He turned slowly to look toward her.

Leaning back, Brianna crab-walked away from the window, moving into the shadows where she knew he couldn’t see her. She watched as he searched the darkness beyond the pane of glass, then shrugged and turned away. Her golden brows drew together in confusion. She knew she shouldn’t have eavesdropped. But they’d been so close to the property line, she couldn’t help but hear. It had been so much fun, it hadn’t seemed wrong at the time.

What had he meant by using disks? And why was he worried about them drawing attention to themselves. Were they here illegally? Way too puzzled to sleep now, Brianna collected Killer from the backyard and fed him. He sniffed his food, then looked at her as though saying, *is this all I get?*

“Yes, that’s all you get, you little beggar.” Reaching down, she scratched him behind the ears. Knowing she’d never sleep with the racket still going on next door, she decided to clean the house. It always seemed that there weren’t enough hours in the day for her to get her own housework done. It was strange, considering it was what she did for a living. Today it didn’t take long to scrub the whole place top to bottom. With a feeling of accomplishment, she prepared her

dinner and spent a quiet evening reading a book, her stereo playing soft music.

Occasionally, her mind wandered to the conversation she'd heard earlier in the day. Why shouldn't they speak their own language? It sounded quite beautiful. Brianna frowned, wondered what language it was. She couldn't remember hearing anything like it before in her life.



## Chapter Six

*B*rianna stood on the edge of the churning sea, knowing all she had to do was call and they would come. Never would she have believed it was she who would have the power to call them forth from their hidden realm. She longed to see their crystal island, yearned, with everything within her, to see the island fortress that was called both Avalon and Atlantis.

Chill wind blew in from the water, pressing her nightgown against her legs. The mist wet her gown, causing the darker vee at the juncture of her thighs to become visible through the thin fabric. The salt spray dampened her face, glistening on her skin like tiny gems. She inhaled deeply, loving the pungent smell of the sea air, and the tangy taste of salt on her lips. Raising her arms into the air, swaying with the wind, she tilted her head back and called to the Fey.

*"Hei lei agh taleena orrrrr, hei lei agh taleena orrrrr."* Brianna knew in her heart she needed to make this request at the edge of the sea, to beg those of the Fey and Elvin realms to return from Telleg Moor, their name for Avalon.

The winds grew stronger, pushing Brianna away from the edge of the roiling water.

The waves crashed upon the shore in a deafening

*crescendo. Her golden hair whipped about her like a silken web. She raised her head, saw the towering spires of crystal buildings and wondered how she came to be in this place. She laughed gaily. She'd done it! This was Avalon, the elusive magical city on the sea.*

Brianna rolled up onto her elbow, startled. The wonderful dream dissipated like a waning mist facing the burning sun. Not sure what caused her to awaken she squinted through the darkness, trying to see around the dim room. Where in the world was Killer? He usually barked at strange noises.

She bit her lip and whispered, "Come on, boy. Come on, Killer. Where are you?" She looked around again. Still, he was nowhere to be found. Maybe she'd left him running the house. If so, she was going to be in trouble in the morning. He would certainly make her pay for locking him out of her room all night. Brianna groaned and flopped back down onto the bed, her arm flung over her eyes. That was all she needed, a Yorkie with an attitude.

A slight movement in the corner startled her and she shivered with fear. Swallowing thickly, she tried to talk around the giant lump in her throat. "Is someone there?" She sat up, pulled the sheet up to her chest and squinted into the darkness, trying to see around the shadowy shapes she knew was her furniture. The sound of breathing from the corner made her heart pound faster.

Brianna's hands fisted in her sheets, she hadn't been this frightened in her own bedroom for years. The old fears and insecurities rose up, bound her to the bed, making it nearly impossible to move. She was torn

between running and pulling the covers up over her head like a frightened child.

She inhaled sharply when a person stepped from the shadows, even opened her mouth to scream, but nothing came out. Reaching for her throat, she wanted to claw at the slim column and force it to comply. She tried again, still nothing.

*Is this another dream?* The intruder stepped fully into the moonlight and she could see him, or her, very clearly now. Whatever it was, it couldn't possibly be human. It was tall and thin, with long silver hair and long pointy ears. Brianna resisted the urge to giggle. Hysterics were not an option. She needed to keep her wits about her.

"I would appreciate it if you did not think of me as an it *or* as a female." The creature straightened. "I am Larin of the Fey. Messenger of Morgaine."

"Huh?" Brianna sat up, holding the sheet to her chest. Now that she knew she wasn't looking at a specter, whoever it was, had to be human. Fear came bounding back. She cast furtive glances around the room, hoping to find something she could use as a weapon. What the hell, if she was going to die anyway, she was going to go out with a bang. Maybe literally. "First of all, how did you know what I was thinking? Two, how did you get in here, and three, just who in the hell are you?" Brianna waggled three fingers, glaring at him. She didn't give a crap if he *was* gay. She just wanted him out of her house.

He sighed. "I am most certainly not gay. Not in the manner you mean at any rate." He hedged. "I am gay, meaning that I am happy." He smiled and spread his

arms wide, his hands palms up.

Like *that* was supposed to clear things up? Brianna slid backward across her bed to put more space between them. Turning her back, she dropped the sheet, grabbed her robe and put it on. Maybe he was a weirdo surgically altered to look strange. One who needed to make the acquaintance of the guys who wore the white coats?

She held trembling hands in front of her, in what she hoped resembled a placating manner. "I'm glad that you're happy being gay," she smiled. "Really I am. I just don't know what it has to do with me or why you're in my house." She blinked and eyed the telephone, wondering if she would be able to dial nine-one-one before he could take it from her and make her eat it.

Larin closed his eyes, running a long slender finger up and down the most perfect nose Brianna had ever seen. He smiled and opened his eyes. They had the most devilish twinkle.

"I am pleased you like my nose, madam, but it is far from perfect." He leaned back and sighed. "Ah. Now, my Queen, she is another story. *She* is perfection."

"Will you stop that?" Brianna shook a finger at him. "Just stay out of my head! You weren't invited." She glared at him, furious, her eyes becoming slits. "How do you do that anyway?"

"Do what?" Larin asked, feigning wide-eyed innocence. The glacial blue of his eyes was prismatic, reflecting what little light there was back at her.

"Ack!" Brianna threw her hands in the air. She was never going to get a straight answer from him. The

creep was more slippery than a politician.

His silvery white brows drew down in a fierce scowl. "I beg your pardon!"

"If you don't like my thoughts, stay out of my head." She said with a smirk. *There! That got him. What in the world did the guy want anyway? And why aren't you scared out of your wits because he just popped into your house?* The strange thing was that she really wasn't scared of him. She felt more like sticking her tongue out at him than running for her life.

Biting her lip, she eyed the phone and frowned. Why should she care if he's gay? That was his business, not hers.

"I am Larin of the Fey! F.E.Y. You know, the faeries." He all but screamed the last.

Brianna tilted her head to the side and looked on with interest. He wasn't quite so beautiful when his face turned purple like that. His eyes did strange things, too, almost glowing orange, then suddenly changing back to the brilliant blue they'd been before his tantrum.

"Faeries do not have tantrums!" He stomped his foot. Then, when he realized what he'd done, he looked toward the ceiling and rolled his eyes.

She stifled the urge to giggle. This would be hilarious if she could be certain he wasn't an axe murderer.

"I cannot abide your fear any longer," he growled. "Rules or no rules, watch this." He snapped his fingers and disappeared. Then poof! He was back again.

Brianna nearly fainted. If she'd been standing, she certainly would have fallen. "Wha—"

Larin sighed again and shook his head.

She was getting so tired of that. He acted like he thought she was stupid or something.

"How can you call yourself a witch and not believe in faeries?" He scowled again.

Brianna watched him with interest. If he hadn't had that eerie glowing eye thing going again, it would have been comical. He was just too pretty to make those faces.

"Males. Are. Not. Pretty." He emphasized each word.

She made a face. Well, two could play at that game. "Stay. Out. Of. My. Head," she huffed. This yelling match was going absolutely nowhere.

"You're right." He conceded. "This *is* going nowhere." He held up a hand at Brianna's scowl. "Do not say it! I cannot help hearing your thoughts. You think too loudly. All faeries can hear you." He waved a hand as if that should explain everything. Then he looked thoughtful for a moment. "Perhaps a visit to my Queen would be helpful. Come with me." He held out his hand.

"Come with—What? There are more of you?" Brianna's eyes widened.

He dropped his hand to his side. "You should know. *You* called us forth." He growled and gave her that look again.

She glowered at him. "Stop looking at me as if you think I'm dense. You do have to admit that this *is* a bit overwhelming. Give a girl time to adjust."

He dipped his head slightly. "As you wish. I shall concede that point, Brianna." He held out his hand

once more. "Will you please accompany me to behold my Queen?"

She took a deep breath and counted to ten. She wasn't going to ask him how he knew her name. She was getting tired of the oh-I'm-sorry-I-forgot-you're-not-too-bright looks he kept giving her.

The faery's lips twitched a bit at the corners and she knew he was laughing at her again.

*One, two, three...* She counted, trying to hold onto her patience *and* her sanity. It took every ounce of her self-control to keep from kicking him. After a moment, Brianna stood, reached out and hesitantly took his hand, wary. She squeezed her eyes shut, knowing without a doubt, she was completely unprepared for the wild ride that awaited her.

"Open your eyes, Brianna." Larin said, his impatience evident.

She cracked her right eye open, looked around through the blurry slit and gasped. If she thought Larin was beautiful, he was nothing compared to his Queen. Brianna looked around. They were in a meadow next to a beautiful silver stream. Flowers dotted the landscape as far as the eye could see. On the horizon, Brianna saw something brilliant shining in the distance. Turning back toward the beautiful woman who could be no other than Morgaine Le Fey, she was speechless. This must be Morgaine, the half-human, half-Fey, Queen of the Faeries. She was so beautiful it almost hurt to look at her.

Brianna immediately dropped to her knees so stunned she couldn't speak. "Your..." Highness? Majesty? What did one call the Faery Queen? Her lips

were moving, but she didn't make a sound. How could this be real? She'd tried to believe in them, but she'd always felt like an idiot. Her traditional upbringing kept intruding, telling her she was a fool. They weren't real. How could they be? No one ever saw them. They were things of fairy tales and legend.

Yet here she was in this beautiful place. A dream? Maybe. A Vision? Possibly. Yet she was here looking into Morgaine's eyes. The queen's brilliant blue eyes bore into hers. They were a myriad of colors, an ever-changing kaleidoscope of blue, silver and gold. The colors swirled in her eyes, lit by some powerful light from within. Now she knew what people meant when they spoke of great and terrible beauty.

Brianna's mind raced. What was she doing here? Why had Larin brought her? She wasn't even worthy to be in this woman's presence. She was a non-believer.

Morgaine smiled and inclined her head. *You are strong, Brianna. Your light shines brightly within you. Your grandfather will be pleased.*

Brianna heard Morgaine's strange but beautiful voice even though her lips never moved. "Huh? What? Grandfather?" Now she knew this had to be a dream. She was still sleeping. That's why none of this made sense. Everyone in her family was gone, her parents, grandparents, all of them. She was the last of her line. All of her grandparents had passed on before she'd even been born.

Brianna's eyes widened as the queen's... What? Throne? Floated closer. It bobbed gently on a cushion of air. Was she losing her mind or was this just some fantastic dream? This could not be happening. It



couldn't possibly be real.

An inner fire flashed within Morgaine's beautiful eyes and a clap of thunder rumbled in the distance. *This is real! Stop being so stubborn.* Somehow the sound of the other woman's voice was in her head, filled with impatience.

Brianna's hand flew to her mouth. *Whoops! Don't want to piss off the Faery Queen.*

Morgaine's face softened a bit, her mouth quirked at the corners in a half smile.

Brianna sighed. She was never going to get used to these people reading her mind.

*We do not read your mind, lovely Brianna. It would be an invasion of your privacy, and therefore, distasteful to us. We can, however, hear your thoughts because you project them so forcefully. You have done your exercises well. A bit too well perhaps.* Morgaine leaned forward in her seat. *In tuning in to your higher self, your psychic ability has developed much. Quite possibly, even more than you had imagined possible. This is how we have heard your prayers, your wishes and your dreams, when we have heard no others.* Reaching a hand out, Morgaine beckoned one of her people forward.

He held a small piece of jewelry in his hand.

Morgaine took it and attached it to her hair.

The shiny piece in Morgaine's hair drew her attention, seemed to keep her off balance—almost hypnotized. "Return?" It would be nice if she could form more than a one or two word sentence. Geeze.

Morgaine smiled softly. *Eons ago The Fey lived, worked and played among mankind. Our Magick helped those who would ask for it. We entered sacred circles when*

*asked, added our own distinct power to the spell, much as we did with yours, thirty days ago.*

Thirty days ago? Did that mean the energy she'd seen leaving her wand had been their power and not her own? The thought was a bit disappointing, but made more sense than thinking she'd been able to do all of that by herself.

Morgaine sat back and one silvery tear slowly slid down her face, leaving a glowing trail like liquid diamonds shimmering on her flawless skin. *With the birth of the new religions, came our death in your realm. For even the Fey can fall victim to treachery. We were forced to leave, or watch, as our friends were tortured and killed. The majority of people no longer believed in our kind and they persecuted those who did. We were forced to leave, choosing to remain in this dimension, to save their lives. Your belief and the belief of others like you have allowed us to return.*

"My belief?" Brianna asked bewildered. She held her palms up in a delicate shrug. Could one person make such a difference? Especially when said person was still unable to believe what sat in front of her?

*Yes, one could. Though you, and others like you, are still persecuted for your beliefs. Murder of those like you is no longer sanctioned by the Church and Government. Now we can help. We can return.*

"Don't take me wrong, but I can hardly believe you exist and you're sitting right in front of me. Close enough to touch." *Yeah, right.* If she had the nerve.

Morgaine smiled again. The action made her beauty even more brilliant, nearly blinding.

Brianna blinked. It actually hurt to look at her. Never before had she met a woman so beautiful that

she found it both difficult to look at her and to look away.

*Deep down, you believe, Brianna. In here, she touched the center of Brianna's chest. This is where you believe. And that is what matters most. If you did not truly believe, you would not have called us forth.*

Brianna felt a warm tingling sensation in the center of her chest. The feeling spread throughout her body, like liquid lightning. Suddenly she knew, *knew* without a doubt, that this beautiful woman in front of her really was the long lost Morgaine Le Fey, Queen of the Faeries. She knew that however fantastic that it may seem, this was not a dream.

Her head filled with thoughts and memories that were not her own. Morgaine with a man, a blond man she called friend and brother. He held a shield embossed with a blue handled sword and a golden dragon.

She felt the queen's sadness as someone placed the man's lifeless body on a stone slab, in a state of suspended animation, where he would stay forever. Or until the power to change his fate was returned to the faeries.

An old man stood on a hill with his arms outstretched. Lightning shot from the end of his staff. The wind blew his white hair, swirling it around him like whips of dancing white silk. He turned, and Brianna gasped as she looked into his eyes. *Her eyes.*

*Not your eyes, Brianna.*

"Who is he?" Brianna whispered. Her trembling fingers covered her mouth. A river of tears ran down her face. Somehow she knew that face. It wrenched her

heart. She should know that man. Brianna reached out as if to touch him, but felt only the emptiness of air.

Morgaine laid a gentle comforting hand on her shoulder. *He is your grandfather. He was, and is a great sorcerer, and seer of the future. He predicted your arrival, knew you would come. He is the greatest Sorcerer this world has ever known. Powerful enough to leave that place, as we did.*

Brianna's eyes grew round with amazement. Afraid to believe what she was being told was really true and afraid not to believe. It was an extraordinary predicament. "The stuff legends are made of?" Her mind raced, whirled.

Yes.

"Merlin?" *He's my Grandfather? Boy, this is becoming too much!*

Yes.

"But...Merlin really existed? The Arthurian legends are true?"

*Do you begin to see now?*

"I knew that there had to be some truth to the stories. I always believed that there is at least some small grain of truth to every legend." She shook her head, her eyes wide with awe.

*There was truth.* Morgaine's eyes hardened and became slits. *And there were lies, many, many lies.*

"What lies? Tell me, perhaps there is a way to set the records straight."

*You shall see. In time, He will show you.*

"Larin?" Brianna asked.

Morgaine slowly shook her head. Even that mundane movement appeared polished when she did

it. Her white blonde hair flowed gracefully around her, a cloud of silver strands that settled perfectly around her shoulders.

*You will hear me, Brianna.* Morgaine leaned closer and put a hand on either side of Brianna's face and looked into her eyes. *Your thoughts are your own. No longer will they be heard by our people, unless you wish it. Larin is your servant. When you call him, he shall come.* Morgaine gave Larin a hard look as if daring him to complain. She turned back to Brianna and smiled softly. *He must come when you call. If you have great need, even I shall hear you and come to your aid.* The fey queen released her.

With the great power gone, she felt bereft, alone inside herself, where before there had been Morgaine. Brianna grinned drunkenly. She had just enough time to wonder how Larin felt about Morgaine's decree, before everything went black.

## Chapter Seven

Brianna rolled over and slapped her alarm clock with a groan. "I don't work on Monday's. Why did I set the alarm?" She groaned again and rolled over, pulling a pillow over her head, she tried to block out the light shining through the bedroom window.

The weather forecaster on the clock radio said it was supposed to be a beautiful day. "What's so stinking beautiful about it?" she grouched. "Good grief, I hate getting up this early. A morning person, I am not." She could hear the children playing at the bus stop and someone's dog was outside barking nonstop.

She sniffed. "Mmm, coffee." Brianna also smelled the unmistakable scent of bacon carried on the light breeze that blew lazily through the open window, ruffling the lace curtains. Her stomach growled. "When is it going to cool off?" She sat up and pulled the collar of the nightshirt she wore away from her damp body. She lifted the hair away from her neck in a futile effort to cool herself.

"When are the air conditioning repairmen going to get here anyway?" If the air conditioner had been working, the windows would have been closed. And

she could have gone back to sleep, blissfully unaware of the noise outside.

She looked around. Yes, she was in her room. There were no beautiful fields filled with flowers or rivers with pure water. No imaginary people talking in her head or reading her mind.

Brianna shook her head. It was coming back to her. "Whoo boy! What a dream *that* was, a very realistic, strange and fantastic dream." Of course, it couldn't be anything but a dream. Everyone in it was a figment of her overactive imagination.

*Well poop!* "Like I'm really the great, great, something granddaughter of Merlin. Yeah, right, in my dreams!" She snorted, stumbling toward the bathroom, stripped off her nightshirt along the way and dropped it in the hamper as she shuffled past.

"I'm just not a morning person. That's all there is to it." She yawned. "Why don't I just find myself a nice night job? Then my stupid alarm wouldn't be set for this gawd awful time of morning." And she most likely wouldn't be talking to herself at this gawd awful time of the morning either.

She padded to the shower. It was the fastest way she could think of to clear her head. Pushing the shower curtain aside, she reached in to turn on the water and waited a moment for the water to get hot before she stepped in. She shrieked. The water was ice cold!

"Well, you wanted to wake up," she said, teeth chattering. Turning off the water, she stepped out of the stall shivering and dried off with a fluffy towel. Then she donned a robe and padded out to the garage

with Killer at her heels. Brianna inspected the hot water heater, checked that the pilot light was on and that the thermostat was set at medium. Medium was a good temperature yesterday, nice and hot. So what was wrong with it today? She looked around for something to hit it with. She left the garage, giving the water heater a look of contempt.

Brianna returned to the house. "Who do you call to check out a water heater anyway, a plumber or an appliance repairman?" She asked aloud, uncaring that there was no one here to talk to. Sighing, she decided not to think about it until after breakfast. Nothing seemed truly important before her first cup of coffee. Looking down, she noticed Killer hopping around her feet. "Do you want outside, boy? You're such a good boy, for telling me you have to go outside."

He jumped around frantically and whimpered occasionally for effect.

"You just want to see if you can find more mice in the backyard, don't you?" She bent and patted him on the head. "You little stinker." Picking him up, she carried him to the door. Sliding it open, she set him on the ground. As usual, Killer hit the ground barking, his little legs moved as fast as they could, propelling him across the yard like a miniature brown and gold rocket.

Brianna hated for him to be outside barking this early in the morning, but he hadn't been the first one outside making a racket. She left the door open, hoping for a nice breeze to cool down the house. She checked her watch. At least she had time to have breakfast at a decent hour. Well, decent for breakfast anyway.

"Not decent for me," she groused. The coffee was



brewing, oatmeal was cooking in the microwave and Killer was out terrorizing the wild life. "It's Brianna time." She sat down, put her feet up on the chair across from her and the phone rang. "It figures." She put her hand to her head and in her best gypsy fortune-teller voice predicted, "Eet ees a tele-marketeer." She picked up the phone on the second ring. "Hello."

"Hey, girlfriend, you're up early. I half expected to hear the phone hit the floor." Amber sounded perky, her voice filled with energy as usual.

Brianna pushed the hair out of her face, tucked the phone between her shoulder and ear and reached up to take her oatmeal from the microwave. She set it on the counter, licked the oatmeal off her thumb and reached into a drawer for a spoon. "Yeah I know, tell me about it. I accidentally set the alarm and couldn't go back to sleep because I'd had this really bizarre dream."

She sloshed a generous portion of milk into her bowl, then put the milk away in exchange for brown sugar. *And the kids were noisy. Some inconsiderate boob let their barking dog out... Oops, I suppose I'm an inconsiderate boob now, too.*

"Did it have your new friend in it?" Amber was so excited, that the *it* came out more of a squeak than a word.

"No, as a matter of fact, it didn't. You know, Amber, I can almost hear the matchmaking gears in your head spinning. You should oil them. They're beginning to squeak. Just leave us alone. If there is something there, we'll find it."

Amber chuckled. "Girlfriend, I think you've already found it. My question is, what are you going to do with

it?"

Brianna sighed. "When will I ever learn not to tell you about any of the guys I happen to meet?" She knew Amber was a hopeless romantic. Rolling her eyes, she shook her head as she spooned a generous amount of brown sugar onto her oatmeal.

"Don't give me that heavy breathing and those long suffering sighs. And stop shaking your head," Amber said laughing.

Brianna dropped the spoon into her bowl and covered her mouth. How did she do that? "Did you want anything in particular?" She didn't mean to snap. She felt like road kill and her lids felt like sandpaper against her tired eyes. Why did she feel like she hadn't slept at all?

"I just called to talk with my best friend. I didn't know I needed to have a reason." Now she sounded hurt.

Some days it just didn't pay to get out of bed. Damn it. Brianna closed her eyes, took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "I'm sorry. I really didn't mean for it to sound like that. I haven't been sleeping too well lately and I've had some really strange dreams."

"What kind of dreams?"

"Recurrent dreams mostly. At first, the dreams were of a faceless man. Now..." She shrugged. "Niklas is in them. It's the same dream as before, but instead of it being an unknown man, it's Niklas. You remember him. The guy I told you about the other night. You know, the one you were just teasing me about. What's strange about the whole thing is that I haven't even talked to him since."

"Hmmm..."

"What do you mean, hmmm?" Brianna spooned some oatmeal into her mouth and chewed.

"Tell me more while I think about it."

Brianna rolled her eyes and shrugged, in for a penny in for a pound. She swallowed and set her breakfast aside. She'd microwave it again later. "For the last few months I've been dreaming about a man who needs me desperately."

"You and me both, honey, along with about ninety-nine point nine percent of all the healthy heterosexual females on this rock." Amber added dryly.

"I'm serious. In the dream, he's always looking for me, but he can never seem to find me."

"It would be interesting to know if he has had any similar dreams himself."

"Why? What would that mean?" Brianna walked around the counter and sat down at the table.

"Because, silly, if you're both having similar dreams, it could mean a couple of things." Encouraged by Brianna's silence, she continued. "One, you both could have been involved in a past life together. Two, he could be your soul mate. Three, one of you has what the other needs to continue your journey to enlightenment."

"You're reading a lot into a dream, aren't you?" Brianna fiddled with the phone cord.

"How can you even call yourself a Witch? You disbelieve or make fun of half of the things a true Witch would believe in or would just take for granted to be true," Amber admonished. She really sounded upset this time.

Brianna felt ashamed. Amber, an adept, had taken her under her wing and had helped her whenever she needed it and she was right. Every time something didn't fall within the realm of left-brained possibility, Brianna faltered in her beliefs. She had yet to make herself fully believe that all things are possible. She just had to believe hard enough and work toward that goal. Maybe that was why her spells never worked. Maybe they failed because she didn't truly believe they would work. It was worth some thought.

Amber became the teacher again. "You should know as well as I do. Recurrent dreams are either a reminder of a past life, a warning or premonition. This one doesn't seem much like a warning because right now I don't feel that you are in danger. If you were in danger I would like to believe I would feel it, like I did at the ball. And right now, all I feel is an itch for an ice cream sundae."

"Don't even tell me you see a sundae in my future." Brianna laughed. Her sense of foreboding dissipated.

"No, but I see one in mine. I'm headed out to the Dairy Queen. Wanna come?"

\* \* \* \*

Niklas wandered through the newly repaired house. The walls were freshly painted a creamy eggshell and the wooden floors gleamed, a newly stained golden brown. The hard work he had done to make this house livable hadn't distracted him a bit. His thoughts were still on his *real* home, his family. Would he ever find The One? There were so many worlds and so many

people. This had become a time consuming search he just wanted to end. He reached up and rubbed the back of his neck.

Looking out over the yard, he wondered if he'd ever be able to rest again. After these last months of searching nonstop, it was easy to wonder if it would ever be over. How many worlds had they searched? How many more were there to investigate? Where would they be when he finally ran out of time? These questions plagued him.

He leaned against the window frame. His head rested against the cool glass as he took in the beauty of the world on the other side of the window. It was too beautiful to unleash evil upon it. And there was no doubt in his mind. If the evil prevailed, this world and others like it would be defenseless against it.

There had to be a way to stop the upcoming wars without the woman. What if she was never found? What if Morwyyn had been mistaken and she didn't really exist? The doubts lingered. It just didn't make sense that a woman from off world would be the one to save his entire planet.

A movement outside caught his eye. Any distraction from his worries was a welcome thing. Not sure what he saw, Niklas waited for it to come again. He saw it again near the fence. The area toward the house owned by the woman whom he'd met his first night here. He tried to shake off the carnal feeling that always accompanied any thought of her. He shouldn't have found her attractive. She'd been missing teeth and had that horrible hairy growth on her face. But damn! He just couldn't forget her. And his body ached

every time he thought about her. There was something about her scent... The movement came again and he watched, curious. A tuft of hair mixed with flying dirt, burrowed under the fence.

Niklas left the house and became very still. All of his senses went on alert when he heard the growling behind him. He turned very slowly. It sounded like a beast ready to attack. He must have wandered too close to its lair. Strangely, it stopped growling as he approached. A bit surprised to see it wore a collar, he carefully reached down, wanting to see if it would allow him to touch it. His mother would have been appalled. Niklas took too many unnecessary risks. He shrugged. He knew if he had to, he could snap its neck.

Making soft noises, he approached the animal. He remembered the discs he'd listened to told about animals like these. They were called dogs. Most of them were domesticated, which was the reason he didn't feel apprehensive about approaching the little beast.

He held out his hand, making small nonsense noises that the animals on *Terrna* seemed to enjoy. It was suspicious. It stopped growling, but still didn't want to make friends with him. The little beast didn't seem happy to share his secret place. After a moment of staring at each other, the dog sat down and looked at him with its tongue hanging out.

What in the world did that mean? It was hard enough trying to figure out the people on these worlds without having to deal with their animals, too. Beasts were unpredictable. As a rule, Niklas didn't have anything to do with any of them, unless he was eating

or riding them. Finally coming a decision, he knelt down and reached toward the animal, waiting for it to decide what to do.

The hairy thing licked his hand and wagged its tail. Well, what it had of a tail. No longer nervous, he reached out, scooped it into his arms and went into the house with a very evil look on his face. Once inside, he set the dog on the floor and let it wander around. Investigating the new scents inside, it didn't take long before it latched onto a smell he didn't recognize and took off growling. Niklas followed close behind. He had to see this!

When the animal found her, she was on her hands and knees crawling under a table to plug in a new lamp. Niklas watched almost oblivious to the perfectly rounded rump waving in his face.

Minra heard the growl, froze for a split second, then sat straight up. She slammed her head into the bottom of the table, nearly dislodging the lamp.

Niklas winced. *Ooh, that had to hurt.* He almost felt bad for letting the thing scare her. Almost.

"Ouch!" Minra screamed. The dog barked and she screamed again.

He ran into the room and scooped up the dog with a huge smile. "Really, Minra, you have to get a grip on yourself. If you scream every time you see an animal, you are bound to draw too much attention to yourself."

Minra, her face white as a sheet, sat on the floor glaring at him. "You did that on purpose, didn't you? You knew that, that *thing*," she gestured, her arms moving wildly, "was going to scare the *drak* out of

me." She sat on the floor, staring daggers at him, still quivering.

Niklas loved it when he could get the crew to forget who he was and treat him like they would anyone else. Grinning, he patted the dog on the head and left the room whistling.

Minra glared after him. "Why am I the one always stuck with him and his pranks? I'd bet all of the Conque I have that the rest of them aren't up there using the discs like they are supposed to. I bet every one of them is enjoying the vacation they are getting from his pranks." She fumed. "Now I wonder if he put that cat in here to scare me as well."

Niklas stuck his head around the corner and grinned. "No, Minra. I didn't put the cat in here for you to find. I do wonder though, do you recall anything on the discs about something called a snake?"

Minra looked up sharply. "What about them?"



## Chapter Eight

Brianna finished her breakfast, walked to the sink and rinsed off her dishes. She refilled her cup and headed back to the table, prepared to enjoy more of the steaming hot brew. "It's awfully quiet out there." She frowned. It was very uncharacteristic of Killer to be quiet while outside.

Brianna hurried to the backdoor, "Killer, come on, baby," she called through the open door. When he didn't come to her, she stepped outside and looked around the yard. He was nowhere to be seen. *Where in the world is he? I've looked everywhere.*

Finally, when she was ready to give up, Brianna saw a hole in the ground near the edge of the fence. It led into her new neighbor's backyard. "Oh, no," she breathed. "Oh, my Goddess, I hope he hasn't bitten anyone." Brianna rushed back inside, changed into a pair of jeans and a blouse, then rushed out to see exactly what sort of havoc he'd wreaked.

Brianna didn't know what to expect when she knocked on the ornate mahogany door, but she certainly hadn't expected a beautiful brunette to answer. She was extremely disappointed. What

woman wouldn't be let down to find out a man like Niklas was already married to someone like this beauty before her? The woman gave Brianna an inquiring look.

"Can I help you?"

Brianna wrung her hands together. "Yes. I seem to have lost my dog. You haven't seen him by any chance, have you? He got out of my yard by digging a hole under the fence into your backyard." Brianna danced from one foot to the other, trying not to invade their privacy by peeking around her and into the house.

The woman opened the door wider and stepped aside. "Come in, please, he's in here. Niklas found him in the back yard and brought him in to meet me. He's really adorable. What kind of dog is he?"

She had the same accent Niklas did. Brianna wondered where they were from. Hopefully there were more there just like Niklas. Maybe he had a brother. *For that I just might take a trip.* "He's a Yorkshire Terrier."

"Oh. I didn't know." The woman glided into the living room, her hips gently swaying. It wasn't any wonder Niklas was with her. She was gorgeous!

Brianna followed and closed the door behind her. The interior of the house was cool, no old broken-down air conditioner here. She wanted to stay here forever. Or at least until *her* air conditioner was repaired. She shook her head when what the woman said, finally sank in. Her Killer, adorable? There was absolutely no way they could be talking about the same dog, Brianna thought right up until he ran out of the kitchen and bound around her feet yapping to be

picked up.

She was so relieved. She didn't scold him at all. She picked him up and hugged him to her, cooing to him like a baby. She gave Minra a smile. "Thank you so much for keeping an eye on him for me. I do try to make sure he stays in our yard, but sometimes he just does as he pleases." She smiled apologetically. "Please thank your husband for me." Brianna turned to leave.

The woman laughed, "Niklas isn't my husband he's my —"

"Brother," Niklas interrupted.

*She's his sister? Thank you, thank you, thank you!* Brianna looked up to see him descending the stairs, a smile on his handsome face. She blinked. He was even more devastating in the daylight. He looked surprised, delighted even. He had a look in his eyes, which almost made Brianna want to run screaming back to her house and lock her doors. It was almost as if he was a predatory animal on the hunt, and she was...well, lunch.

"How do you do? I am Niklas Voortag. I have just moved to this area." He held out his hand. The look he gave her was unsettling to say the least. "I do not think we have met. I know I would have remembered your beautiful hair." His eyes raked over her hungrily. "Yet you seem so familiar to me. Do you have a sister that lives near here, one with long black hair?"

He gave her an inquiring look, raising one brow in a way that made him look so sexy Brianna wanted to either faint or throw herself at his feet pledging eternal sexual servitude. She covered a nervous laugh with a cough as she shuffled from foot to foot. "No, I don't

have a sister. If you're referring to the other night, that was me." She blushed. She actually felt the crimson stain crawl up her neck to her face. "I was in costume for Halloween. I forgot to remove my makeup, before I left my house."

He smiled, his perfect white teeth nearly blinding. Brianna was nearing a sensory overload. *What in the world is wrong with me? I have never reacted to a man like this in my life!* Whenever she looked at him, she thought of hot nights, sweaty sex and the decadent feel of satin sheets against her bare skin. She rubbed her suddenly moist palms on her jeans.

Did he look relieved or was that just her imagination? Maybe the man was just glad he didn't live next door to a hag with a wart of gigantic proportions. Or maybe, if she was lucky, he was attracted to her.

"Brianna O'Neill, nice to meet you. In the daylight that is."

She held out her hand and laughed self-consciously. *Minus the hairy wart, with clean teeth...The list could go on.* Brianna's gaze darted around the room. She tried to look anywhere besides his too handsome face. *What were you thinking? That he's going to fall at your feet, begging to take you out? Yeah right!*

Niklas stepped closer, took her hand in his much larger one.

She reveled in the slide of her skin against his, felt the slight tingling sensation of her energy mingling with his as it traveled up her arm.

He bent slightly at the waist and briefly pressed his lips against the back of her hand. "I am pleased to meet

you once again, Brianna. Would you do me the honor of accompanying me to lunch?" His eyes, the darkest, most amazing shade of brown, never left hers. It was almost as if he didn't want to let her out of his sight.

Brianna couldn't shake the feeling that he wanted to be with her for something other than lunch. Her skin tingled and goosebumps rose on her flesh. She felt uncomfortable under his constant scrutiny. His formality and his invitation had taken her completely off guard.

"I-well, I don't know," she hedged. *What, are you stupid? Say yes! She raged at herself. You know you want to. Who wouldn't? He is the best looking man on the planet. He even had to be imported. Say yes, you idiot!*

Brianna looked around for support and realized it wasn't forthcoming from Minra. She just stood quietly behind her brother and smiled brightly at her. Even Killer liked him, which was strange. Killer hated everybody, or at least he used to. *So now you're going to complain because Killer likes him? Sheesh! Get a grip, Brianna.*

Niklas's gaze held hers. He had such compelling eyes, the color of dark chocolate. She found herself agreeing before she even knew she was going to. "I...ah. Well, I guess I'd better go home and get ready then," Brianna said, just before she bolted. She'd always loved chocolate.

Brianna nearly ran back to her house. Cold water or not, she needed a shower. Hurrying through her ablutions, she pondered the whimsical twists of fate that brought people together. In the middle of brushing her teeth, she paused. *Wait a minute, what if it*

*was the spell?* She *had* met him on the twenty-eighth day. Blinking, she stared in the mirror, shocked that she hadn't thought about that before. Never in her wildest dreams had she ever thought to attract a man like him. She returned to brushing her teeth furiously.

Brianna dropped a shaking hand from her hair. "This is too good to be true. You're plain, Brianna, why would Niklas, the epitome of tall, dark and handsome be so interested in you?" She looked into the mirror, trying to see what it was he'd seen in her.

Had her spell really worked? Had the faeries really helped her cast her spell and she'd really met Larin and Morgaine? She smiled. It didn't really matter, did it? "What does matter is that he is a very nice guy."

He was just so much more...likeable than most good looking men she'd met before. What spoiled most of them was, they *knew* they looked good. Niklas was devastating, but he took it all for granted. Either he didn't know how handsome he was or he didn't care. It didn't really matter either way. It gave him an endearing quality that he otherwise would not have had.

"Thank you for bringing me here," Brianna said before they entered the restaurant. She couldn't believe he'd taken her to one of the best restaurants in town. "Do you know the story behind the decorations?"

He shook his head. "I have no idea. I thought it looked like a good place to eat."

She was only too happy to fill him in on one of her favorite haunts. "The Sand Bar is owned by a retired Navy veteran and boasts most things nautical in its

decorations. You'll see when we get inside."

He helped her out of his large SUV and escorted her into the restaurant. He waited until she was comfortable in her seat, then sat across from her, his gaze never leaving her face. He didn't even check the menu, just stared at her in fascination.

"Can I help you?" the waiter asked, looking at them expectantly.

He glanced at the cover of the menu. "I'd like a pepperoni pizza please."

The waiter tried to hide an impatient look. "We don't serve pizza here, sir. This is a fine dining establishment," he said, his nose in the air.

Niklas opened his menu, then looked up at Brianna. "What do you suggest?"

Brianna tilted her head for a moment. "You look like a meat and potatoes man to me. You should probably get the steak and baked potato." She looked down at her own menu. "And I think I'll have the fish and chips." Brianna glanced at Niklas. "It's the house specialty."

The waiter brought their salads first. He tripped over a woman's purse that had fallen off the back of a chair. It was lying on the floor, a trip hazard for the wait staff and anyone else walking near her table. Brianna's salad landed in her lap.

"I'm so sorry, ma'am!" The waiter was beside himself. "I swear this has never happened to me before." He dipped a napkin in a glass of water on a table nearby and started to wipe the front of her suit. "Please let me help you clean this up."

Brianna grabbed the napkin from him as he brushed

it across the front of the jacket. He meant well, but he was only making it worse.

"Thank you. Really, it's fine. It's an old suit anyway. Don't worry about it." She was just about ready to cry. It wasn't an old suit. It was the first time she'd ever had the occasion to wear it and now it was ruined. She closed her eyes. *Please don't let anything else go wrong.*

"I'll just go get you another salad."

"Don't bother. It's all right, really." Brianna smiled weakly. It would just sit in front of her, mocking her, because she'd never be able to eat it anyway. What had ever made her think she could ever have a normal date? She sighed. The only thing there was left to do was to hope the worst was over and stick it out to the end.

*Don't cry, don't cry*, Brianna chanted to herself an hour later. The tears were coming. Nothing she could do or say would ever stop the flood of tears waiting on the brink of her control. She could only hope to hold them at bay until she got home.

*There goes Hurricane Brianna. Watch out! Don't get too close! I'd rather be dead, than date the girl who's red on the head.* The old childhood taunts haunted her. Hurricane Brianna was what all of the boys in school had called her. Something had gone wrong on every date she'd ever had. Why should today be any different? She looked down at her lap, watching her hands twist the napkin under the table.

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have brought you here."

Brianna bit her lip and tried to smile. "Don't be silly, Niklas. It's not your fault those things happened."

"I should have picked a better restaurant." He was



adamant. "If I had chosen better, perhaps your beautiful suit wouldn't have been ruined." He smiled ruefully. "I would offer to pay for the cleaning. But I don't think any amount of cleaning is going to help it."

"It's not your fault or the restaurant's fault that old man was in such a hurry. I'm sure he didn't mean to knock that bowl of soup out of the waitress's hand and onto my shoulder. Or that the waiter tripped over that woman's purse and dumped my salad in my lap." She raised a trembling hand and brushed her hair back from her face. So, her hair was working its way free from the French twist? Big deal! Her bottom lip trembled.

Niklas looked so dejected. She almost felt sorry for him, even though *she* was the walking menu. Brianna took a deep steadying breath, determined not to lose control in front of him. "I really have to run, Niklas, if you'll excuse me." She stood and ran from the restaurant. Who could blame her?

Niklas tried to follow, but was stopped by an irate employee who yelled, "Hey! Who's gonna pay this check?"

Niklas scowled and almost asked who was going to pay for Brianna's suit and lost dignity after having soup and salad dumped on her, but decided to pay the check instead so he could go after her. Still not used to the currency, he fumbled in his pocket for the correct amount. "Sorry, I was just trying to catch her." He gestured toward the door. Not waiting for his change, Niklas ran outside. He needed to catch her.

The street was crowded. He threw his arms out, disgusted. "Well, what did you expect in the middle of

the day?" he asked himself, looking up and down the street, hoping he would see her retreating figure. It was no use. She was gone and she knew this town a lot better than he did. The only thing left to do was to go back to her house and hope he could talk with her there.

"Blast that restaurant, blast that old man and waiter and blast my accursed luck!" He fumed as he drove, knowing he needed to calm down a bit before he reached her house. After parking the truck on the street in front of her home, he strode to the door and knocked several times. When what he really wanted to do was break down the door. "I see you made it home all right," he said when the door opened.

"You must be Niklas. I'm Amber, Brianna's friend." The beautiful blonde woman holding the door didn't appear too happy to see him. "What in the world did you do to her anyway? She came home absolutely devastated." She scowled at him as though everything was his fault.

Niklas recovered from his surprise quickly. "It is very good to meet you, Amber," he said warily. He wasn't sure he cared for her attitude. She at least should establish his guilt before she punished him.

"Ooh, great accent. No wonder she's so upset." She grinned.

The woman clearly wasn't going to make this easy for him. "I take it, by your attitude, she is home?" Niklas asked, looking past her, trying to get a glimpse of Brianna.

"She's home, but chances are, she's not going to want to talk to you."

"It wasn't my fault, you know. What happened I mean." He raked his hand through his hair. "I wish I could have stopped it, but..." He shrugged, his arms raised in the universal sign for *shit happens*.

Amber nodded and opened the door wider so he could enter. "She tends to overreact about these things."

"This has happened before?" Niklas was stunned.

She tilted her head and gave him a wry smile. "Well, not this exactly. But things like this happen to her all of the time. Every time she has a date, something embarrassing happens to her. It's almost as if there is some cosmic rule that Brianna can't date and every time she does, she's punished."

Niklas sighed, rubbed the back of his neck and wondered if he should ask. He didn't have to. Amber volunteered the information.

"She usually ends up wearing what she ordered or a waiter will drop spaghetti on her head or if she's at a zoo, a bird will poop on her head. There *was* the time that—"

He held up his hand, "I think I get the picture."

Amber grinned. "Too much information huh?"

"Definitely, more information than I needed." He looked around. "Where is she now?"

"To tell you the truth...you *do* want the truth, don't you?" she asked, giving him a shrewd look. At his quick nod, she continued. "She's in her room crying. She couldn't bear to answer the door. Said you most likely wouldn't come over when you got home, but if you did, she didn't want to see you." Then she grinned. "I'm of the mind that if your date didn't scare

you off, like all of the others, you must be Mr. Right."

Amber at least had the grace to look a little guilty when she imparted that last bit of information. She may have even felt a little guilty, but an observant person could see that the wheels were turning in her matchmaker's mind. She smiled, tongue in cheek.

"Voortag, my name is Niklas Voortag." Niklas said as he ran his long fingers through his already abused hair. Now what was he supposed to do? He had absolutely no experience when it came to women and emotional issues.

Amber giggled. "You look like Mr. Right to me." She raised her hand. "Do you know what I would do if I were you and I gave a damn what she thought about me?" she asked, looking at him shrewdly.

He shook his head slowly, a blank expression on his face. It seemed the Goddess was going to make things a little easier for him. At least he could hope.

"I would march right into her room, take her in my arms and tell her that I couldn't care less what she's wearing because she would look beautiful in anything, or nothing." Amber grinned and leaned her hip against the back of the sofa.

Niklas eyed her a bit suspiciously, wondering if he should take the advice. The woman seemed sincere, but she also seemed to be enjoying this a little too much. She patted his arm. Her eyes widened when she realized that the size of it had nothing to do with a baggy shirt and everything to do with his physical strength.

"Aw, come on, big guy. What do you have to lose?"

The woman had no idea what he could lose. But she

had a point. What was the worst that could happen? Brianna could kick him out. At least he would have tried to make her see reason. She was going home with him one way or another. It would be easier for them both if she wanted to go, but not impossible for him if she didn't.

Niklas took a deep breath and walked toward the door Amber indicated. Knocking, he waited as Amber asked, "Are you decent?" She opened the door when Brianna answered in the affirmative, then gave Niklas a push into the room.

His heart nearly stopped. If he'd had any doubt in his mind that she was The One, it was gone now. The emotion he'd felt when he first saw her lying across her bed, her head buried in her pillow as deep sobs wracked her was immense. He knew now, that his mother had been right. Brianna had already touched his heart. She'd probably stolen it the first night they'd met.

Niklas crossed the room, hoping the advice her friend gave him was good. He sat on the edge of the bed and gathered her in his arms. At first she cried harder as he rocked her back and forth.

\* \* \* \*

Brianna stiffened when she realized it wasn't Amber holding her. The arms that surrounded her were too large to be hers and too strong. "What are you doing in here?" she cried, trying to pull away.

He held fast, keeping his arms wrapped tightly around her. "I'm here under advisement." He chuckled

and smoothed her hair.

"What?"

He chuckled again and gave her a gentle squeeze. "I was informed on good authority that you needed a shoulder to cry on. Mine seems to be just the right size. Although, in all fairness, I must admit that those were not her exact words."

She reached for a tissue to wipe her swollen eyes. Gods, she must look a mess! "I swear, one of these days, I'm going to kill Amber." Even though she could be embarrassing sometimes, Brianna wished she had half of her love of life.

Niklas gave her another squeeze and held her gently against his solid frame. "I think it was good advice. You did need my shoulder and I needed to talk to you."

"I'm sorry I ran out on you." She swallowed hard and wiped away fresh tears.

Niklas put a hand under her chin and lifted her face to look into her eyes. "You don't have to apologize, Brianna."

She closed her eyes for a moment, savoring the way he said her name. He rolled the R and it sounded so foreign, so sexy. "I can never have a normal dinner with someone. Something bad always happens." She pulled from his embrace, not able to think when he held her with his hands doing magical things to her back and shoulders.

\* \* \* \*

Niklas let her go, deciding to choose his battles. "Yet it

is never your fault." It wasn't a question, merely a statement of fact as if he already knew it to be true.

"No. Not that it makes a difference." She shrugged. "It doesn't stop it from happening. Strange things happen to me all of the time, Niklas. Not necessarily bad things, just strange." Brianna twisted the tissue she held for a moment before she continued, "It scares most people off. I've had premonitions, wild animals walk up to me, food dumped all over me. Lightening even struck one of my dates. Things like that put a real damper on an evening. No pun intended. They also tend to scare most guys off."

She turned her head toward the wall as if she couldn't look at him or didn't want him to see her tears. Moving her shoulder in a small shrug, she looked as though she was trying to appear that it didn't bother her or she didn't care. "I don't know why I thought it would be different with you. I guess...I just wanted it to be different. I should have known better.

"You got what you wanted, Brianna. It *was* different." Niklas reached out, took her chin in his hand and gently turned her face toward his. He gazed deep into her eyes. "I'm still here."

\* \* \* \*

Brianna closed her eyes as fresh tears streamed down her face. She didn't know if she should laugh or cry. Part of her wanted to jump for joy. Another, more cowardly part, wanted to run screaming from the room. Niklas was right. This was a unique situation for her. He didn't run from her. He ran to her. It was the

most exhilarating and frightening thing she'd ever experienced in her life. That was saying an awful lot for someone who rode with Amber behind the wheel on a regular basis. "Why is this different, Niklas?" she asked, searching his eyes. "Why did you come looking for me?" She had to know.

\* \* \* \*

Niklas cleared his throat. "You are the most beautiful woman I have ever met." He placed his fingers over her lips when he saw that she was going to protest. "Hear me out before you say anything." He was embarrassed to say this, but if all women were anything at all like his mother, this should make her understand.

"Since I was a child, my mother would tell my sister and I stories about what it would be like to find our *El'edal*. Translated, it means life-mate." At her curious look, he added, "You would say soul mate." He took her hand in his larger one and nervously drew small circles in her palm while he talked.

"She told us we would know our *El'edals* the moment we met. On my—" He cleared his throat. "Where I am from, we have seers, people who see far into the future. One of these seers predicted my future wife would have hair and eyes of a certain color." He watched her, waiting to see disbelief or censure. He saw neither.

"When we first met, you wore a costume. I didn't know it was a costume. I thought it was the way you always looked. I was attracted to you then, yet I



thought you couldn't be The One because you didn't fit the description given me."

Eyes wide, and with no small amount of fear and anticipation, Brianna asked, "What description were you given?" She licked her lips nervously, asking, even though she already knew the answer.

Niklas looked into her eyes, hoping she wouldn't run again. "My *El'edal* would have hair of gold and eyes the color of indigo."

She stood. Nervous, she began to pace the room. "Are you saying I'm your soul mate?" She bit her lip and watched him, waiting for his answer.

He nodded. "I know it is hard to believe. We have known each other for such a short time and one knows nearly nothing of the other."

\* \* \* \*

Brianna's mind raced. Was he saying that he loved her? He said he was attracted. Hell, so was she. He was so hot she nearly had to fan herself every time she looked in his direction. But it didn't mean she was in love with him. In lust with him, yes. But love? She licked her suddenly dry lips.

"It is a bit hard to swallow." She took a deep breath. She might as well get it over with now before she got too attached to him. "I've got something to tell you that's bound to send you running from me like I'm an axe murderer anyway."

Niklas gazed at her, waiting.

"I'm a witch, Niklas. A Goddess loving, spell casting, cauldron stirring...witch." Brianna watched

him, sure that he was going to run screaming this time. She hadn't expected to see the biggest smile she'd ever seen on his handsome face.

"The Goddess hasn't been totally forgotten here after all. I was afraid everyone here had forgotten about her."

"What do you mean you thought everyone here had forgotten about the Goddess? You're not going to run from me screaming? Or tell me I'm going to rot in hell?" *Or call me a heathen slut on the fast track to perdition?*

Niklas smiled and shook his head. "Sweetheart, I'm definitely here to stay."

## Chapter Nine

*This is too good to be true!* Was Niklas really telling her he was a witch or did she misunderstand? Brianna turned to him, the confusion showing plainly on her face. "I'm not sure I understood you correctly. Are you saying you're a Wiccan, too?" What were the odds of *that*?

Niklas tilted his head to the side and blinked. "I am not familiar with this term, but if you are asking if I worship as you do, the answer is yes." He hedged a bit. "I come from a different country so our terms may be different, but I believe the meaning is still the same. We don't believe in the One God as so many of your people do. My people believe in many Goddesses and Gods."

Brianna was in shock. Never had anyone she'd ever been attracted to before ever agreed with her beliefs. Her dates usually ran from her screaming or stood toe to toe, arguing with her, trying to convert her on the premise that she was going to rot in hell if she didn't change her heathen ways. "So, you believe in the Goddess? Which one?" she tested.

He smiled and winked. "Why, all of them, of course.

We may know them by different names or the names may be the same. What does it matter? I will not try to change you just as I know that you will respect my beliefs."

"How could you know that, Niklas?"

"That is the way of the Goddess. She would have you believe what you will as she would have me believe what I will as long as we harm none. Is free will not the way of your religion?"

She nodded. "Yes, that is the way."

He held out his hand, waiting for her to take it. "Are you going to fear me now as you thought you would be feared?" he asked when she hesitated.

Brianna shook her head, let him take her hand and bring it to his mouth. She closed her eyes and her knees turned to butter. What was it about this man that he could do this to her? It was if he had put some kind of spell on her. Her eyes snapped open. "You haven't..." Brianna cleared her throat. "You haven't put a spell on me, have you?" Was that squeaky frightened voice really her own?

Niklas straightened, looking offended. "I would never do such a thing. And *you* should know such things rarely work. When they do, they usually backfire and the person ends up hating you. I would not have that between us." He led her across the room, sat on the bed then pulled her down onto his lap.

"Neither would I." She leaned over and put her head on his shoulder, wondering how she could feel so comfortable with him when they'd just met. She hadn't been this comfortable with her own father.

\* \* \* \*

"Would you like to go to the beach with me tomorrow? I hear it is going to be a beautiful day." He looked down at her, hoping she would agree. They needed to spend time together if she was going to grow to trust him enough to leave her world willingly.

"I would love to, Niklas, but I have to work." Her disappointment showed on her crestfallen face.

"After work then. You get home early, do you not?" Smiling softly, he squeezed her hand.

Brianna sighed. "I just love the way you talk. You always sound so old-world or something." She blushed at her admission, drew her knees up to her chest and wrapped her arms around her legs. "I should be home around two-thirty. We could go then." She looked at him with wide eyes. "Don't *you* have to work?"

Niklas shook his head. "I do not have employment as yet so my days are free." What was he supposed to say? I don't work because I am an alien king come to steal you from your world? Conscience pricking him, he grimaced and rubbed the back of his neck.

\* \* \* \*

Brianna looked at her alarm clock and noticed the time. She didn't want him to leave. In fact, if she were to be honest with herself, she wanted him in her bed. Neither of them was ready for that step, but she knew if he asked to stay, she would consent. When had she become such a slut?

She squeezed his hand, then let go. "It's getting late,

Niklas. I don't want to be rude, but there are things that I need to get done before I can go anywhere tomorrow." She lowered her feet to the floor and her toes curled in the short pile of the cream carpeting.

"Of course." He stood and headed for the door.

Brianna nearly ran after him, but stopped before she made a fool of herself.

He turned at the door. "One last thing before I go." Niklas strode back to her, pulled her into his arms and lowered his head slowly...giving Brianna ample opportunity to pull away, if that was what she wanted.

*Not on your life, sister!* Her libido was taking charge and retreat was not in its vocabulary.

The kiss they shared was nothing like any other she'd ever had. It was electric, if there had been any doubt in her mind before about whether or not he was her soul mate, or life-mate as he put it, it was washed away in that one exquisite moment.

Niklas pulled away. He held Brianna until she gathered her wits. It was a good thing, since they had gone missing as soon as his lips touched hers. He left her after pressing a small kiss on her forehead.

She watched him go, holding her trembling fingers to her kiss-swollen lips. She waited a moment, then followed him from the room. Giving Amber a glare, she headed for the kitchen, needing a cup of chamomile tea to calm her nerves. Glancing back, she noticed that Amber was following her. The little troublemaker didn't look the least bit guilty over what she'd done. When did she ever? If anything, she looked smug. The little meddler knew her matchmaking was legendary among the Pagan crowd. Brianna often

wondered why Amber had never tried matching her with anyone. Apparently she'd been waiting for the right person to come trotting along.

"This one isn't running, Bri."

Amber bounced up behind her. Her gleeful tone left nothing for the imagination. How anyone could have that much energy was a mystery. She turned and made a face at her friend. "How astute, Amber. Am I finally on your list for matchmaking?" Taking the chamomile tea from the cabinet, Brianna gave her an inquiring look.

Amber nodded and grinned. "I told you that one day the right guy would come along. He didn't even get scared off when your date curse kicked in." She filled the teakettle and set it on the stove.

Brianna grinned. "I can do even better than that. I told him about my being a witch."

Amber inhaled sharply, her hands still poised above the teakettle. "You did what? Were you *trying* to get rid of him?" She turned around, resting her hip on the counter, disbelief clearly written on her face.

Brianna crossed her arms and leaned against the pantry door and glanced through the window to the backyard and watched Killer sniff under the shed for the umpteenth time. "Well, you can't blame me. I wanted to know how he would react. You know, before I got attached." Pushing away from the door, she walked across the room, opened the refrigerator and snatched up a baby carrot.

"And?"

Bent over, her arm draped over the door, she looked at Amber from under her arm. "He's a witch, too! He

told me that he believes in the Goddess. I couldn't believe it. You could have knocked me over with a feather when he said that." Brianna stuck the carrot in her mouth and chewed.

"Hmm...I'll bet I could have. After all of those guys running from you like some storybook hag, it seems rather refreshing that he would take it so well. Does he have a brother?" Amber pulled herself up onto the counter and swung her legs.

"I don't think so, he only mentioned a sister. Maybe he has a friend or two... Oh! Now listen to me. I'm sounding like you and trying to set you up."

"I wouldn't mind, believe me." Amber hopped back down off the counter when Brianna gave her a dirty look and eyed her meat fork meaningfully. "Okay, okay. I'm off the precious counter. You don't have to threaten me with bodily harm."

Amber took the coffee cups Brianna pulled from a nearby cabinet and set them on the table with spoons and sugar.

"I couldn't remember if you liked cream or not. You know I like my chamomile with just a touch of sugar. But we've been drinking a lot of Earl Grey lately..."

Amber wrinkled her nose at the cream. "I won't be using it." She poured herself a cup of tea.

"How about some shortbread? Are you in the mood?"

Amber rolled her eyes. "When am I not in the mood for shortbread? You know it's my only weakness." She tilted her head, thinking. "Well, that and cute guys. Let me rephrase that. Cute Pagan guys."

"Food is your only weakness, Amber, not just



shortbread." Brianna gave a very unladylike snort. "And you have cute guys on the brain."

"Well, at least I have a healthy interest. It could be worse. I could have given up on the male persuasion all together." Amber took a sip of her tea and grinned.

Brianna sighed. "Yes, I suppose you could have. I know I did for a while. I swore to never be attracted to another man as long as I lived. Now look at me." She looked at her cup. "I hope this tea helps me sleep tonight. Sometimes it just sits in my stomach like a lead ball waiting to be hurled back up."

"Think positively, hon. Just keep telling yourself that is not going to happen this time."

Brianna smiled. "You're right. Things have been going too well for me over the past few days for it to stop now. The tea will relax me." It had to.

## Chapter Ten

Brianna was so excited she wanted to rush through her work. Never before had she contemplated not giving her people their money's worth. She wanted to spend as much time with Niklas as possible. But she had a strong work ethic and took pride in a job well done.

The thought that Niklas and she could be soul mates was intriguing. She fervently hoped nothing went wrong on this outing and thought of the irony of this situation. This would be her first second date ever. Reaching for the phone, she dialed Amber's number.

The phone was picked up on the second ring. "Hello, Amber's house of ill repute and oyster bar. Eat 'em raw."

Brianna giggled. "What in the world?" She shook her head. Leave it to Amber to think up something as off the wall as that.

"Hey, hon, what are you doing home so early. I thought you had two houses today." Something crunched in the background, Amber was eating again. So what else was new?

"I did, but one cancelled. They had some sort of

family emergency out of town. You know I normally would be upset about losing the money. But —”

“But this time you’re excited because that gives you more time with lover boy? You do still have a date, don’t you?”

“Yes I do, I just needed to talk with you. I need some advice.”

“You actually want my advice?” she feigned shock.

“Come on. Don’t even try to make it sound like I don’t value your opinion.” Brianna scowled. “What should I wear? I haven’t been to the beach on a date since I was a teenager and he’s going to be here any minute.”

“Oh, all right. How can I resist that whine?” Amber teased. “What have you got to wear?”

“I have my navy blue one piece and I have the orange and black one piece.” Brianna held them both up to herself and looked in the mirror critically.

“The blue one piece, definitely. The only other color you look better in is emerald green.”

“Thanks, Amber. I know I don’t tell you this nearly enough. Hell, I’ve probably never said it. But I do love you like a sis.”

Amber sniffed. “Oh, shut up before you make me cry or something.”

She laughed. “*That* coming from the proprietor of Amber’s house of ill repute?”

“Don’t forget the oyster bar.” She laughed. “I’ll talk with you later, hon.”

Taking her friend’s advice, she wore the navy blue one-piece suit. She knew it complimented her eyes.

"You look wonderful." He said, devouring her with his gaze, making her feel like the most beautiful woman in the world.

Brianna blushed. He had a way about him that made her feel as though she were the only woman he would ever want. Niklas took her breath away when he removed his shirt. She had known he had an exceptional physique, but she still hadn't been prepared for such sheer masculinity. She was equally unprepared for the rush of desire she felt for him.

Whew! If every man in the world realized just how hot an abdominal six-pack looked, they would all have one. Brianna fanned herself, but not because of the heat. A fine layer of perspiration had already formed on his bronzed skin, beading in on his chest like tiny pearls. He looked like a Greek God returned to Earth. His body glistened in the sunlight. The darker brown of his flat nipples and the dusting of black down on his forearms and legs only magnified his appeal.

Brianna's fingers itched to bury themselves in his luxurious hair and touch the soft hair on his chest. Her eyes lowered, followed the tapering vee to the waistband of his shorts. Brianna looked up startled when he dropped his towel at her feet. He grinned at her and winked, his chocolate eyes wreaking havoc on her overloaded senses.

"Are you going to swim?"

"Um...yes, just give me a minute." She slipped out of her shorts and shirt and felt Niklas's appraising look. Good grief! Had he felt her looking at him, too? She felt the blush stealing up her neck to her face. Brianna kicked off her shoes and ran for the water. She

needed to cool off in more ways than one.

Niklas followed close behind.

They both dove into the churning surf. The cool water swirled around her, cooling her off. She needed that after the look she'd gotten of Niklas's nearly bare body before he dove into the surf. He stayed near Brianna as if protecting her. It was sweet the way he blocked the big waves so she wouldn't lose her footing. She did fall once and squealed as he picked her up and carried her from the water. "Put me down, put me down! I'm too heavy, you'll hurt yourself," she screeched.

He snorted. "I don't think so," he said, shaking his head. "You are not heavy. You may be tall, but you are still almost a foot shorter than me. Think you that I could not carry my woman to safety?"

*His woman?* Gods, she loved the way he talked! There was no one on this Earth that could melt her with a word or a look like this man could. She didn't know whether to be pleased or insulted. She supposed it would have been nice if he'd *asked* her to be his woman. Brianna gave him a mock glare and crossed her arms over her chest. "Just who said that I'm your woman? I don't remember anyone asking." She pouted. "You know, a girl likes to be consulted about things like that."

He smiled, showing his perfect teeth, a flash of white on his tanned face. For some reason, the sight gave her an odd feeling of *déjà vu*, and made her wonder if he was tanned all over.

Niklas lowered her to the ground slowly, deliberately allowing her body to slide down the hard

length of his. The tips of her sensitized breasts brushed against his muscular frame and she felt every bulge on his exceptional anatomy on that little trip down the front of his lean body.

It heightened her awareness of him and she hadn't thought that possible. She swayed a bit unsteadily when her feet touched the sand and held fast, wanting, needing to feel her body against his. She leaned into him. He was like a drug, just one taste and she needed more.

Niklas lowered his head, his lips barely skimming hers. Her lips parted in invitation. He breathed a soft kiss onto the corner of her mouth. "Will you be mine, sweet Brianna?"

His arms still held her tight. She was sure she would have fallen had he not been holding her. Brianna's body reacted in a way she'd never expected. The cool breeze on her wet body, mixed with the warmth of Niklas against her heated skin made her head spin.

Her hands, moving of their own volition, roamed lazily over his muscular arms, climbing upward. Moving up over his shoulders, her fingers lost themselves in his thick, hair and she gently pulled his head down to hers. Never in her life had she ever been so bold. What in the world was she thinking? She wanted this man. And yes, she wanted to be his woman. "Yes, Niklas," she said breathlessly against his lips. "I want to be your woman." She closed her eyes, reveling in the feel of his warm lips against hers.

He leaned forward, sucked her bottom lip between his teeth and bit down lightly. It was sensual, erotic. She wanted nothing more than to kiss the socks right

off him. Brianna pulled away with a nervous giggle. He wasn't even wearing any socks. The ridiculous thought danced through her head. She pushed against his chest.

He released her immediately, obviously confused. "Brianna, I must apologize. I thought we both wanted that kiss."

"No, Niklas, I'm the one that should apologize. I'm so sorry." She paced back and forth in front of him. "I don't know what came over me. I don't usually do this...sort of thing," she said, waving her hand in the air. She really *didn't* know what came over her. She barely knew the man. But that didn't stop her from playing tonsil hockey with him on the beach!

\* \* \* \*

Niklas took her hand, gently tugging when she would have pulled away. His fingers tangled with hers, holding her to him so she couldn't run. She wanted to run. He could see it in her eyes and knew the fear she felt was groundless. She was afraid of her feelings, feelings she likely felt were too strong too soon. Perhaps he needed to explain the feelings, the needs of an *El'edal*. She may feel differently if she knew when the people on his world found their mates they knew it instantly. Or, he thought miserably, perhaps it would only frighten her more.

She appeared shocked and dismayed. Most likely believed her behavior was inexcusable. Niklas knew it was normal for her to feel this way. He was a virtual stranger. They had met only four days ago. Still, it

didn't stop his heart from beating faster every time she looked at him or stop his breath from catching in his throat whenever she glanced his way. It didn't stop his body from reacting, becoming hard with the urge to take her and make her his.

\* \* \* \*

Niklas became still. His eyes glittered and he suddenly seemed dangerous. The hair on Brianna's neck stood on end. It wasn't caused by the close proximity to Niklas. This was a totally different feeling. *This* was evil.

His stance changed. He was tense. Had she made him angry? Her neck began to tingle. She felt something in the pit of her stomach. The same feeling she'd had at the ball Friday night. Someone was watching her, someone evil. "Niklas, we have to..."

"Shh." He bent his head, placed his lips against hers. His mouth trailed kisses along her jaw toward her ear, he whispered, "I feel him, too. He has been following me. I believe he doesn't want me to complete my mission. Do not allow him to know we are aware of his presence."

His hands roved slowly over her body, left a trail of burning awareness as the thumping of her heart drowned out the sound of the waves crashing on the beach. Brianna wrapped her arms around him, reveling in his scent and the warmth of his embrace. She was glad for the excuse to hold him close and accept his kiss. No regrets, no excuses, just feeling. His lips left hers, nibbled along her jaw once more, then he



placed a kiss behind her ear.

"We need to make it back to the car. He will not be able to get to us in my house or yours. We must find a way to get there without arousing his suspicions." His hands wandered lower.

"What mission? You have a lot of explaining to do, Niklas," she whispered, pulling his earlobe into her mouth. "Although I don't think you are entirely correct. I think whoever it is, is after me. They were following me around at the Witches Ball on Samhain."

Niklas groaned with obvious pleasure. "Later, Brianna. I will answer your questions later." His hands cupped her bottom, pressing her lower body against his own. Brianna felt the ridge of his erection against her pubic bone like a steel rod. He squeezed her rear and let his hand wander slowly up her back. Moaning, she pulled away with a scowl. She slapped him, then winked. "I think that's just about enough! I'm not that kind of girl. Take me home now, please," she said imperiously, her words loud enough to carry far along the beach. She glared at him for good measure before she stuck her nose into the air, then turned and began to walk from the beach. Kneeling, she picked up her towel, gave it a snap to shake the dirt off it, then stood and marched to the truck.

\* \* \* \*

Niklas watched as she stomped off the beach. He was proud of her quick thinking. His *El'edal* was going to be very, very hard to convince when the time came. She couldn't even know her act was giving the spy

reason to doubt she was The One. With any luck, it would buy him a little time. Niklas bent to retrieve the towel she'd so thoughtfully brought for him to use, picked up the rest of their things and followed her from the beach, looking properly cowed.

\* \* \* \*

The sinister figure watched from the bushes, following them with his dark malevolent eyes, his scarred face filled with biting hatred. His black, venomous eyes held nothing but contempt for the couple on the beach. Good! She was leaving him alone on the beach. Perhaps she wasn't the one he searched for after all. He wanted to be sure. He disliked the idea of putting an innocent to death.

The whole concept of murder was distasteful. He didn't like to get his hands dirty. In fact, he would rather pay someone else to do it. Either his people were all dead or they refused to report in because they feared his wrath at their incompetence. He shrugged carelessly. Still, if murder served his purpose and would buy the time he needed, it would have to be done. The more time that passed the better. Each hour, each minute, each second brought them closer to the end, closer to the eventual rule of the rightful heir.

He took a deep breath, and released it slowly. Yes, one day he would be King. He had lots of time. He could afford to wait, to be generous. But if she had the stone, he wouldn't be generous. If she had the stone, she would die a very painful death that it would be his pleasure to inflict. He smiled a parody of a smile. He

knew it was merely a cruel twisting of his thin lips, that his malignant black eyes were filled with a cold fury. He spat on the ground, the hate eating at him like a cancer.

“Niklas,” he hissed, his hatred showing in the pronunciation of that one name. He grimaced. Just saying it aloud had left a bad taste in his mouth. Niklas would never keep her. He would leave her if she wasn’t The One, and if she was, she would die. He would see to that.

The man reached down and rubbed his nearly erect staff in an obscene gesture. He licked his lips in lustful anticipation. She was beautiful and passionate. Before he killed her, he would taste her sweetness. He needn’t kill the woman if she was innocent, but he would still taste her. She wanted it after all. She’d been panting after Niklas like a bitch in heat since he’d first seen them together.

The man rubbed himself again, resisting the urge to unfasten his trousers and ease the lust he felt while the sight of her rare beauty was still fresh in his mind. But he waited, watching as they left in a vehicle Niklas drove. He followed them discreetly. He didn’t want to alert them to his presence.

*The fools! Don’t they know what real power is? No one could ever sneak up on me. Watch me without my knowing, without my feeling their presence. They are weak fools, not even close to being my equal.* He watched scornfully as Niklas left her at her door, returned the truck to his garage and ran back to her house and pounded on her door, begging to be let in.

*The weak fool! I wouldn’t have begged.* He laughed

under his breath. *I would have demanded admittance. Or I would have destroyed the door and taken what I wanted. Women don't know what they want. They say no, when they really mean yes.*

He caressed himself again, grateful for the privacy of his vehicle. He watched when she opened the door, a scowl on her beautiful face, and Niklas entered the house.

*I know what Niklas wants, what he is going to get. I will get it, too. She will beg me for it. Yes, I will have her before I leave this forgotten land. Whether she lives or dies will be up to me.* Smiling cruelly, he rubbed his hands together in anticipation. "Oh, yes, you will beg for it, you teasing bitch."

\* \* \* \*

Niklas took Brianna in his arms and swung her off her feet.

She squealed with surprised delight. "Put me down, Niklas!"

"You were wonderful!" He grinned, setting her down. "I would bet he didn't even suspect we knew he was watching us." He held her to him tightly, his hands roaming up and down her back in a light caress.

She tilted her head back, her laughter forgotten, her wide indigo eyes filled with fear. "What does he want with you? What type of mission are you on? Do you work for the government?" She fired her questions off quickly, unsure what to think.

"Yes and no. My mission is very important. It could mean life or death for millions. Am I doing this for my

government? Yes. Do I intend to harm anyone here? The answer is no." Niklas straightened and paced the room with long strides. "There are so many things I must tell you. Things you should know." He paused, giving Brianna a look of pure longing. "Yet every time I look at you, I can't concentrate. My heart pounds and all I can think of is kissing you. How warm and wonderful you feel in my arms, how much I want to..."

Brianna stepped closer to him, slid gentle fingers down his arm, stoking the fire already burning out of control in his blood. "How much you want to what, Niklas?" She smiled softly. "How much you want to make love with me?"

He turned to her, pinned her with his tortured gaze. "Yes, but there are other things I should be thinking of." He fisted his hands at his sides. "Other things that are so much more important than sex." He turned away from her, away from temptation. He closed his eyes, trying to bring his body under some semblance of control.

She walked around him, gliding in front of him, looking at him with sultry eyes and waited for him to look at her. When he did, she lifted her hand to her hair, brushed it back in a sexy movement he found irresistible. "Then we should definitely devise a way for you to concentrate on your mission." She put her hand on his chest, then let it slide down toward his waistband. Reaching up with her free hand, she pulled his head down to hers. Before their lips met, Brianna whispered, "I've never been so bold or so brazen and I've never wanted anything more in my life. There

might never be a second chance to find out what it's like to make love and I'm determined to live for once." She gazed deep into his dark chocolate eyes. "I'll worry about regrets and consequences later."

He groaned as he bent down to cover her lips with his. She was so soft and pliant in his arms. His hands moved over her hips, her firm round bottom. He pulled her against his hard length, felt her jutting breasts rubbing their hard peaks against his chest. He devoured her with his lips and tongue, reveling in the fact that she wanted him as much as he wanted her.

He picked her up and carried her into her bedroom, to the bed. He needed to have her beneath him, to feel her soft body welcoming his, even for just a short while. He pushed the straps of the suit from her shoulders, down her arms and looked on with wonder as he uncovered the treasure that awaited him. His eyes darkened with the intense desire to touch her, to hold her. He wanted her to know she was his woman, irrevocably.

Dipping his head, he kissed the hollow of her neck, licking the tangy salt from just above her clavicle. Moving lower, he kissed the sensitive underside of her breast, his tongue sliding across her smooth, salty skin. He smiled slightly as she caught her breath when he took her pebble hard nipple into his mouth. She cried out, bringing her hands to his head. She held him there in a trap of his own choosing. And he loved it.

Gently, his hands slid across her quivering belly, pushing the suit further down her legs until she was able to kick it free. It landed on the floor across the room, discarded in a damp, forgotten heap. Again, he

kissed the petal pink peaks of her breasts, suckling the hard nubs. He reveled in the feel of her soft skin sliding against his, knowing she was The One. No woman had ever made him feel the way she did. He was on fire. His body was a raging inferno that burned only for her and he felt an undeniable need to make her his.

\* \* \* \*

Every inch of Brianna's body felt as though it was on fire. Her blood was hot, molten, flowing through her veins slowly, thick, like lava. The volcano her body had become was centered near her stomach. The heat generated there, spreading throughout her body, scorching her, burning into her mind in a fiery conflagration. She'd never felt anything like this in her entire life.

Niklas stopped for a moment to look into her eyes. "I need to know this is what you really want, *Laharra*."

Brianna groaned, "Oh, God, Niklas, don't stop now." She reached up and pulled his head back down to her breast, arching her back to force the contact. He chuckled and lapped at her nipple, taking her breath away.

"Slow down, *Laharra*, we have the entire night."

His mouth covered hers in a drugging kiss that pushed every thought from her mind, leaving only a haze of pure lust.

"I want to worship you for the rest of the afternoon and into the night." Niklas looked into her eyes. His were glazed with need, with a fervent hunger Brianna

knew she couldn't deny if her life depended on it. Gooseflesh rose on her skin as he lowered his head, moving his lips over her jaw to her neck. She moaned when he suckled and nipped her collarbone and canted her head, giving him better access to the sensitive spot behind her ear.

Brianna was on a dreamy passionate cloud. Gripping Niklas's shoulders, she tried to push him up and away. She wanted to look into his eyes, needed to tell him she would die if he didn't enter her soon. "Niklas, please..." She panted. It was all she could manage.

Still, he understood. "Not yet, *Laharra*, be patient a little longer." He guided her back to the bed, supporting her body as he covered her trembling body with his own. He suckled her sensitive breasts yet again, bringing each velvety tip to a hardened peak. His sentence was broken as he alternated between them, giving both equal attention.

The hand that had once cupped her breast now slid down her body to rest on her downy curls. Niklas moved one finger, testing her moisture, before finding her nub and slowly moving in a gentle rhythm that nearly drove her mad.

Brianna's head tossed back and forth on the pillow. She bit her lip, reached for some elusive...thing. She knew it was there, she could feel it building, waiting, burning. She felt herself blazing from the inside out, until she was sure she would spontaneously combust. Still, Brianna was unprepared for the waves of pleasure that washed over her again and again.

Just as she reached the apex, Niklas covered her



mouth with his and he swallowed her cry of pleasure. He still performed his erotic massage until Brianna's stiffened body collapsed onto the mattress spent.

"So that's what it's like." She sighed, shivering with aftershocks. Her hands fumbled on the mattress, too weak to raise them to brush the hair from her eyes, to wipe the perspiration from her brow.

\* \* \* \*

Niklas smiled and kissed her gently. He gave her one last chance to change her mind. The sweat beaded on his forehead. A fine sheen of moisture covered his body. He was in agony. Yet he would find a way to leave her bed, if it was what she wished. "Are you sure that this is what you want, Brianna?"

His dark chocolate eyes gazed deeply into hers, searching for a way to tell her, to warn her. There would be no going back. He wanted no lies between them. "Once we do this thing, there will be no going back." Niklas leaned down to nibble her shoulder. He wanted to keep her just a little off kilter. He knew it was a bit unfair, but later she wouldn't be able to say she wasn't given a choice.

She gasped as his lips closed around her sensitive nipple. Her hands held his head, her fingers tangled in his fine ebony hair. "Oh, yes, Niklas, I want this."

Standing, he quickly removed his suit then lowered himself over her once again. Closing his eyes for a moment, he inhaled sharply, trying to keep his raging body under control as Brianna reached between them to stroke him softly. His already eager flesh jumped

with excitement. He captured her hand, kissed each finger slowly, then held it against his heart. "Not this time, *Laharra*, I am afraid that I will lose control and I do not want to hurt you." He released her hand, then held her chin gently and looked deep into her eyes. "You understand, if we do this, there will be no going back?"

"Yes. Oh, yes," she uttered breathlessly. She tossed her head on the pillow, squirming beneath him. "There is no going back. I don't want to go back."

Niklas let out a long breath, cupped her face in both of his hands, looking into her indigo eyes. "Brianna, do you choose me?" His voice was gruff, a mixture of husky longing and disbelief.

She smiled and squirmed impatiently beneath him. "Yes, Niklas, I choose you. How could I not? Since the moment we met, I have been drawn to you like the wave to the shore." Her hands smoothed the worry lines from his face. "You need someone. Someone who can love you, for you, I think." She grinned impishly, then leaned up and kissed him passionately.

Niklas squeezed his eyes shut and groaned as he entered her slowly. Throwing his head back, he clamped his teeth together, laboring to keep himself under control. He was so near the edge. She was so hot and tight, her inner walls closed around his shaft like a hot, velvet glove, clasp and flexing, milking his sex. He moved forward slowly and was pleasantly surprised to find her maiden's barrier still intact.

A muscle jumped rhythmically in his jaw and he forced himself to move even more slowly. Leaning down, he suckled her once more, drawing on her

breast fiercely. He wanted to distract her from the pain he knew would come when he pushed past her virgin's barrier.

She had chosen him. Niklas wanted to cry to the heavens, thanking the Goddess for this great gift. He wanted to be sure she would have no reason to regret it. It didn't matter that her mind didn't know what she'd just done, her heart knew, her soul knew. That was what mattered. "*Brianna, Mi Dara*, I choose you. We are one, in this life and in the next. We have gifted ourselves unto each other. Now we are one."

"Yes, Niklas, we are one." Brianna panted.

As he eased in and out over, and over again, she was completely mindless. Still, she was affirming their bond, making it easier for Niklas to bind her to him.

He deliberately moved with a gentle rhythm that was killing him so he would not hurt his Brianna. His body shook with the effort to move so slowly, even as he burned for the ecstasy of release. He knew he would find the ultimate pleasure in the solace of her body. Niklas groaned as he finished the ritual. "One heart, one soul, in gifting ourselves we are bound to each other. For all time."

Brianna screamed beneath him, her climax so intense, she nearly bucked him off her. Her slick velvet walls gripped him, milked him, until mindless. He forgot the promise to himself to be gentle and drove into her, shouting to the heavens. Thanking the Gods for the precious gift they had given him, his beloved, his wife. Niklas had his mate. He had finally found her. And she had chosen. Later, she wouldn't be able to deny he'd given her the choice.

She collapsed beneath him spent, aftershocks rippling through her body, her breathing hitched and ragged.

He leaned down and claimed her lips as she lay panting beneath him. He wasn't looking forward to explaining exactly what they'd just done. But now might be the best time. She was too tired to put up much of a fight. "Brianna, I must thank you," he began formally. He took her hand and kissed her palm sensuously. Niklas searched though his mind, wanting to find a way to tell her that she would understand, that she could forgive.

She turned toward him, looked at him through sleep fogged eyes. She licked her kiss-swollen lips slowly, not realizing how sexy it looked or the many ideas it gave him.

He leaned up on one elbow, the muscles of his arm bunching and clenching as he shifted his weight. He brushed the damp hair from her forehead, placing a tender kiss there. "I am honored that you gifted yourself to me. I hope I will never give you cause to regret it. I will care for you always and see to our happiness together." He glanced down at her, saw the dreamy half smile on her face. Heartened to see she was taking this so well, Niklas lay back, gathered her into his arms and nuzzled her neck for a moment. "I must admit that I am surprised that you are taking this so well."

\* \* \* \*

"Taking what so well, Niklas? Are you planning to

leave already?" She turned away, her heart already breaking into tiny pieces. She was so tired, she hadn't heard much of what he'd said. But it sounded like he was trying to say goodbye. Had she just been taken advantage of?

"No, *Mi Dara*, that is most emphatically *not* what I am trying to say." Niklas caressed her shoulder, his hands rubbing up and down her arms in a rhythm meant to sooth.

She turned in his arms, wanting to face him, to see the truth in his expressive eyes. She searched his face intently. "What does that mean, *Mi Dara*, and the other word you used?" She wrinkled her brow trying to remember.

"*Laharra*?"

She inclined her head. "Yes that was it."

"*Laharra* means beloved, in my language."

Brianna smiled drowsily, kissed him passionately, glad that he thought of her that way. He must not be planning on going too far if he thought of her as his beloved. "And the other?" she asked, her fingers lingering in his hair. She could live the rest of her life happily, if she never had to remove her fingers from his hair. Her eyes were sparkling now, happy. Niklas's were dark and troubled.

"*Mi Dara*?"

She nodded expectantly, smiled through her exhaustion, her eyes drifting closed.

Niklas cleared his throat, uncomfortable. "Basically, the closest translation would be...my wife."

Brianna's eyelids flew open. "But we're not—"

Niklas placed a finger over her lips. "In the eyes of

the Gods and in the eyes of my people, we are married."

"What?" She jumped out of the bed as quickly as her jellied limbs would allow. "What sort of archaic country do you come from? You can't just marry a woman without her consent," she said, glaring at him. "We are not married!" She stamped her foot in a fit that caused her breasts to jiggle invitingly.

She looked down at herself, realized she was standing in the nude arguing with a crazy man who thought they were married. "Look, just because I agreed to have sex with you does not make me your wife." She reached down, grabbed her T-shirt and pulled it over her head. She snorted. Apparently the man didn't get around much if he thought a little romp between the sheets was a wedding ceremony. The sound of his words came back to her.

*Do you choose me?* he had asked. *There is no going back.*

*I choose you.* She remembered saying it clearly. She'd *had* said those words. Then Niklas had said something else. Something strange, something about being bound for all time. Brianna's trembling hands flew to her pale face. "Oh, my Goddess, what have I done?" She leaned against the cool wall and slid to the floor in shock. She wrapped her arms around her knees and rocked back and forth, staring into space.

Niklas sat up in the bed. He watched her for a while before he stood, walked to her and lifted her into his arms. It was a measure of her shock that she didn't resist. "You have given yourself to me, *Laharra*. To put it in a term you would understand, we are married or

handfasted.”

Brianna’s trembling hand slid to her throat. Her fingers rested over her racing pulse. Her heart drummed frantically in her ears. Emotions, fear, joy, passion, all crowded through her.

She looked at Niklas, her eyes like saucers. When she gazed into his beautiful dark chocolate eyes, try as she might, she couldn’t make herself regret what she’d done. She blinked. After all, Brianna Lynne O’Neill was no idiot. The man was very nearly a God!

## Chapter Eleven

Brianna closed her eyes, and inhaled deeply, taking in the smell of his skin, their intermingled scents and the smell of sex. She thought of the wild, uninhibited way she had given herself to him and blushed.

Leaning her head to the right, she rested it against his broad chest. She could hear his strong heartbeat and felt the rightness of what she'd done. Her hand moved from her neck to his chest. Her fingers made a lazy circle around his perfect flat nipple.

Niklas sucked a breath between clenched teeth. He quickly returned to the bed and sat, still holding her in his arms. He watched her with those wonderful eyes. Those addicting eyes. They were every bit as addicting as the chocolate they resembled and every bit as decadent.

He inhaled deeply and shook his head slowly. "You have no idea what you do to me." His hand captured hers against his chest. Leaning down, he brushed his lips against her forehead and smiled, obviously nervous. "There are words that must be spoken, words that you must say to truly complete our bonding."



Brianna looked at Niklas. Fascinated by the way his eyes changed color—ever so slightly—with his emotions. She peered into their mahogany depths, wondered if he was telling her the truth. “Tell me what they are and I’ll say them.” Tears pooled in her eyes. She thought that he was being noble and giving her an out.

Shaking his head, he kissed her soundly. His tongue grazed her lips, entering her mouth when her lips parted and tangled with hers. Brianna wanted nothing more than to stay right here, in this beautiful moment with him. He was everything she’d ever dreamed of in a man.

Niklas reluctantly broke their kiss and looked into her eyes. “I cannot tell you the words you must say.” He shook his head slowly. “For this to be a true bonding, they must come from your heart. Your soul knows them. If we are truly meant to be bonded, you will know them.” He raked a nervous hand through his hair. “If you truly do not want to be bound to me, you can refuse to say the words.” His head was bowed as though it really mattered to him.

Brianna closed her eyes and reached inside herself. She looked for the words that Niklas needed to hear from her. She found a flicker of light within her that was strangely a part of Niklas. Then to her surprise, she began to speak in another language. “*Mi Daru un dula, Mi Daru sonay. Laharru mon sunta waleema budai.*”

Brianna’s eyes flew open. She clapped her hand to her mouth in shock. *Where had that come from?* She knew she’d just spoken another language, didn’t even know what she’d said. No, that wasn’t true. She *did*

know what she just said. She just didn't know *how* she knew it.

She'd said, *my husband and life, my husband and soul. You are my beloved. I gift my heart and soul into your keeping forever and beyond.* Brianna's gaze flew to his, both eager and terrified to know if what she thought she'd said was correct. But how could she know that? It definitely wasn't normal.

Niklas smiled, kissed her slightly parted lips. Lying back on the bed, he took her with him. Brianna's lips parted further, his tongue slid between her teeth, dancing, mating with her own. She felt a peculiar wrenching in her heart and her mind. Somehow she could hear him talking to her. Yet he wasn't because his lips were still firmly pressed against hers in a searing kiss, his hands were roaming her body, enflaming her, driving her wild.

\* \* \* \*

Mi Dara, *my wife. I have waited so long for you. You humble me with the gift of your trust and your beautiful body. Know this, your heart and your soul are safe in my keeping for as long as I live.*

He was still kissing her, drugging her with his mouth and hands. He gently nudged her legs apart with his knee. She parted her legs easily and Niklas settled himself in the cradle of her hips.

He groaned with intense pleasure as he entered her again. He whispered sweet nonsense into her mind as his body drove her wild. Niklas heard her whispers of encouragement, knowing what she wanted, needed,

before she could voice it. And he knew with a startling realization that the legends of his people were true. Against all odds, he had found The One. And they were truly bound in heart and mind.

On his knees, Niklas lifted her buttocks, tilted her hips and drove into her with the abandon that he could hear her whispering for. She wanted him out of control, needed the both of them to go up in the flames she could feel licking at their skin. Brianna moaned, the sound coming from the deepest recesses of her being. A guttural sound, which barely escaped his throat, burst free as Niklas felt his own release.

Afterward, they lay panting side by side, both exhausted, both replete. With their hands clasped together, their fingers entwined, they finally slept.

\* \* \* \*

Brianna woke to deliciously sore muscles, muscles she'd never even known existed, protested movement. She stretched slowly and smiled. Knew if she wanted to, she could lie back and sleep for a very long time. "I don't *ever* remember being so relaxed."

She remembered the dream she'd had. Wouldn't it be wonderful to really be so connected to the person you loved that you could hear their thoughts? She paused. Did she really love Niklas? Could she? She didn't even know him. She moaned, rolled over and crawled out of bed. She didn't even want to think about what her silly heart had gotten her into this time.

She headed for the shower, wondering when Niklas had left. Part of her was bothered that he hadn't

decided to stay. Another part of her, the part that knew she couldn't have faced him first thing this morning, was glad he was gone. After all, she had plenty of reasons to be embarrassed after the abandoned way she had made love with him.

Turning on the water, she stepped into the little stall and tried not to think of the way she had totally lost control. She felt the blush steal up her neck, warming her face. Had she really raked his back with her fingernails, screaming for him to drive into her harder and harder? Brianna covered her face with her hands, completely mortified.

*Do not be embarrassed by your sensual nature, Laharra.*

"Niklas?" Startled, Brianna jerked her head up and poked it out of the shower, the cooler air brushing her cheeks. Realization hit. When had her water heater started working? Turning the water off, she stepped from the shower, grabbed a towel and rubbed it briskly against her skin. She walked to the counter, and leaning over, she rubbed the towel over her mirror to see if she looked any different. Should she?

Brianna eyed herself in the streaked mirror and frowned. She didn't look any different. She didn't look like she'd just had the most incredible night of sex she could have possibly imagined. She shrugged and continued to towel herself dry, mindful of the tender places on her skin. She looked down at herself and flushed.

There were whisker burns all over her body. Wherever she looked, there was evidence of their lovemaking. She hugged herself and smiled, remembering how wonderful each, and every, one of

Niklas's caresses felt.

Dressed in blue jeans and her favorite T-shirt, that boldly announced, *give me my stinkin' coffee now, or suffer the consequences*, she went in search of Killer to let him outside for his morning bark-fest. No matter where she looked, Killer was nowhere to be found. Putting her shoes on, she rushed next door. Maybe Niklas knew where he was, or at least maybe she could get him to help search for him.

Brianna knocked on the door, waited a moment, then knocked again. Her patience was near the breaking point. She loved that little pain in the butt. If he had been hurt because she'd forgotten him outside last night, she'd never forgive herself.

Niklas opened the door with a smile. He was holding Killer and immediately handed the squirming bundle of hair to her. He knew it was why she was there.

Brianna hugged Killer close and kissed him on the ear. "Why did you take him? I was worried sick."

He stepped back, waved her into the house and closed the door behind her. "You were sleeping. I brought him here so he wouldn't disturb you. I left you a note. Did you not see it?" He looked at her quizzically, his brow raised in a way that made him look even sexier.

Brianna blushed. She was embarrassed that she didn't think Niklas would have left a note. "I was so frantic I didn't even look for one. Where did you leave it?" Cuddling Killer close, she rubbed his ears and pressed little kisses to the side of his head.

Niklas smiled. "It was on the table in your kitchen."

He placed a gentle hand on her back, massaging it lightly. "And there is no need for you to look so embarrassed. I understand your apprehension. You love him."

She sighed, relieved. How did he always seem to have the ability to make her feel so comfortable? He had an agreeable way about him that erased any embarrassment she felt. Brianna opened her mouth to apologize and Niklas interrupted.

"You do not owe me an apology or an explanation. I left your home with something you love. You had every right to be upset."

How did he always seem to know what she was thinking now? She gave a mental shrug and smiled into his eyes. She then looked around, noticing for the first time that most of his belongings were gone. She frowned. "What happened to all of your furniture?" She wandered across the almost empty room to stand by the window that faced her house.

\* \* \* \*

Niklas closed his eyes for a moment and let out a deep breath. He'd hoped she would sleep a bit longer. At least until he could have returned to her and explain. He'd felt her embarrassment earlier. He had hoped she'd been dreaming, but it was not the case. He'd been using a holographic device to give orders to the crew and wasn't able to go to her at the time. They needed to leave this place as soon as he was able. When he felt her anxiety over the missing pet, he knew she was indeed awake and would have to be dealt

with, whether he was ready or not. Finished with the holo device, he'd been coming down the stairs when she'd started pounding on the door.

He took her arm and sat her down on the sofa, one of the few furnishings left in the house. He put his arm around her shoulders, drawing Brianna closer to his body. He wanted a firm grip on her when she heard what he had to say. "I am packing to leave." The sooner he got this over with the better, as far as he was concerned. She stiffened. It was a reaction he'd expected, yes, but one he certainly did not welcome. He held fast when she tried to wrench herself free from his grasp.

Tears began to pool in her eyes, trembling like gems on her lashes. She was obviously under the mistaken impression that he was leaving this world without her. Niklas could feel the emotions roiling within her. Of them all, anguish, confusion, fear and anger, mostly he felt her anger. She thought he'd used her. Each emotion swirled within her, each trying to control the direction of her thoughts.

She turned her head. Eyes blurred with tears found his. "But...but why? After last night I thought—" She covered her mouth with her hands, the last of her words coming out on a sob.

Killer stood on his hind legs, licking her face in an attempt to console. It was a measure of her upset when she pushed him away.

Brianna scrubbed her face with her hands, her feelings of humiliation and loss obvious. *I won't cry over him. I won't cry because my spell didn't work and I'll have months to wait before the planets will be in the right*

*alignment again.*

Niklas's arm tightened around her as he heard her thoughts and she tried to pull away again. He held her firmly to his side. He couldn't bear to see her like this. He couldn't take the time to stay, to reassure her, to give her the time to grow to trust him thoroughly.

He cursed under his breath. Why did things have to happen this way? Why did they always have to be so difficult? If he didn't have to rush back, he could take all the time he needed to reassure her. *What a strange twisted universe this is.* He groaned, knowing he had to tell her, yet wasn't quite sure how to do so. Where should he begin?

She turned away, but not before he could see how her eyes reflected her anguish. It was obvious she couldn't bear to look at him anymore.

"*Laharra*, look at me, please," Niklas pleaded. He reached out, trying to gently turn her head back toward him, but she fought.

"I can't. I won't. I don't think I can ever—" she sobbed into her hands, resting her forehead against the wall.

He didn't have time for this. He would have liked nothing more than to stay here with her until she could grow to trust him. He'd been lucky, very lucky, just to have found her. He couldn't protect her here as well as he could on *Terrna*. Or even as well as he could on his ship, now that he was relatively certain all of the spies were gone. "I have to go home, *Laharra*. I would take you with me, if you would go."

\* \* \* \*



Brianna lifted her face, looked at him through her tear-filled eyes. "Don't you understand? I don't even know you, not really," she cried. "I can't go anywhere with a man I don't even know. I don't even believe I had sex with you. I never do things like that." She was breaking his heart, she could feel it. *Good, then he knows how I feel. The jerk.* Strangely, she could feel his remorse. He didn't want to hurt her. The knowledge gave her a small measure of comfort and she was able to calm herself a bit.

"You will have a hard time believing this, *Laharra*, but I am not from another country. I have come from another world in search of my *El'edal*, my mate, and the woman who can save my entire planet. After searching many worlds, I have finally found you. *You are my El'edal, Laharra.*"

She began to struggle again and Niklas released her. Standing quickly, she backed away from him before he could change his mind and pin her to his side again. *Another planet? The guy is nuts!* "You really believe that, don't you?" She looked at him and wondered why her? Why after all those years of waiting for man who could accept her as she was, she had to end up with a crazy person?

\* \* \* \*

Niklas didn't know what else to say. He watched as Brianna bent slowly, picked up a frantic Killer with trembling hands and walked to the door.

"I don't believe this," she said, burying her face in

Killer's neck. "I thought you were different, but you're not. You were just smarter than other men, smart enough to figure out how to get me in bed when others couldn't." Brianna whimpered, "I was just another conquest for you, wasn't I?" She laughed, near hysterics. "I can't believe you're actually telling me this." She snorted. "Another planet? Ha!"

Niklas stood speechless as she walked through the door. What could he say? She didn't believe him. Besides, he needed a little more time to get things in order. Let her go home and be angry. It cost him little. Just little pieces of his soul.

## Chapter Twelve

“He used me,” she sniffed. “He used me and I liked it! Oh, God, I’m such a slut,” Brianna cried. She threw herself down her bed and sobbed.

*I did not use you, Laharra.*

“Stay out of my mind, you pig,” she screamed at the ceiling and threw her pillow at the wall in frustration. Geeze, this was just like when the faeries could hear her thoughts. Could Morgaine help rid her of this connection, too?

“Larin?” The name came out as a whimper. Brianna looked around her room and bit her thumbnail. Morgaine said he had to come when she called. Okay, maybe he’d found a loophole or something. Maybe she had to deliberately say she wanted to see him. Or maybe it had been just a dream after all. “Larin, I summon you,” she said imperiously.

“Getting a bit bossy, aren’t you, beauty?”

Brianna jumped. He’d appeared behind her, leaning against the doorjamb, his arms crossed over his chest.

“Don’t do that again. You scared the crap out of me.” She stood and began to pace.

Larin looked her up and down and inhaled deeply

through his nose. "I doubt that very much." He bowed low. "You summoned me, oh beauteous human?"

Brianna turned to glare at him. "Shut up, Larin. Why do you always have to be such a creep? Why can't you be nice once in a while, you know, be amenable or something?" She stalked over to her vanity, sat on the dainty wooden chair and leaned forward, holding her stomach.

He smirked at Brianna acrimoniously. "It's very refreshing not knowing what's on your mind. You surprise me with your rapier wit and merciless tongue."

She sighed and shook her head. "Stop being such a jerk, Larin."

He raised a brow. "I was just trying to be nice."

Brianna laughed, "Yeah, right! Nothing you could ever do could make me change what I think about you." He was rude and a general pain in the butt.

He chuckled. But the laughter didn't quite reach his eyes.

She saw a flicker of...pain? She disregarded the glimpse, not sure it had really been there. It was most likely a figment of her imagination anyway.

Larin straightened and walked to the window. He pushed the heavy curtain aside, leaving nothing covering the window but sky blue lace. He looked over his shoulder. "Ah, you *can* take the sunlight. You had me worried for a moment."

"What do you mean by that?" Brianna's eyes narrowed to little slits. "Just because I'm a night person doesn't mean there's something wrong with me." She didn't want to examine *that* comment too closely. She

closed her eyes and chanted to herself. *I don't want to know. I really don't want to know.* She was having enough problems right now without having to worry about whether or not there were really vampires in the world.

Larin closed his eyes and sighed. "What do you wish, Brianna?" He sounded tired.

Wish? Could he grant wishes? She didn't even want to go there. "I need to see Morgaine again. Would you take me to her?"

The corners of his lips drew down in a slight frown and he tilted his head to the side. "Why do you wish an audience with my Queen?"

What was she supposed to say? She'd gone and gotten herself quasi-married to a crazy man who thought he was from outer space? "I've met a man who can hear my thoughts and he can talk to me without speaking."

"Hmmm. And you think Morgaine can help you?"

She nodded. "She has to. I don't know what I'll do if she doesn't." Brianna was desperate.

Larin paused, appeared to concentrate on something for a minute before his expression cleared. "Morgaine has decreed to fulfill your destiny you must go with him." He looked at her when she gasped, then frowned, took a step toward her and stopped, fisting his hands at his sides.

"What? I can't go with him. He says that he's from another planet." She stood so quickly the chair behind her shuddered a bit and almost fell over.

Larin gave her a sardonic look and stepped away from the window. "What makes you think he is not?

You believe in faeries, but not people from other planets?" He stopped in front of her.

"You can't mean—I don't believe that—" Brianna's eyes widened incredulously. "Are you telling me that he was telling the truth?" She threw her arms into the air. "This is just too much!"

Larin smiled, took her hand and bowed over it. "Have you need of me again, mistress, just call. I live only to do your bidding," he said as he straightened, putting his right hand over his heart.

"Oh, shut up," Brianna shouted too late. He had already disappeared. Now what was she supposed to do? Go crawling back to Niklas? Say she was sorry she didn't believe his fantastic tale? *No way!* She plopped down on her bed and crossed her arms over of her chest. She wasn't going anywhere. If she left, Amber would have no one. She refused to leave Amber alone. No how, no way.

But did she really want to live without Niklas? Leave it to her to fall in love with an alien. Well, her dreams *had* been warning her of this very thing all of these years. She jumped when the doorbell rang. "Oh, it's you," she said when she opened the door. Shaking her head, she repeated, "What do you want?" She snorted. Like she cared what he wanted. Not!

*You do care, Laharra. That is why you hurt so.*

"Stay out of my head." Brianna poked him in the chest, emphasizing each word. "When I want you rattling around inside there, I'll invite you," she shouted. "What do you want anyway?" she repeated, before she turned away from him and walked into the living room.

"I wanted to talk. To tell you I love you." He cast his gaze around the room before looking into her eyes. "I know you do not believe me. I can hardly believe it myself. Yet, it makes it no less true." Niklas held his arms out in a placating manner.

"Yeah, right." She snorted her disbelief, then shot him a glance out of the corner of her eye. Even though she was angry with him, she couldn't help but admire his physique.

"Why do you fight me? I have told you that I love you. Can you not feel it?" He stuck his hands into his pockets, leaned a hip against the wall and crossed his legs.

Brianna looked down the long, lean length of him and had to stop herself from licking her lips. "That's not the point, Niklas, and you know it." She turned away, her back ramrod straight, wanting to hide the turbulent emotions racing through her. She blinked back the tears she felt burning her eyes. She was *not* going to cry again. He wasn't worth it.

"What *is* the point then, Brianna?" Niklas asked as he stepped around her. "I told you the truth and you chose to ignore it."

He ran a hand through his hair impatiently, obviously unaware how adorable it made him look. His hair stood up on end, attesting to the fact that he'd spent some time thinking about what he'd done.

"The truth is, you refused to deal with it. Tell me. Did you even want to try?" His voice was filled with resignation. He watched as she walked toward the kitchen.

Brianna turned to face him, her voice filled with

contempt. "You had to know something like that was going to be impossible for me to believe. You told me you're from another planet, for crying out loud." She paced back and forth between the recliner and the kitchen, repeatedly following the same path.

Niklas watched her with his beautiful, expressive eyes. "And that makes you love me less?" He straightened and walked over to the window. He gazed out at her groomed lawn and colorful flowerbeds.

Brianna let out an exasperated sigh. She pressed her hands over her face, then shook her head with denial. "You know it doesn't. I don't even think that was a fair question. I don't know what to think anymore. You come to me with this fantastic tale and expect—" She paced back and forth for a moment, looking for the right words. She threw her hands into the air. The whole situation was absurd. They should be in each other's arms talking of picket fences, growing vegetables, having children.

She turned to him and scowled. "Well, I guess I don't know what you expected. But I'm damn sure not going home with you. You can't expect me to just give up everything I've ever worked for, everything I have ever dreamed of. To pick up and fly across the Galaxy with you." The last was said with a little giggle that bordered on hysterics.

When Niklas would have replied, she held up her hand to stop him. "I don't want to hear it. I don't think there's anything you could say that would make me even consider walking across the street with you right now."



"What if I were to tell you that you are the descendant of a great sorcerer? One who predicted the death of my world and also predicted the savior. The one person in the universe with the power to fight a great evil."

"Who would that be, you?" Brianna laughed. It was just like a guy to come up with a story like that, to try to win a girl over. He was going to be the big hero and save his people. Yeah, right!

"No, *Laharra*." He shook his head sadly. "I wish it were me, it would have been easier. *You* are the savior of my people. That is why you must return with me. I am asking...no, begging. Please come with me." He held his hand out, inviting her to take it.

She shook her head slowly. "I don't think so, Niklas. Don't you understand? I don't even know you. How can I choose to go anywhere with you. Especially when part of me keeps saying you're crazy, that this can't possibly be real?" She stopped pacing in front of him, her eyes glistened with unshed tears. Part of her wanted to go to him, to beg him to take it all back. She wanted nothing more than to believe him.

"I want to believe you," she said through her tears. "I need to know you're not some nut job, but I just can't." She shrugged. "And even if I did believe." She looked around her home, at all of the familiar things surrounding her. "I don't know that I would want to leave. I love my house, my things. I love Amber like a sister and she has no one, Niklas. I can't just leave her alone." She walked into the kitchen, grabbed a tissue and blew her nose. His shoulders sagged. Brianna watched him and almost slumped with relief. He was

listening, maybe he even understood.

"I know I will regret this, but..." *You give me no choice.* He reached out to touch her.

She wasn't alarmed, at first, but when the tingling spread throughout her body and she began to collapse, she had time for only one thought. *Niklas, what have you done to us?*

\* \* \* \*

His heart ached that she would not choose to go with him. That she didn't love him enough to want to. Worse, that he was compelled to take her by force since she didn't choose to go. His expression was blank, his eyes unreadable. He reached out, catching her as she fell. Then he radioed Cholo. The crew knew what to do. They would empty Brianna's home and then begin their journey back to *Terrna*. They must bring everything with them to be sure they didn't leave anything behind. He had no idea where she kept the *Heart of Terrna* and they couldn't risk leaving it behind.

He held her still form in his arms. Gazing down at her face, she looked so peaceful. Taking advantage, Niklas looked his fill while he could. In a few hours she would be raging. In a few hours she would wake hating him.

"I wish there was another way, *Laharra*. If I had time, I would court you in the ways of your people." He held her close, pressing his cheek to hers. "I would have earned your trust, even given you a choice." He leaned down, pressing his lips against her forehead, inhaling her intoxicating scent. "Neither one of us has a

choice, Brianna. Our choices were taken from us the minute we both were born. This is our destiny.”

## Chapter Thirteen

“Is there nothing we can do about that incessant yapping?” Minra asked, holding her hands to her ears. She looked over her shoulder at Killer and scowled.

Niklas heaved a sigh. “Short of throwing him out of a decompression tube, I have no idea how to get that animal to stop making that constant noise.” He shook his head and looked down. The dog was chasing one of the crewmembers.

Killer nipped at his feet. The man half-ran, half-walked, while occasionally picking up his foot to shake him off when the dog’s teeth caught on material of his pants and was dragged along.

“Shona said the next time she catches him in the kitchens, she’s going to dice him up for supper,” Minra announced.

Niklas frowned, cast one last look over his shoulder as Killer found another crewmember to attack and turned back to Minra. “You tell Shona she will not touch a hair on his annoying little head. Or has she forgotten that annoying lump of fur belongs to her Queen?” He checked the security console briefly. “I

need to go check on her. She should be waking soon." He stood and walked from the bridge.

Niklas hated the way he'd had to bring Brianna. He knew she was going to hate him for it, but what else could he have done? At least he'd brought Killer. Perhaps she could forgive him one day. He knew she would never have forgiven him for the loss of her pet, which was the only reason he hadn't thrown him out a decompression tube. Yet.

When he reached the door to his room, he punched the security code onto the keypad and entered. Brianna lay on his bed, her hair spilled across the satiny pillow like a treasure of spun gold surrounding her. He sat on the bed, realized she wasn't sleeping, was in fact, trying to make him believe she was still unconscious and thinking of escape. His heart couldn't take much more of this. He needed her love, not her fear and distrust.

He watched her silently for a moment, hoping she would gain the courage to open her eyes and face him without coercion. She lay as still and as quiet as she'd been for the last few days. He sighed deeply. Could nothing ever be easy for him?

"*Laharra*, look at me. I know you no longer sleep," he spoke softly. He didn't want to remind her of their mind link. He knew it distressed her. Niklas placed his hand on her back and felt her stiffen beneath it. "You must eat. You have been asleep for two days. In that time, you have not had sustenance." She'd had no food or water for two days. No one could have known her body would have reacted this way to the *tronesa*. Most people only slept for an hour, perhaps two.

Sarcha, the ship's physician, had hypothesized since her body was not accustomed to the molecular transport perhaps the combination of the *tronesa* and the transport had been too much for her system to bear.

"Her body has been through a series of shocks, Majesty. It would have been far better if you hadn't used the *tronesa*."

"I had no choice. She was being unreasonable. She wouldn't listen to me. She had no intention of coming with us." He waved his hand in a gesture of dismissal.

"Still, it would have been more appropriate..."

Sarcha had left off at that, leaving Niklas with the feeling of being reprimanded.

Now, Niklas sat next to Brianna. Watching her, he knew she was awake, yet he loathed to force her to do anything more. He'd already taken her from everything and everyone she'd ever known. He was forcing her to accompany him to his world where she would know no one. He reached out and took her hand in his. *He* needed the contact, even if she didn't.

She jerked her hand from his and opened her eyes. Brianna looked at him, her eyes filled with contempt, her voice dripping with loathing. "Take me home," she demanded. "You had no right to bring me here." She slid to the other side of the big bed and wiped her hand off on the comforter as if his touch were somehow dirty.

Niklas reached for her, needing to make contact. "You know I cannot." He shook his head. Her anguish tore through him, a dull knife digging into his heart.

She pushed herself up, and swinging her legs over

the opposite side of the bed, sat with her back to him, her head down. "Take me home. You have no right to do this." Brianna stared at the wall in front of her as if she couldn't bear to look at him.

Niklas stood. He admired her strong will. He didn't know if he would be doing as well in her situation. "You know I cannot take you back home, Brianna. I need you, my people need you."

"You are so full of it, Niklas. No wonder your eyes are brown." Brianna stood, marched over to the curtained window and drew the cloth wide.

Niklas knew she had hoped to prove him a liar. He could tell she hadn't expected to see the darkness of space before her. The glittering stars streamed by as they raced back to *Terrna*. His heart ached for her. He watched as the fight drained from her, knew when she finally understood there really was no going back. He willed her to understand, hoping she could find it in her heart to forgive him one day.

Brianna's shoulders slumped, sinking down onto her knees. She held her head in her hands. Sobs racked her small frame.

Niklas tried to comfort her, but she shook him off. "I'm nothing more than your prisoner. A means to an end." She looked up at him with swollen, tear-filled eyes. "You never really wanted anything more from me, did you?"

Niklas stepped closer, reaching for her and stopped when he saw her flinch away. He closed his hand into a fist to keep from touching her again. A muscle ticked in his jaw as he fought for something to say. Anything that he thought she would believe. "You are so much

more than that, *Laharra*. You have to know, you are so much more to me than that."

"Don't... Don't you *ever* call me that again." Tears ran down her face. "If you truly cared about me at all, you wouldn't have done this," she choked the words out. Brianna wrapped her arms around her stomach, closed her eyes and inhaled deeply.

"I do care, *Laharra*. I care for my mother, my sister. I care for everyone on my world." He kept his voice flat, emotionless. If an unfeeling bastard was what she saw, what she expected, that was what she would get. "You must also understand, had I left you on your world, those who wish to stop me would see you dead. The man who watched us together on the beach would have killed you."

Brianna's breath left her with a whoosh. Her eyes darted to his, obviously wanting to see truth there.

Niklas resigned himself to the fact that she hated him now. He would save his world and, in the doing, would save her as well. But she would hate him for it. "Come, you need to eat."

\* \* \* \*

His voice was soft as he reached out, offering his hand. He was still trying to care for her. Even after the animosity she'd shown. She ignored his proffered hand and followed as he led her toward the dining area.

Brianna's eyes followed his movements. The way his long legs ate up the distance so effortlessly as he walked. How was she ever going to resist him? Even now, when she was furious, she was still attracted to



his dark good looks, his gentle, caring ways. How could she keep him from taking over her life?

She almost laughed aloud, barely stopping the sharp sarcastic sound. The last thing she wanted to do was draw his attention again. What was she thinking? He *had* taken over her life and she was still attracted. She just hoped she wouldn't get burned too badly. She tried to pay attention on their trek through the ship, wanted to know her way around. But following him through one corridor after another, she came to realize it was going to take a long, long time to learn her way around. This was no small vessel. She'd never find her way back to her room alone.

A thought shimmered in her head. Though it was very brief, and he'd tried to censor it, she understood. "I will not share a room with you, Niklas. If that's your room, I want another." Her tone was flat. She meant it. She refused to share his bed. He could force her to accompany him, but she refused to sleep with him again. Willingly.

He turned to look into her eyes. "You will stay where I know you are safe." His tone brooked no argument.

Brianna knew she was going to have to pick her battles wisely. So she decided to let that slide. For now. But if he tried to crawl in bed with her, she'd show him a few moves she learned from Amber. "Why would I be safer there?" she asked nonchalantly, sliding her fingers along the cream-colored wall as they walked. She quickened her pace to catch up with him.

"It has magnetic locks. Unlike the others, there is no way into that room without the codes." He shrugged,

"Unless, of course, you are foolish enough to grant entrance to someone without the codes.

"It is the only one with magnetic locks because..." Brianna wasn't sure how she felt about him thinking her foolish.

"Because it is mine." Niklas said with a smile that didn't quite reach his eyes.

She'd hurt his feelings. Big deal. He was a big boy. He'd get over it. He'd hurt her too, had taken her from everything and everyone she'd ever loved, Brianna choked back a sob. "Killer!" She'd never see his adorable face again. Never hear his high-pitched bark. Never see him proudly lay a wet, disgusting, spit covered mouse at her feet. Blinded by tears, Brianna stumbled in the corridor.

Niklas stopped and turned to face her. He grabbed her upper arms, lifting her slightly off her feet. "Stop this, Brianna, you are only making yourself ill!"

She could hear the anger in his voice, his expression was hard. He was trying to keep himself from projecting his emotions. He was angry. She may have been quick to condemn him, but what did he expect? She had no idea why he'd done what he had and she wasn't sure she cared to find out. She wasn't the one being irrational or unwilling to listen to reason. *He* was the one in the wrong, *he* was the kidnapper.

Niklas kept her shoulders in a firm grip, his thumbs brushing the clavicle on each side, causing gooseflesh to rise on her skin. "We left *nothing* behind, Brianna. Everything you had is here, on this ship. Everything." His eyes searched her face.

She could see his anger, felt it as it rolled from him

in waves. She felt his frustration, fear and helplessness where she was concerned. That knowledge allowed her to relax a bit. He was so used to being in control. He had no idea how to handle this situation where he had none. It almost made her feel better, knowing that he had no idea how to handle her.

Her ability to read his emotions grew every time they shared their minds. She felt his regret over her abduction, his love for her. She licked suddenly dry lips, looking everywhere, but at his too handsome face.

\* \* \* \*

Niklas was encouraged when she didn't wrench herself free of his hold. And she hadn't repeated her order not to touch her. Perhaps he was making progress. "Come with me, *Laharra*, and we will find you something to eat." He took her hand, tangling their fingers together.

They had been close to the ship's cafeteria, she could smell it, when they heard a shriek come from the other end of the corridor. Suddenly, Niklas was running toward the sound, heedless of his own safety.

"Stay behind me," he called over his shoulder.

His fear for her safety shimmered in Brianna's mind. What kind of job did he have that danger followed him onto his own ship? She ran to catch up with him. After all he had done, she still felt fear for him. She came to a halt just outside the door, standing behind him, his massive frame blocking the doorway, sheltering her from danger. His shoulders were shaking. Was he crying? No. He was laughing!

Another shriek rent the air, followed by high-pitched giggles.

Niklas raised his arm and, pulling her under his shoulder, entered the room, which was filled with strange looking equipment. A young woman lay on her back on a low flat table, surrounded by what looked like weights hanging suspended in midair. The woman was pinned. Killer stood on her hair, licking her face, behind her ears.

"Stop. Stop it," she said, her words barely intelligible. She was laughing so hard it was hard for her to speak.

"Killer!" Brianna cried. She ran to the woman, picked him up and hugged him to her. She looked at Niklas, tears in her eyes. He may be a Neanderthal, but he'd just earned some points. He'd brought Killer along. He must have known how much it would hurt her to leave him.

Niklas cleared his throat, his voice thick. "I told you we brought everything with us." He gave her arm a gentle squeeze.

"I thought you were just talking about my things, not Killer." Brianna said, still hugging Killer to her chest. She reached up with her free hand to swipe at the tears streaking down her face.

"Yes, well, I did say everything. Would you care to see the rest of your things?" He extended an arm toward the door.

She nodded eagerly. A smile brightened her face.

"After you have something to eat," he bargained, raising a brow.

"You've got a deal." Brianna agreed. Not only

because she wanted to be sure all her things were indeed on board this ship, but also because she was starving.

## Chapter Fourteen

“How big is this ship, Niklas?” Brianna asked, looking around the cargo bay in awe. Her whole house would fit just in this one space. It was like a warehouse, this one enormous room. Crates sat in one corner of the immense space, her furniture among them.

“It’s big, *Laharra*, the flagship of my...planet’s fleet.” He walked to the center of the room, then turned to indicate she should follow.

Brianna ignored Niklas’s outstretched hand and walked across the hold to her things. She searched through her furniture until she found her dresser behind her armoire and bookcases. She opened the top drawer, sighing with relief when she saw her things still there. “They didn’t remove anything from here, did they?”

“No, *Laharra*, everything is where you left it.” He moved closer. He wanted her to trust him. “Just as you left it.”

She looked at him, smiled sadly. “Not *exactly* where I left it, Niklas.”

\* \* \* \*

"What do you seek, *Laharra*?" Niklas hoped he hadn't made a huge mistake and taken the wrong woman. His heart told him she was the woman he sought, but only the *Heart of Terrna* could prove it. She may be his *El'edal*, but if she possessed the stone, she was indeed The One.

Brianna frowned as she dug through the dresser drawer. "I can't find my pendant. It should be in this drawer, but I can't seem to... Here it is!" She pulled a small box from the drawer, opened it and showed Niklas the stone.

He was in shock. It was a milky multi-colored orb, which began to glow when she slipped the chain over her head. A rainbow of colors glistened from it as she walked beneath the lights.

"*The Heart of Terrna*," Niklas whispered. His hand reached out of its own volition and he touched the stone. A brilliant sphere of white light surrounded them, warmed them, connected them and, for a split second, their thoughts were one.

He jerked his hand from the stone. He couldn't have moved faster had he been burned. He had seen Brianna's thoughts. Now he knew, not only was she frightened, but she still cared for him. She was angry that he'd forced her compliance and angrier still that she knew the faeries were on his side.

Niklas blinked. Had she actually seen the Fey on her planet of disbelief? He rubbed the back of his neck, and watched her through hooded eyes.

\* \* \* \*

“What was that?” she asked, her eyes round. She turned around in a circle, her face and voice filled with awe. The stone had never done anything like that before. She felt a surge of power when Niklas touched it. Instead of growing cloudy and dull, the stone actually brightened at the contact. Brianna had even gotten a glimpse into his mind. She saw *all* of his thoughts!

She felt his determination to save his people, his commitment to them, his resolve to marry The One. Her? He *did* say they were married. Niklas was determined to keep her safe at all costs, even at the cost of his very existence. He loved her more than his life. She swallowed around the lump in her throat. Tears threatened to come. They burned her eyes. How could she love this man so much after all he’d done to her, taken from her? She opened her mouth to speak, but her tongue seemed stuck to the roof of her mouth. “Niklas, I—” She managed before he interrupted her.

“Shh...I understand, *Laharra*.” Niklas stepped closer to Brianna, brought his hand up and cupped her face. He looked deep into her eyes.

He radiated sensuality, gentleness and raw masculinity. It was a heady combination that drew her to him like a magnet. She stepped closer, giving in to the overwhelming urge to smooth his hair down. He was always running his fingers through it, messing it up.

Niklas bent his head, took her lips in a long drugging kiss. *Laharra, how I have dreamed of this.* He



groaned, the sound coming from deep within him. It was as though she was a drug he was addicted to and powerless to resist.

She made a little sound in the back of her throat then moaned into his mouth. He could hear her heart hammering inside her chest. Lithe arms crawled up the broad expanse of his shoulders, wound around his neck, pulling him closer and deepening their kiss.

*You belong to me, Laharru, and no other.*

"I am overjoyed, *Laharra*. You have chosen to speak to me privately, using our mind link." His lips brushed hers lightly as he spoke and pulled away slowly. It was obvious that he didn't want to lose control and take her here in the cargo hold where anyone could walk in and find them.

Brianna clung to his shoulders, her legs weak. How did he do that to her? He always seemed to know what to do to keep her off guard. She still wasn't sure she wanted to forgive him.

"We'll go back to our room. Where you can keep this safe," Niklas said, touching the chain around her neck.

She looked down at the glowing stone. The intense gleam grew softer as they put distance between themselves. She reached up, touching it lightly with her finger. "It never did that before. Do you know why it was glowing, Niklas?" She tilted her head, watched him intently. "You know something about it. I could tell by the look on your face when I first took it out."

\* \* \* \*

He wanted to explain. He didn't want lies between them, knew he'd be very lucky if she decided to forgive him for kidnapping her. "We call it the *Heart of Terrna*." He turned, then paced away from her. "It belonged to Morwyyn. It was created and protected by him. Some say it belongs to the people of *Terrna*." He raked his hand through his hair.

"This stone has been in my family for hundreds of years," she said, covering the stone with her hand as if protecting it. "No one is taking this from me, Niklas. I won't allow it!"

He stepped closer, took her hand in his and was pleased when she didn't pull away. "I do not plan to snatch it away from you, *Mi Dara*. Although there are some who would, the evil one watching us on the beach for instance." He brought her closer, bent down and rested his forehead against hers.

"I would guess it has been passed through millennia not hundreds of years." He smiled grimly. "Morwyyn was very old on our world. It surprises me that he did not survive on yours." He took her arm and led her across the cargo bay to her sofa where they both sat down. "He escaped during the great uprising. He hid on Earth, even changed his name. You would know him as Merlin."

Brianna gasped, her eyes filled with wonder. "Merlin?" She shook her head. "How could the stone be so old? You said Morwyyn created it. If the legends are true, Merlin existed here sometime around the Middle Ages." She stood and began to pace.

Niklas watched her, knowing how she felt. The whole thing sounded absurd, yet it had happened just

the same. "Morwyyn and the stone disappeared from *Terrna* nearly two thousand of your years ago. No one knew where he had gone. He was charged with protecting the rightful Heir of *Terrna*. The stone, created for that purpose, has a mystical power best kept from the wrong hands." He stood, watching her carefully.

\* \* \* \*

Brianna frowned, thinking. She'd always known the stone had some inner power. There was an energy she'd always felt, which was easily perverted when exposed to the wrong element. "This is what the bad guys want?" She put a hand to her breast, closing her hand around the pendant, as if that action alone would protect it.

Niklas shook his head. "They want both of you. They know only you can wield the power contained within its depths."

"Me, why me?" she gasped, her eyes wide with alarm. Her body stiffened with shock and she began to sway back and forth.

He rushed to her side and thrust his arm out to steady her, before she toppled over. "You are a direct descendant of Morwyyn. *He* also had the power to wield the stone."

"Why didn't you just get another stone? Why didn't they?" She took a deep breath, shaking her head. She backed away from Niklas, her eyes wide, floored by the realization that she wasn't just *plain* Brianna anymore. She opened her hand and looked at the

pendant she'd loved for so long. She looked up into his eyes. "How could something so harmless looking cause so much trouble?"

He shrugged, a casual movement, which rippled the muscles beneath his shirt. Brianna turned away, trying to ignore the sight.

Even Niklas didn't understand many things, yet he had to try to explain them to her. He took her arm and gently led her from the huge room. "No one knows where the stone came from or how Morwyyn was able to charge it with his power. Some think it's just a legend, still others believe he engineered it somehow. Perhaps he did."

Brianna nodded and followed Niklas into an express lift. He spoke something in his language and the small room shifted slightly. "The *materia prima*," she whispered. Her hand closed around her pendant and felt it pulse against her palm. The energy radiating from the stone strengthened every time Niklas got near it.

What had Morwyyn done? What was it Morgaine said about him? Something about him having enough power to escape this world during the time of persecution or something like that? Morgaine had also said that her grandfather would be pleased. Present tense. The thought that he could still be alive was totally insane. Yet hope flared within her. Family.

The lift doors opened and she followed Niklas out into a familiar hallway. "How do you think Morwyyn could have created such a thing? Was he really so powerful?" Had her family retained possession of the famed philosopher's stone all these years?

Niklas turned, slowing his gait when he realized she was having a hard time keeping up. "It is said his mother was human, his father Fey. Morwyyn received the frailty of the human body, but was able to live in the realm of the Fey where he would not age."

Brianna shook her head to clear it. "What is that supposed to mean exactly?" She was surprised to see they'd already reached the door to his suite of rooms where he'd insisted she sleep. She'd been unaware that they were even heading in that direction. She'd been so preoccupied with her thoughts.

Niklas punched a complex code onto the keypad and the door opened quietly. "To put it simply, he was half-human and half-faery." Niklas threw her an odd look.

"I understood *that* part," Brianna said dryly. "So stop looking at me as if you think I'm dense." She crossed her arms and glowered at him. "I meant the part about his being able to live in their realm."

He ushered her into the room, then closed the door behind them and led her to the far corner. "Most stories about Morwyyn border on the fantastic. Some rumored him to be hundreds of years old." He chuckled. "Some even rumor him to still be alive, living in the faery realm."

"Why is that so hard to believe?" She walked across the room to sit down. She jumped up with a squeal when the seat began to conform to her size and shape.

"Relax, *Laharra*, it moves to make you more comfortable. There is no reason to be frightened."

Niklas crowded her back to the chair, holding her hands as she sat down. Enduring her death grip, he

held her wide-eyed gaze with a smile as the seat conformed to her size and shape.

"How am I supposed to get used to that?" Brianna looked down at the chair. Bending from the waist, she put her head between her legs to look under it. She wanted to figure out how it worked.

Niklas shrugged. "It has been thus all of my life."

She shrugged. "Of course, you don't know anything different."

Niklas shook his head. "But of course I know things are different in different places. I have the experiences of being on other worlds. Your world for instance," he said matter of fact.

"Of course, experiencing other cultures."

He nodded. "As you shall experience other cultures. Then perhaps our way will not seem so foreign to you."

Brianna nodded thoughtfully. She could understand that. A country with no understanding of computers might think a computer was strange. A world without space travel would think a spaceship was strange or magic. It made sense although for him it most likely worked in reverse.

Everyone thought his things were magic and he probably thought everyone else was strange. Brianna giggled at the thought. She clapped a hand over her mouth to stifle her laughter. She didn't want to have to explain *that* to Niklas. Carefully, she took the chain from around her neck and held it up to the light, watching the light shine through the milky depths of the stone. "What should I do with this? I don't think I should be wearing it like it's nothing if it's so

powerful." She dangled it out in front of her.

He reached out to take it, his hand palm up, waiting for her to trust him.

*How could I not trust you, Laharru. You wait for me to give you the stone when we both know you could easily take it.*

\* \* \* \*

Niklas inclined his head. He knew he didn't deserve her. He would spend the rest of his life trying to be worthy of his Brianna. Still, he waited for her to place the stone in his hand. When she hesitated for a single moment, he gave her a knowing look. He raised a brow, waiting.

She smiled softly and slowly lowered the chain until the stone rested in the center of his palm, then closed his fingers around it.

He felt the energy flow through them both.

"You should put this away before the power effects us. I don't know about you, but I can feel it inside of me, making me feel..." A blush dusted her cheeks.

Niklas felt it, too. The stone amplified their energy. Right now it amplified their frustrated sexual energy and they were both becoming very aroused. He turned to the corner and waved his hand, using his DNA to open a closet. The lock clicked open. Niklas reached inside and took out a box. He turned and motioned for Brianna to join him.

Niklas showed her the plain looking metal box. Brianna could see the drawers and wondered if it was the safest place for her pendant.

"If you press here on this side, then here on the top, this door will swing open."

Brianna watched with interest as Niklas hid the stone in a secret compartment.

He opened one of the drawers, showing her it was a toolbox.

"How clever." Anyone looking for it would either assume she was wearing it or check the jewelry box. Or some other place you'd keep valuables. Who would look for it in a toolbox? Brianna cleared her throat. "Niklas, why do you have a toolbox in your room? I don't mean to offend you, but you just don't seem like the type to repair things," she asked, curiously.

"There are times when I do my own repairs." He looked affronted.

She grinned, her eyes, showing her mirth. "*Excuse me*, I didn't mean to offend your masculinity. You just don't seem like the type, that's all."

He crossed his arms over his chest and frowned. "Just what type *do* I look like, Brianna?"

Shrugging, her sense of humor kicked into high gear. She walked past the table in the corner, sliding her hand over it as she walked. "Oh I don't know, you have this...presence or something. You have an authoritative attitude, like you're used to people doing everything you tell them to."

He snorted. "Like you do?" he asked, trying not to let the way she caressed the table have an effect on him, but he was having a hard time controlling himself. He watched while Brianna's hips swayed gently as she made a slow circuit of the room.

She turned, smiling over her shoulder. "I might.



You just haven't asked me in the right way. Yet." She winked and gave him a sultry look that left Niklas steaming.

"Would you care to elaborate on how I should proceed? Will you tell me the right way?" He was stalking her now.

\* \* \* \*

Brianna laughed. "I didn't mean right now, Niklas. You have a lot of explaining to do. And I want to see this ship." She backed away with her hand flung out in front of her.

The look in his eyes was hungry, predatory.

"I'm sorry for teasing you, I don't know what came over me." The smile melted from Brianna's face. She watched him, wary. "I don't know if I can just pick up where we left off. I don't even know if I can even trust you anymore." She tilted her head to the side, pinching her lip between her teeth. "I need some time."

Niklas's expression changed, became shuttered. He stopped his pursuit, leaned toward the wall and pressed a button next to a blinking yellow light on the communication panel. "This is Niklas. What do you need?" he asked in English. He paused, waiting for the answer. His head tilted to the side as he listened to the exchange in *Terrnan*. He turned his head and lifted his eyes. "I have to go. There seems to be some trouble on the bridge." He turned and left the room.

Brianna watched him go with mixed feelings. Part of her wanted him so badly she ached from it. Another part knew she couldn't trust him. She sat on the huge

bed and waited for it to change size. How in the world was she going to get used to *that*? Furniture wasn't supposed to move on its own. Shaking her head, she looked out through the window. Stars streamed by as she watched, like long streaks of light in the darkness of space.

What in the world was she supposed to do on this ship? She had no job, no real function other than chief complainer and head bitch. The damn thing even cleaned itself. She walked over to the replicator, deciding to figure out how to use it. She wasn't really hungry, but a nice piece of pie would help or chocolate. Brianna licked her lips at the thought. She loved chocolate. She brightened, chocolate pie she compromised. That would hit the spot.

She walked up to the replicator slowly. Reaching out with no small degree of trepidation, she punched a few buttons. The thing beeped and bleeped, which didn't seem like anything out of the ordinary. She waited a full minute before she realized it was going to take a while to learn how certain things worked around here.

Her stomach grumbled in protest. She put her hand on it and scowled. "Oh, shut up."

## Chapter Fifteen

She was going crazy! There was nothing for her to do here. Brianna tried to find something to do, even offered to help the cook, but no one would let her lift a finger. They treated her much the same as they treated Niklas. She scowled at no one in particular, thought of their earlier conversation and nodded to herself. She'd been right, Niklas did have presence. Everyone on this ship deferred to him. She figured that was normal since he was their Captain. But did they have to treat him like some sort of God? *Sheesh*.

It was obvious he was used to getting his way. He answered to no one while in space. "Spoiled rotten brat," she muttered. She wondered how well he followed orders from his superiors when he was home. Niklas didn't seem the type to bow to anyone else's judgment. Yet he made her feel like his partner, as if she'd had a choice in coming on this journey. She had to love him for that. He never treated her, or anyone else, as if they were beneath him. He was a man with an abundance of power, yet he didn't abuse it.

Niklas began sleeping in the regular crew quarters since he'd brought her on board. Brianna still didn't

know how she felt about that. Although she knew she would have been horrified had he demanded some sort of conjugal rights since he said they were married in the eyes of his people.

It was strange though. Everyone treated her like his wife even though they made no pretense of sleeping together. Niklas didn't even eat with her half of the time. The thought made her fret. "Why is he avoiding me? You'd think he'd want to patch things up." She paced the room, wondering what she could do to make him spend more time with her.

The crew acted strange around her, too. None of them wanted to call her by her name, even though Brianna had given permission to them several times. They all called her Ma'am. It made her feel like her mother.

Brianna left her quarters, determined to find Niklas. She couldn't stand it anymore. The sexual tension between them was tangible. It had to stop and so did this Ma'am business. She caught up with him just outside the cafeteria. "Niklas, we have to talk." Her hand on his arm, she stopped him from following Cholo into the room.

He smiled and took her hand. "We can talk over lunch." He seemed genuinely happy to see her, although it seemed he had been avoiding her for the last few weeks.

She held fast. He wasn't doing this to her again. "No, Niklas, we cannot talk over lunch. I need to talk with you alone." Brianna watched him intently. If she didn't know better, she would swear he was nervous. "Now."

"That would be wonderful, *Laharra*. Would you care to join me for lunch first?"

She watched his Adam's apple bob up and down as he swallowed convulsively. He turned to enter the door, about to leave her in the hallway.

She grabbed onto his sleeve. "Oh, no, you don't, mister. The last time I pinned you down, you wanted to have lunch. Then you conveniently had an emergency on the bridge. You told me to wait for you and I waited for two hours before I finally gave up, damn it. You're coming with me. Now!"

"Yes, ma'am," he said, falling into step behind her.

"Stop calling me that," she smacked him on the arm. "Everyone on this ship calls me ma'am. I'm sick of it."

"I'm sorry, *Laharra*, I didn't realize it made you uncomfortable. They do not feel comfortable calling you by your name."

"Why? Because I'm the captain's wife?" Brianna watched his reaction. The color rose from his neck and his face turned red. What was it that he was afraid to tell her?

"No, it is not because you are my wife." Niklas sighed. "Come with me." He took her hand and pulled her behind him to his quarters. She almost had to run to keep up with him, his stride was so long and he walked quickly. He spoke the pass code, pushed the door open, then shut it firmly behind her. When they were finally alone, he sighed looking down at his feet. He actually looked nervous.

"I wish I could have told you everything before I had to force you to come with me. You have been wonderful, considering the circumstances," he said as

he paced in front of her. "You could have spent days, weeks, ranting and raving, cursing me and my people, but you have been everything that is gracious." Niklas turned, put his hands in his pockets and heaved a sigh.

She listened, half bemused. Was he saying she was being too nice? She wished she had the power to read his thoughts when he didn't want her to. He was very good at setting up barriers. Besides, during the past weeks of separation, it seemed that she lost what little ability she'd had to read his mind. She swallowed, not at all sure she was ready to hear what he was going to say next. "What are you saying?" She walked to the bed and sat down. It had adjusted itself to her size earlier so it didn't move.

He raked a hand through his hair as he paced from one side of the room to the other. "I doubt you will like this. but I have put this off long enough. We are only a month from *Terrna* now and you must come to terms with this before we arrive."

Niklas *was* nervous. She'd never seen him like this before. He actually looked frightened. But what could he be afraid of?

"The way my crew treats you is very different from how the rest of my people are going to treat you. The members of the crew are getting to know you. Soon, they may call you by your name as they call me by mine. It took forever for them to do that by the way. Months." He smiled ruefully. He walked to the window, looking out into the darkness of space. "I need to ask you a question, your answer will hopefully give me the courage to continue." He turned to look over his shoulder. At her questioning look, he asked,

"Do you love me, Brianna?"

"Yes," she answered without hesitation. "Yes, of course I do. How else could I have come to terms with all of this so quickly? My love for you shadows the rest."

Niklas sighed with relief. "Then hopefully, that will help you with this also. The people on my world will treat you differently. You must expect that as your due."

"I don't understand. How will the rest of your people treat me? Will they resent me because I am an off-worlder?" Expect their disdain as her due? Well *that* hurt. She scowled, crossing her arms over her chest.

Niklas ran his hand through his hair again.

Brianna watched with a half smile, as he wreaked havoc on it. The short ebony thatch stood on end. She hoped he never stopped doing that. It gave her an excuse to touch him when she would otherwise have none. Standing, she moved to the window and looked out through the blackness of space.

"The rest of my people will treat you with much more respect."

Well, that was something, wasn't it? "Because I'm Morwynn's granddaughter?" It made sense in a weird sort of way.

"No," Niklas closed his eyes and sighed. "Because you are their Queen."

"What!" Brianna's stomach lurched and her heart drummed against her ribs, feeling as though it might burst through her chest. He couldn't possibly be serious! Her knees suddenly felt like rubber and she

had to emotionally pull herself together to keep from collapsing. "You can't be serious."

He looked at her in a way she would believe him. Had to believe him.

The authority in his voice, the nobility in his bearing could not be denied. Niklas drew himself up to his full impressive height. "*Laharra*, I am Niklas Tanis Marcious Voortag, High King of *Terrna*." He bowed, took her hand, then kissed it. Niklas lifted his head and looked into her eyes.

What could she do? She saw the hope in his eyes, the yearning. Knew he thought she was going to condemn him for not telling her the truth after all of this time. He was having a difficult time controlling his emotions.

Apparently she could still read his thoughts after all. He'd just been blocking them the past few weeks. Now that he was upset, she could feel them spilling over the barrier he'd built in his mind. She felt his fear of losing her, his love for her, his determination to keep her with him.

Tears ran down her face. "Why didn't you tell me? Why didn't you warn me that I was going to be a...a *Queen* before you asked me to choose?" Pain knifed through him. She felt it even though he disguised it well. She wouldn't have known if he had his emotions under control.

"Would you have chosen differently, *Laharra*?" he asked. "Would you have loved me any less?"

"Ooh, I hate it when you do that. You know it wouldn't have made a difference, you big goon." Brianna pushed at his chest and glowered when she



didn't budge him. "I would have liked to have had the choice," she snapped, her eyes spitting fire.

"You did have a choice," he shrugged. "And you chose me. Just because I am a king, it should be different?" He put his hands behind his back to keep from touching her. "If I had been a cook, should I have said, will you choose me even though I am a cook? Would it really have mattered to you?" He shook his head. "I refuse to believe you could be so superficial."

She blinked slowly. "You know it wouldn't have made a difference, I thought... Well, I don't know what I thought. I know I didn't expect you to be a king." She threw up her hands.

He cocked his head, raising that one eyebrow that drove her mad. "Do you think I expected to fall in love with a woman from another world. One with more power in her little finger than most of my people combined." His words were matter of fact. As if it should go without saying this staggering belief that he and his people had of her and her so called powers.

"I do not," she stomped her foot, crossing her arms over her chest. Brianna tried to ignore the fact it made her feel good that he even thought so, with her idiotic feelings and conservative upbringing. Yet she knew better. She may be a descendant of Merlin or Morwyyn or whatever the heck his name was, but it didn't mean she had any real power of her own. She said as much.

"Yes you do. I would bet you even cast a spell to bring me to you. That is probably why I was able to find you so quickly. Did you call to me, *Laharra*?"

Brianna felt the warmth steal up her neck. His eyes were teasing, the half smile on his lips inviting. She

shook her head, wanting to lie, but her honor wouldn't allow it. "Yes, I called to you. *After* I dreamed of you, you were searching for me. You seemed to need me so badly. I wrote a spell to draw you to me. Only I thought you needed someone to love. I had no idea you wanted a savior for your world. The whole idea is horrifying." She put her head in her hands.

Niklas stepped behind her and put his hands on her arms. "The prophecy is real. You were born to be Queen of *Terrna*. From the moment you drew your first breath, you were destined to be Queen. I do need you, *Laharra*, more than I have ever needed anyone. I love you," he said as he pushed a nervous hand through his hair.

The motion made her smile. "You have no idea how glad I am to hear that." She reached up and smoothed his hair down. He bent closer so she didn't have to stretch so far to reach him. His eyes held hers. A girl could lose herself in eyes like those, she knew that from experience. She was losing herself even now.

Niklas bent his head closer still and her arms wrapped around his neck of their own volition. Their lips met in a searing kiss. One made all the better from their long abstinence.

He wrapped his arms around her, pulling her close. His hands rubbed her hips, sides and back. He lifted her, carrying her to the bed as if she weighed little more than a child. Brianna was in awe of him, his strength and character. Niklas was literally the man of her dreams. *Love me, Laharru. Need me, as I need you.*

\* \* \* \*

Niklas could barely contain his elation. She had used their mental bond while lovemaking. Without coercion!

*I haven't yet, Laharru. She gave him a sultry smile. We are not making love. Yet.*

Still, Niklas was overjoyed, if only she would call him—he tried to banish the thought, didn't want to ask her to call him that. He wanted her to say it of her own free will.

*I didn't know you wished it, Mi Daru. I shall call you by no other endearment if that's what you wish.*

*I only wish for you to say it if you desire to, Laharra.*

*This whole talking while kissing thing is great. She smiled into his mind.*

He grinned against Brianna's lips. *I heard a wise Earth saying while on your world. Talk is cheap, Laharra. Let me show you more pleasurable pursuits.*

And he did.

## Chapter Sixteen

The crew began to relax around Brianna after three more weeks passed. They became even more casual when Niklas dragged her into the mess hall, her face and neck still pink from his kisses. He reintroduced her, to let them know they no longer had to hide his identity. In fact, he did it in a very matter of fact manner. He'd just waltzed her into the room and said in English, "Ladies and gentlemen, I present to you, your Queen."

The entire crew cheered. It wasn't hard to see the relief on their faces. Brianna stood slightly behind him and blushed. She knew everyone could tell what they had been up to.

Niklas could do nothing but grin. He looked at her and winked. *You put this smile on my face, Laharra. I was nothing without you.*

*You were King*, she thought indignantly, her smile still glued in place.

*I was a lonely king, one who did not even know the true meaning of the word love.* He gave her a smoldering look.

*Don't give me that load of bull. You loved your mother and your sister.*

*That is not the same, Laharra, and you know it.* Niklas wrapped his arm around her, pulling her forward within his embrace.

She resisted, wanting to stay behind him, using his body as protection. She raised her chin, determined to hold her ground. To the crew they were just a happy couple gazing into each other's eyes. *You were still loved, Niklas, but I will grant that platonic love has nothing on what we have together.* She wet her lips, biting back a smile, as she watched his gaze follow the path of her tongue. She couldn't resist moving it slowly across her mouth in a wanton display.

*You are right, Laharra. I never knew passionate love such as this.* He squeezed her gently. *Never before have I looked at one woman and knew I would want her over all others, for all time. Until you.* Niklas grimaced, causing her to elbow him when he added. *Even when I thought you had black hair and that horrible growth on your face, I still wanted only you.*

She blushed at the memory. To the crew's surprised delight, she put her arms around his neck, pulled his head down and kissed him thoroughly. *It must have been true love.*

He returned her kiss passionately, lifted her in his arms, leaving her feet dangling nearly a foot from the floor. The crew cheered, happy to see their King and Queen so well matched.

*You must be right,* he said as he set her on the floor.

Brianna stood next to him, swaying and shook her head to clear it. She looked up into his eyes. *Wanna go have some fun, big boy?*

Niklas raised an eyebrow, and inclined his head.

His eyes glittered mischievously and his brilliant smile seemed to light the room around them.

"How do you two do that?"

Niklas pulled his gaze from hers to look at the man who'd spoken. "Do what, Cholo?"

"It's as though you two are speaking or communicating with just a look. It's almost as if..." He shook his head. "No, that's just an old wives tale." He laughed.

Brianna laughed. "Don't be silly! Many married couples can make it seem as though they are communicating with just eye contact. It usually just means they wouldn't mind some time alone." She wagged her eyebrows at the crew.

"Then, by all means, take some time. Niklas needs an heir!" another crewmember shouted.

Brianna wished the floor would open up and swallow her. Where in the world had she learned to be so brazen? She would have been absolutely mortified had she not known it was all said in good cheer, that the crew really cared for Niklas.

"A Drink to our King, and our new Queen!" Hale cried and they all raised their cups in a toast.

"Now be off with you two and make us an heir so we will know the throne of *Terrna* is safe for another generation," Rodel shouted, waving his hands in front of him, shooing them from the room. He sent a knowing glance toward Minra, who blushed to the roots of her hair.

Niklas pulled Brianna from the room and they hurried down the corridor laughing. Niklas gained ground faster than she could with his long legs. He

turned, noticed her lagging behind, picked her up and carried her the rest of the way to their room.

Brianna was too overcome with laughter to try to fight him. "Put me down, put me down! I swear, one of these days you're going to hurt yourself doing that," she said through her giggles. She pushed against his chest, a futile effort against his superior strength.

He shook his head with a grin. "Perhaps. One day, when I am old and gray and you have grown fat from having too many babies," he said with a laugh. He spun around in a circle making her dizzy.

She stopped smiling. This was something she'd wanted to talk with him about for quite some time, but was unsure how to broach the subject. "How many children are too many, Niklas?"

He smiled and kissed her. "You do not have to have any children if that is your wish. I want you by my side for me. Not as a brood mare for my people."

She wanted to believe him, but she hadn't forgotten why she was here in the first place. "I wish I could believe that, Niklas. But you forget, I do know why you came searching for me and it *was* for your people."

He looked uncomfortable. "You're right to question me. I cannot say I wouldn't do the same. At first, I did want you to save our world. But I would not keep you with me if I didn't love you. I do love you, *Laharra*." He reached up and brushed a stray lock of hair from her forehead. "My sister is capable of giving my family heirs, if that is what you wish. You are more important to me than the continuation of my line."

Brianna sighed. That wasn't exactly what she'd wanted to hear. She'd wanted to hear he wanted a

dozen children and would still love her even if she did get fat.

"But I would, *Laharra*, I will love you always. You are my *El'edal*."

She pulled away, turned toward the window and watched the stars stream by. It never ceased to amaze her that there were windows on this ship. Smiling sadly, she turned, walked toward the bathing chamber and looked into the mirror hanging on the wall. "I keep forgetting you can do that. Birthday presents are going to be a problem for us, aren't they?" She looked at Niklas over the shoulder of her reflection.

He chuckled. "My mother is going to love you. She always said I would fall in love with a woman with more fire and sense than I would know what to do with." He picked her up and carried her to the bed. After setting her down, he lit some candles then strode to the door and switched off the light. "It seems she was right." He shook his head slowly. "How do you say it?" He paused. "I shall never live it down."

"Your mother?" Brianna's look was apprehensive. She cast her eyes downward, wetting suddenly dry lips. "I didn't think about your mother."

\* \* \* \*

Niklas watched her tongue travel across her lips. A fire grew in his blood like an inferno. She had no idea how sexy it looked when she did that or when she pushed the heavy fall of hair from her face as she was doing now. He nearly groaned with wanting her. "Yes, we will be home soon, not quite a week from now."



"A week?" Brianna squeaked. She couldn't keep the alarm from flaring in her eyes. She had known they would eventually reach his planet. But so soon?

Niklas felt her fear and apprehension rise and he rushed to her side. "What's wrong, *Laharra*?" His gaze was searching. "What is wrong with you? You weren't this upset when you discovered I abducted you."

Brianna shrugged. It was a small graceful movement of her slender shoulders that drew his attention to the thin column of her neck. "Just nerves, I guess. I'm not sure I'm ready to meet your family. What if they don't like me?" Her eyes filled with tears. She wanted him to be happy. What would she do if his mother didn't like her?

"She will love you, *Laharra*, if only because you make me happy." He enveloped her in his arms, giving her the comfort she craved. He opened his mind, sharing his memories with her. His mother scolding him for leaving his world. Her happiness when she found out he was going in search of a bride. He held her shoulders, looking into her tear-filled eyes.

She won't care that I'm not from *Terrna*?" Brianna sniffed.

Niklas smiled, held her to him. "She will only care that I have finally found my *El'edal*. The most important thing to her is my marriage and the possibility of grandchildren in the near future."

Brianna's smile wobbled a bit. "She does have that."

\* \* \* \*

"Then you agree to have my children?" He appeared to

be holding his breath. Apparently, children were a bit more important to him than he let on. The action endeared her. She knew if she said no, he would readily agree, although it was obvious he desperately wanted children.

"Only our children, *Laharra*. But I would not force you to bear even one, if you do not wish to."

Brianna looked at him and nodded. "I agree, Niklas. I will bear your children. One quite possibly in the very near future." Her eyes were wide, searching.

Niklas stilled, his face unreadable. He paused, his hand stopped in midair as he reached toward her hair.

She nervously licked her lips, wished she knew what he was thinking, but this time his thoughts were his own. This mind bond thing was pretty cool, but it definitely wasn't very reliable.

He tilted his head, looked at her. His eyes grew bright and he blinked, clearing his throat several times. "Are you saying that you are — That we are going to —" When comprehension dawned, his grin was blinding.

Brianna blinked. He was happy? His smile was beautiful. *He* was beautiful. She'd often wondered if he could get more handsome. Well, apparently he could.

Niklas rushed to her side, picked her up in his arms and twirled her around the room.

Ooh, Boy! He was ecstatic. She began to feel sick and held her hand over her mouth. If he didn't stop soon, she was going to embarrass herself. She looked down and had the ridiculous thought that this carpet wasn't green.

Niklas caught her last thought and stopped twirling her immediately. Only it was too late.

*I'm going to be sick!* She didn't dare open her mouth.

He rushed her to the bathroom. They reached the basin just in time.

"Somehow, I don't think being pregnant is going to be any fun at all." She leaned over the sink for several moments before she rinsed her mouth and stood. Niklas helped her clean up, took her to the bed and called Sarcha.

Sarcha arrived with his medical supplies. He looked around confused. "Is there a problem, Your Highness?" It was apparent that neither one of them was seriously ill. He obviously wondered why he had been summoned. He looked around the room once more, blinking owlishly.

Nothing seemed to rattle the doctor. Brianna would bet everything she owned that Sarcha's hair could catch on fire and he would simply walk to a sink and stick his head under the faucet. She could even picture him saying. *My hair is on fire? Big deal, it just needs a little water...* The thought made her want to giggle, but she coughed instead. Somehow, she didn't think either of them would appreciate humor now. This felt like it was going to turn into a big deal. Good grief, she hoped they didn't start treating her like some porcelain doll or something.

"Brianna needs a complete physical, Sarcha. She hasn't been feeling well for the last few..." Niklas shot her an inquiring look.

"Weeks."

Niklas raised an eyebrow, giving her that look she'd seen him use on others when he felt he should have been informed of something. It was a look she'd seen

him direct at members of the crew often over the last months.

“A few weeks?”

Brianna gave him a sheepish look and shrugged. “I thought it was nerves. You have to admit I *have* been under quite a bit of stress lately. To tell the truth, I didn’t think much of it at first. At least not until everyone started talking about heirs. Then I realized that must be what has been wrong with me.”

Sarcha began his examination, looked into her eyes. He took her pulse, normal things that surprised her. She didn’t expect him to take her pulse.

*How else would we know if we were alive?* Niklas was laughing at her now. He knew she had no experience with aliens to speak of.

*Aliens?*

*More advanced life forms. Does that make you feel better?* She felt like sticking her tongue out at him.

He gave her a smoldering look. *I like your tongue.* He smiled slowly. *I can think of lots of interesting things that involve the use of that particular part of your anatomy.*

Brianna looked away and blushed. That just wasn’t fair.

“How have you been feeling, Highness?” Sarcha asked. His eyes were on hers now. With the examination paused, the doctor was exercising his bedside manner. He frowned a bit, reached out and touched her forehead. “Your color is up, have you been feeling feverish?”

She shot Niklas a dirty look before she turned back to the doctor. “I’ve been really tired and sick to my stomach. I’ve been having a hard time keeping things

down when I eat."

"Um hmm... Have you, ah, missed your cycle?"

Brianna blushed again. "Yes I have."

Sarcha pulled a small square box from his kit and held it over her stomach. He smiled. "I am honored to be the first to congratulate you both." He turned and smiled at Niklas.

"We're pregnant?" she squeaked. She'd hardly dared hope. Although she'd known Niklas so short a time, she knew this was right. She wanted to spend the rest of her life with him and bear his children—even though he could be an overbearing, anal-retentive jerk.

"Yes, Highness, you are." He looked at the results of the remarkable test he'd taken. Sarcha nodded. "By my calculations, you are three months along."

"Three months?" they said in unison.

Sarcha smiled again. He gave them both an understanding look. "I would guess it happened at your bonding."

Niklas grinned.

Brianna frowned. "You're looking awfully proud of yourself." She looked at Sarcha. "You'd think he was the first man to get a woman pregnant or something," she said dryly. The doctor looked up at her and smiled.

Sarcha gathered his things together. His testing device beeped, drawing his attention. His smile grew wider. He turned back to Niklas.

"Your mother will be *very* pleased. I must remember to congratulate her on the impending arrival of her grandchildren."

"Twins?" Brianna cried. This was unbelievable. "I'm having twins?" Her face was a mask of shock.

Sarcha shook his head. "Triplets, two boys and a girl. Again, congratulations, Majesties." Sarcha bowed, then left during the stunned silence.

Brianna burst into tears and Niklas was still in a state of shock, a smile firmly planted on his face.

"Triplets?"

"Is that all you can say?" Brianna cried. "You never told me how many children you wanted. How many are too many, Niklas?" Brianna sobbed. She was going to get fat, *really* fat.

Niklas sat on the bed next to her and pulled her into his embrace. "Such silly things you think, *Laharra*." He kissed the top of her head.

\* \* \* \*

"I will be honored to watch you grow heavy with my child. Children," he amended. "You will only grow more beautiful as their lives grow within you." He reached down, covering her still flat stomach with his hand. He rocked her gently as the sobs subsided to little hiccups.

Niklas held her until her body went limp with exhaustion and her eyes drifted closed. Still he held her. He sat on the bed holding his life in his arms and thanked the Gods that he found her.

## Chapter Seventeen

With the initial shock over, Brianna was forced to come to terms with the fact that in just six short months she would be the mother of three. "Triplets?" She laid her hand over her stomach.

Niklas assured her that he was thrilled to know triplets were on the way. "*Laharra*, how could I not be pleased to know that we have been blessed so well, so soon?"

"Just what the hell is *that* supposed to mean?" Brianna shouted, tears in her eyes. "You think three is too many, don't you? Oh God! I'm going to get so fat," she rolled away from him, sobbing.

Nervous, Niklas ran a hand through his hair. This was untried ground for him. He had no idea how to handle a hysterical pregnant woman. "I said no such thing, *Laharra*. I merely said we have been blessed."

She sat up and wiped her face with her hands. "I'm sorry. I don't mean to be such a baby. I know it makes you uncomfortable." She gave him a weak smile. "You're always so in control of everything. I know it must pain you to not know what to do with me when I get so emotional."

Niklas sat facing her. He leaned forward and framed her face with his hands. "Why would you think you disappoint me, *Laharra*? You could never do that." He kissed her softly on the forehead.

\* \* \* \*

She wrapped her arms around him, her hands resting against his firm muscular back. "I hope not. I do love you. I wouldn't want anything to come between us. Ever."

"I would have nothing between us as well, *Laharra*."

Brianna held him tighter, reveled in the warmth of his embrace. "Would you just hold me for now, Niklas?"

"I would hold you forever, *Laharra*," he replied, rocking her in his arms.

She heard the soft strains of a song. It was beautiful, although she didn't understand the words, and comforting. She drifted toward sleep in Niklas's arms, listening to him sing in his language. He had such a beautiful voice. It was a shame she didn't understand the words he sang so beautifully.

"Tonight I will give you a language disc to listen to. It is time for you to learn the language of your people."

"Yes, Niklas," she whispered. "Niklas?"

"Yes, Brianna?"

"I love you, *Mi Daru*." She tilted her head back. Even half asleep, there was no mistaking what she wanted.

\* \* \* \*



He grinned and placed a kiss on her puckered lips. "Rest, *Laharra*, while I hold you safe in my arms." His answer was a soft snore. Niklas bowed his head and prayed. He thanked the Gods for bringing them together. He wondered what wonderful thing he had done in his life to deserve her.

Her charm, wit, and sense of humor would be legendary on *Terrna*. His *El'edal* could make a weeping woman laugh and a grieving man smile. He blinked as the moisture in his eyes threatened to overflow. He hadn't shed a tear since reaching manhood, yet they threatened to come now. He smiled down at Brianna. He had his *El'edal* to thank for that. She had awakened his slumbering heart.

He bent his head toward hers, his lips brushing her hair, inhaling deeply. He took in the sweet scent that was his Brianna. She always smelled sweet, like berries. He would be forever grateful for her, his beautiful gift from the Gods.

\* \* \* \*

Brianna slept comfortably in his arms, more so than she had in the last few weeks. She woke after an hour, feeling refreshed and hungry.

Niklas surprised her by suggesting an evening alone in their quarters. He even replicated a pizza for the occasion.

"I thought I would never see another pizza again," she cried, snatching up a slice. She crammed half a slice in her mouth as if she'd been starving.

Niklas smiled, pleased. He would have replicated more Earth foods for her, had he known she would react this way. She ate more tonight than he'd seen her eat at any one time in the last three months on board. He wondered if her eating habits had contributed to her weight loss. Before, he had attributed her failing appetite to her upset over being abducted, then her pregnancy. Perhaps she didn't find *Terrnan* food enjoyable. The thought never occurred to him that she might have been missing the culinary delights of her world. He would have to change that.

"I would like to see you eat like this more often, *Laharra*," He said, watching as she took a third slice of pizza. "You are growing far too thin. Even now, when you should be gaining weight and getting thicker around the middle, you are too thin. I have been growing worried about you." He watched her eat, his elbow resting on the table, his chin in his hand. He'd been even more worried since he found out she was pregnant, carrying their children. She should be gaining weight by leaps and bounds, not losing it to the point of emaciation.

He observed her closely, troubled. When had those dark crescents appeared beneath her eyes? He noticed for the first time how her clothing hung from her like poorly fashioned sacks. She'd lost so much weight. Why hadn't he noticed it before? Had he been so self-centered, worrying only about himself and his people?

Niklas berated himself. She was in his care and he was failing her. She had gifted him with her heart, soul and body, and he had abused her trust by neglecting her health. He had been ignoring her needs for his own

base desires. Never again would he fail her. Never again would he make the mistake of placing his own needs above that of his Beloved.

"Thank you for the pizza, Niklas. It was delicious," Brianna said, licking her fingers.

Niklas, distracted, watched as she stuck the tips of her fingers into her mouth. He swallowed repeatedly trying to keep his mind on mundane things. Not what that tongue would feel like sliding over his body. What it would feel like if she took him into her hot, wet mouth. He shook his head and looked away. "Excuse me?"

Brianna smiled. "What were you thinking? You looked like you were a million miles away."

He stood up, gathering the dishes. "I was just thinking that I have never seen you enjoy a meal more."

"And you probably won't see me enjoy a meal more. Pizza is my all time favorite." She stood and helped him remove the dishes. They took them to the replicator counter and set them down. "You know, I'll never tire of seeing the dirty dishes disappear before my eyes. No more dishpan hands or food particles stuck to the clean dishes in the dishwasher. Woo hoo!"

Niklas grinned, "It is fast becoming one of my favorites as well." He found, to his surprise, that he would gladly consume dirt if she would only keep eating like she did tonight. "What other kinds of foods do you like? I had Shona program the replicator with hundreds of Earth dishes I thought you might enjoy."

"Why didn't you tell me that before?" Brianna asked. "Do you mean to tell me that all of this time that

I've been trying to choke down that other stuff you call food, you were capable of feeding me something I like?" She shot him a dirty look.

Niklas shrugged. "I honestly didn't think of it before. Besides, you do have to get used to eating *Terrnan* food. It will be served at State dinners and other formal events. It wouldn't do to have our Queen gagging on the food at a bureaucratic dinner."

\* \* \* \*

Brianna sighed. "I suppose you're right. Let's make a deal, one day on, one day off."

Niklas looked at her, his head tilted to one side. "Let me see if I understand you correctly. One day you eat Earth dishes, the next you eat *Terrnan*?"

She nodded, "Yes, except for cravings." She shook her finger at him. "Cravings don't count. If I'm craving Earth food, you have to give it to me, even if it's not the right day." She shuddered. "The same goes for *Terrnan* food. Although I don't see *that* happening." She looked at him and grinned. "Especially if it's in the middle of the night."

Niklas raised his brow.

She loved that about him. He looked so darn sexy it made her shiver.

"Do you plan on having many of these midnight cravings?"

She shook her head. "Oh, I hope not. I plan on keeping you busy in other ways," she skimmed her hand lightly up his arm to cup his cheek. "Just look at the bright side."

He looked skeptical. "There is a bright side to getting up in the middle of the night to replicate food for these cravings you expect to get?"

"Sure there is. At least you won't have to run to a twenty-four hour grocery store. All you're going to have to do is hotfoot it to the replicator."

Niklas leaned down and nuzzled her neck. "Hmmm...hotfoot it to the replicator, huh? What's in it for me?"

Brianna put her hands on his broad shoulders and swallowed thickly. "Um..." She licked her lips and tried again. "I um...think we could arrange something."

"A trade of some sort?" He nibbled her ear, suckling the lobe softly.

"Um hmm."

He slid his tongue around her ear, holding her as her knees gave way. "We may have a deal, Your Highness."

"Oh, yes," she breathed. "I believe we do."

Niklas straightened, keeping one hand on Brianna, holding her steady. He reached behind him and pulled a case from the shelf behind him. "First, you have to listen to this. You only have one more month left," Niklas said as he opened the case. He pulled out a flat orange piece of plastic. At least it looked like plastic.

Brianna frowned. "What's this?" She took it and turned it over in her hands, examining it.

"It's the language disc I've told you about." He took the disc from her and placed it into a slot on the wall. He then opened a small drawer and took out two very small items, which resembled ball bearings. He placed

them in her ears. Soon she could hear soft strains of music. Oh! They were headphones, well, sort of. "Wait, this must be the wrong disc. I only hear music."

"That is all you will hear, *Laharra*. It is a subliminal disc."

"Oh, I guess I wasn't paying attention when you mentioned it before. Sorry." She bit her lip and shrugged.

"No need for apologies, my love. You have had much on your mind of late."

"You're not kidding. That's the understatement of the year." She smiled crookedly. "How does this work? Do I have to be listening or does it work whether I'm paying attention to it or not?"

"It works best when you are quiet, or sleeping, but it is working now as well."

Brianna nodded. "Cool, I don't suppose you have any of these on math or science do you?" Her look was so hopeful it made Niklas grin.

"Sorry, all of the educational discs are on *Terrna*. We only have the language discs with us," he apologized.

Brianna frowned. "Bummer."

"Why don't you lie down and listen to the disc while I take your mind off talking for a while. Niklas leered at her.

She gave him a scorching look. "Sounds promising. Just what did you have planned?"

Niklas stepped closer.

She grinned and backed up. It was a dance, one of seduction. He took one step forward, then Brianna, one step back, until she backed into the edge of the bed. Brianna knew that look. She struggled to keep her

breathing slow and even. Heat already pooled in her stomach. It was a slow burn that began as soon as he looked at her with need in his eyes.

He took her in his arms, gently laid her on the bed and covered her body with his own, careful not to put too much weight on her. Desire burned in his eyes. His mind was a smoldering sensual haze, filled with hunger and love for her, combined with the yearning he felt for her body. Their minds melded, and as before, their link grew stronger. Every melding brought them closer, their hearts, minds and souls.

Brianna felt the clothing separating them. The whisper of her silk camisole slipping over her skin, the rough material of the jeans he'd come to love wearing, scraped sensuously against her skin.

He removed her clothing slowly, reverently. Indulging himself, he kissed every inch of her newly exposed body. When he finally removed her panties, revealing the golden hair at the apex of her thighs, Brianna was writhing on the bed. Her mind, unable to focus on anything, but the ache deep in her belly, she barely kept herself from crying out for release.

He kissed her lower abdomen, licking his way from one hip to the other. He lapped at her skin, tonguing the crease of her thigh. Brianna's breath hitched with anticipation. Part of her wanted this, the other wanted him to enter her, to feel him thrusting against her with abandon.

He dipped his head to her moistened center and she moaned her pleasure. She fisted her hands in the sheets. Then they moved to bury themselves in his ebony hair of their own volition.

He suckled and laved, bringing her to a fevered pitch. Brianna screamed her release, grinding her hips upward, her thighs closing, holding him against her.

Niklas crawled his way back up her trembling body. He kissed her briefly, allowing her to taste her essence. Then pulled away slowly to stand and remove his clothing.

He towered over her, his bronzed skin glistening with a fine sheen of perspiration. Brianna let her gaze wander lower, giving him a seductive smile. He *was* tan all over.

He slowly lowered himself to the bed. His warm skin brushed against hers, the downy hair on his chest teased her erect nipples. He kissed her deeply and suddenly she couldn't think. She only knew she wanted Niklas beyond the sex, beyond his good looks. She loved him more than life itself. In that moment she realized she would gladly die for him.

*As I would die for you, Laharra. You are my love, my life. I worship you.*

Brianna moaned. His mouth did such wonderful things. No man should be without a mouth like his. He knew exactly where to nibble and lick to drive her crazy. She tossed her head back and forth on the pillow, panting, unable to catch her breath.

Niklas suckled her breast and she moaned his name, her arms wrapping around his shoulders, her fingers burying themselves deep in his ebony hair. His fingers parted the folds of skin between her legs, felt the moisture and pushed his fingers deep within her.

He pushed his fingers further inside her tight channel, his thumb rubbing her hard nub. Brianna's



hips arched off the bed.

The scream started deep within her. It began as a small groan. His fingers pushed upward, toward her belly, increasing her pleasure yet again. "Niklas!" She screamed. Her body stiffened, jerking with small spasms, until she collapsed under him, her muscles, once tightened reaching for her climax, now spent. She touched him with a trembling hand. She wanted to give him pleasure. She reached downward.

Niklas captured her hand and kissed it. "Next time, *Laharra*. This time is for you." His dark eyes gazed into hers. "I wish to worship your body." He looked down the length of her, then back to her eyes. "The body that carries my children." He kissed her again.

If Brianna had been about to say something, she'd forgotten what it was as she wrapped her arms around him, kissing him deeply.

Niklas placed his hand over her still flat stomach. His large hand nearly spanning from hip to hip. "It is hard to believe the evidence of our love grows right here." He looked down at his hand, flexing it, wondering at the miracle concealed in her womb.

She spread her legs wider, giving him better access to the warm cradle of her hips as he eased into her slowly, moving cautiously back and forth, he rocked gently. He didn't want to hurt her or the babes she carried deep within her.

Brianna moaned. The thought was endearing, but she needed more. So much more. She looked up at him. His lips were pressed together in a near grimace. The muscles of his neck and shoulders bulged from the effort he expended. She could see his pulse in the

protruding vein in his neck. "Harder, Niklas." She urged, knowing he was holding back.

"I don't...want to hurt you, *Laharra*." His breathing was labored, more of a pant. The beads of sweat on his brow confirming that it was a struggle for him to hold back, to keep moving as slowly as he was.

She chuckled, opened her mind further to him. "Now if you hurt me, you will know. You can hear my thoughts, can't you? Now you know what I want, what I need."

With a groan, Niklas plunged into her. He felt her pleasure as well as his own. His deep thrusts bringing them both closer to the edge.

Brianna wrapped her legs around his waist, giving him better access, making it possible for him to thrust still deeper into her. Their pleasure increased, magnified by the mind sharing between them.

They moved together, each of them giving pleasure, each taking until they reached their climax at the same time. Alone, yet together, crying out their release. Afterward, they lay in each other's arms, spent, their legs entwined, a fine layer of perspiration covering them both.

"I didn't know sex could feel like that," Brianna sighed, sated. Her hand sifted through the soft hairs on his chest. "Had I known it could feel like that before, I may not have held out for Mr. Right." She grinned impishly.

Niklas pinched her bottom.

She yelped. "Hey!"

He smiled and soothed it with a caress. "Sex doesn't feel like that," he groused. "*That* was making love."

"There's a difference?" Brianna asked, looking a little *too* innocent. She knew it was a loaded question.

Niklas turned onto his side. He wanted to look into her eyes when he said this, so there would be no misunderstanding. "Yes, *Laharra*. There *is* a difference. Sex can be gratifying if you don't want or need a commitment. It can relax you, help you vent frustrations." He closed his eyes, looking for the right words. "What we have is different. I have had sex, Brianna, I can tell the difference. *We* make love."

She frowned. "How is it different, Niklas?" Her hand skimmed down his chest to his stomach. She felt the involuntary clenching of his already firm stomach muscles. He must be ticklish there. She filed that bit of information away to think about later. Right now, she had a different kind of mischief on her mind. Her hand slid lower. Oh, yes. Her husband was a *very* virile man.

\* \* \* \*

Niklas swallowed convulsively, trying to keep his voice even and his body under control while she teased him. "Sex is two people coming together to release sexual tension for the sheer pleasure of it." He tried to shrug, but the movement was beyond him. She was driving him mad.

"There are many reasons for it. They are usually concerned with their own pleasure, their own release." He reached up, cupping her face between his hands. "Making love is between two people who love each other, who want nothing more than to please each other."

Brianna bit her lip. "And were you this way, Niklas? You had sex, primarily for your own pleasure?"

Niklas dropped his hand after a moment, thoughtful. She made it sound so base. *Had* he been that way? He frowned. If he were to be truthful, could he say he'd cared at all, for any of the women he'd lain with before her? Niklas closed his eyes and nodded. "Until recently." He wasn't sure if he could explain the change in himself, but he *had* changed. She needed to know that. He didn't have to read her thoughts, he could see it in her eyes.

"What happened recently?" She stopped fondling him, and bringing her palm to his chest, rested her chin on the back of her hand.

"About eighteen months ago, I began to have strange dreams. Dreams of a woman I never met. I wanted her, needed her, but I could never see who she was." Niklas looked at her, a tortured expression in his eyes. "Since that first night, I had been unable to...perform. I tried a few times, but I couldn't. No woman could hold my attraction once I got them alone."

"But I did," she said with a smile, moving her chin to rest on his chest. "As I recall, you couldn't keep your hands off of me."

Niklas squeezed her, rocked her back and forth. Thankful she was able to tease him at least. "I think *you* were the woman in my dream. I was looking for you. In more ways than I could possibly have imagined."

"Hmm... I think I like the idea of you not having had sex for so long."

Niklas threw her a mock glare. "You can joke about

it, but my pride didn't care for it at all. It was embarrassing to say the least."

She was instantly contrite and hugged him to her. "Oh, you poor baby, I'm sorry. I didn't think about it that way. You must have been mortified."

He nodded. "I questioned my manhood once or twice. It humbled me. And after a while, sex no longer appealed. Until I met you." He kissed her deeply. "Believe it or not, the black wig and hairy growth didn't deter my libido a bit when I saw you."

She snorted her disbelief. "That must have *really* been love."

"It was, *Laharra*. Now, let me continue to teach you the difference between having sex and making love," Niklas whispered into her ear just before he kissed her.

"Oh, I'm going to show you what a good student I can be," she said with a smile. "I intend to follow your instruction for the rest of the night."

## *Chapter Eighteen*

Brianna bolted upright. “What in the world is that?” Ripped from sleep, she looked up toward the ceiling. The shrieking noise that came from the speakers over the bed was almost deafening.

Niklas was already out of bed, struggled into a flight suit. He threw a smaller one at her. “Put this on, hurry!” He rushed to the security console, pushed a button and spoke into it quickly.

Too quickly for her to follow.

“We have to get to the bridge. Now!”

He was by her side in a flash, helping her into the jumpsuit he’d thrown at her. She was surprised to see that it fit. When had he gotten this? There was no time to ask. He was rushing her out through the door.

“What’s wrong? What’s happening?” She trotted by his side. His pace was so fast, walking was out of the question.

“We’re under attack.” His face was grim, a muscle jumped in his jaw. Niklas approached the door to the bridge, pushed it open and disappeared to the other side.

Brianna paused, watched as the door closed behind

him. She placed her trembling hand on the smooth surface. What in the world was *she* doing here? What could she possibly do? It wasn't even as if she actually knew how to do anything on board this monster of a ship. No one would let her! She shrugged. One thing was certain, she wasn't going to be able to do anything hiding here in the corridor like a chicken. She needed to show Niklas and his people that their Queen was no coward.

Brianna took a deep breath and pushed through the door entering the bridge. When she got her first glance at the viewscreen, her mouth dropped open. "My Gods, it's huge!"

Niklas threw a glance her way. His expression unreadable, his mind closed to her. This couldn't be good if he'd resorted to blocking his thoughts.

Spearing Niklas with a terror-filled glance, she pointed at the viewer, her hand shaking with fear. "Is *this* ship that big?"

Niklas sighed, running a hand through his hair. "No, *Laharra*, she is ten times our size and ten times our strength. There is only one purpose for a ship like that, war. She is a Leviathan." He looked around the bridge. "The Conquest was build for speed and defense, but not for war."

"But isn't there anything we can do? Any way we can fight?" Her eyes were wide with terror.

Niklas smiled grimly. "I admire your courage, *Laharra*, but we are outmatched in every way."

Brianna looked around the bridge, her gaze flying from one console to another. There was something, there had to be. "Why are they attacking us?"

Their eyes met. His were tortured. He looked at his crewmembers, his friends. Then his gaze turned back to Brianna. "Someone has been trying to stop us since we first left *Terrna*. This is just another attempt to keep us," he shot her a glance, "keep *you* from fulfilling your destiny."

"But why? Who would want to see the destruction of your world?" She couldn't keep herself from staring at the huge, terrifying ship.

Niklas's eyes hardened. "I don't know. The scroll written by Morwyyn only speaks of you and a great evil."

"We need to find out." She went to him, leaned against him needing the illusion of his strength.

Niklas wrapped his arm around her, grounding her to him, knowing she needed his comfort. He sent soothing thoughts to her as his heat seeped into her shivering body. "There is no way to find out without capturing one of our enemies and they elude us at every turn."

"Sure, there is," Brianna pulled back to look up at him. We can ask the faeries. They said they would help if we needed it. I would call this needing it." Brianna chewed on her thumbnail, wondering if this was the right thing to do. Depending on Larin's mood, he could either save them or feed them to the sharks, so to speak.

Niklas gave her an incredulous look. "The faeries? You have actually seen the Fey? Spoken to them?"

"Haven't you? Doesn't your world welcome them?"

Niklas nodded. "Well, yes, but there is only one left on *Terrna*. She resides with the witches of *Nasha*. The



others of the fey disappeared during the uprising. Perhaps they went to another world." Perhaps they had gone to her world, followed Morwyyn there, to protect him.

Brianna looked thoughtful. "Or just maybe, like my world, man became jealous of their powers and immortality, and the faeries decided to remove themselves to prevent tempting the mortals."

Niklas agreed. "Perhaps. But why would they not come now when our need is so great?"

She frowned. She didn't have the answer to that question. "I was told that they sealed themselves away from mortals, to protect themselves and others." She paced away from him, trying not to look at the huge ship looming on the viewscreen like the giant predator it was.

"When someone from this realm summoned them in such a manner that they could hear, they would be free to return. I summoned them. I have no idea how, but hey, what can I say?" She said with a tight smile, her hands held out to her sides.

Brianna took a deep breath, scrunched her eyes tight and thought hard. *Larin, please come to me. I need you.* She opened her eyes and looked around. Nothing. She turned and paced across the bridge. She hoped she was doing the right thing. Larin only came when she actually called him. So if he was going to be difficult, she could be, too. She grinned evilly just before she said, "Larin, I summon thee."

"You don't have to be so bossy, you know. You could just as easily say, *Larin, could you come here for a minute?* or *Larin, I really need to talk to you.* But no, you

have to go and get all bossy about it," he complained.

Larin seemed oblivious to the screams that erupted when he popped onto the bridge. He glanced nonchalantly over his shoulder, snapped his fingers and caught Minra in midair as she collapsed into a faint.

Brianna turned to see him sitting on the top of Minra's console. His feet were dangling over the side, swinging back and forth.

"I'd be more careful calling on me in public places if I were you." He smirked.

His right eyebrow was raised nearly to his hairline. One long braid hung in front of his left ear and was tied with a leather thong. He threw her a petulant look. "Why is it you always manage to pull me from a party?"

Brianna put her hands on her hips and shook her head. "How does Morgaine stand that smart mouth of yours?"

Larin turned red. He actually looked embarrassed.

She shot him a sagacious look. "She can't, can she? She can't stand your mouth," she guessed shrewdly. "That's why she made you hang out near me, isn't it? She most likely wanted to be rid of you for a while."

Larin shrugged, his smile a bit strained. "Among other things, yes." He hopped off the console and walked around the bridge. He pulled Cholo's cap off and turned it around backward before putting it back on him. "She gets fed up with my pranks. So she sends me on these little errands." He gave Brianna a bored look and yawned, patting his hand over his mouth. He gave Niklas a once over, leaned over and gave her a

mischievous wink. "I hear he's a good one. You did good for yourself."

Brianna punched him in the arm and glared at him. "Why can't you be serious for once?"

"I *was* being serious!" he said, appearing shocked that she would think otherwise. "The word among the ladies is that he's a *hottie*." He looked Niklas up and down. "Personally I don't see it, but," he rolled his eyes. "*They* are simply drooling."

Niklas, finally recovered from the shock of seeing Larin, grinned widely at that statement. "Did you hear that, you guys? The faery ladies like me. I'm famous." He turned to look around the bridge and frowned when he saw all of them frozen in place.

Larin snorted. "They only think that because you are not blonde like we are." He shrugged. "Apparently, they like variety," he said, his lip curling.

Brianna paused, taking the time to look around. "Did you put everyone under some sort of spell or something? The alarms aren't even going off anymore." Looking at the viewscreen, she noticed the warship was still there, but the ominous weapons were no longer pulsing with power. It looked more like a picture. Or something from a TV show.

Larin waved a hand and shuddered. "Those annoying things? They were too loud. I could barely hear myself think. So, I paused everybody."

"You *paused* everyone?" Brianna asked, bemused that he would use the word in that context.

He frowned. "Wasn't that the correct word? I read it on some stereo instructions." He rubbed his hands together. "I love stereos, a most marvelous invention.

You don't have to put up with the musician's incessant nagging." He raised his voice an octave. "I don't like this food. Get me something to drink. Yeech! You call *this* ambrosia?" He made a face, then glancing at the crew, he waved his hand impatiently. "They are in suspended animation. Which is why that one over there hasn't hit the floor yet." He cocked his head and looked at Minra. "She looks a bit uncomfortable, don't you think?"

Minra hung in mid air. Her head was a foot or so from the floor. If she landed like that, she would probably break her neck. At the least, she'd have a very bad concussion.

The thought barely entered Brianna's head when Larin waved his hand. Minra gently floated up and was seated in her chair, safe from harm.

Brianna smiled. "That was a nice thing to do. Thank you," she said, turning back to face him.

"Don't get used to it," Larin snapped, crossing his arms over his chest. "What did you want anyway? I know you didn't want to chat. You never want to chat." He wrinkled his nose and spoke in a falsetto voice. "Larin, I need to speak with Morgaine. Larin, shut up. Larin, I summon thee."

Brianna studied him closely. What was wrong with him now? He seemed, well, hurt.

"We need to know who would want to stop us from saving *Terrna*." Niklas said.

Larin looked at his hand, thoroughly examined his fingernails and looked at Brianna quizzically. He stuck a finger in his ear and wiggled it, then glanced at her again. "Did you hear something? I thought I heard

something, but I'm not sure. I'm here to do what *you* ask, not to be just anyone's slave." He glowered.

Brianna crossed her arms. "Do you find it easy to be this difficult, or do you have to work at?"

"I work at it!" he bellowed. His Fey voice sounded eerie as it echoed over the bridge, the picture on the viewscreen wavered and flickered.

Brianna looked on with interest. She tilted her head to the right. "How do you get your face to turn purple like that? I meant to ask you about that the last time I called you." She smirked at him. "I would consider stopping that sort of behavior. You lose cool points when you do it."

Niklas looked from one to the other. "Will you two stop it?" He was furious. He paced between the two, his anger lending him energy he needed to expend. "We don't have the time for you two to sit and trade insults. We need answers!" He stopped to stand in front of Larin. "And we need them now."

"You heard him," Brianna challenged. "Just pretend that every time Niklas asks you a question, it's really coming from me."

Larin gave her a curt nod.

She closed her eyes and heaved a sigh of relief. Holy moly! Did you always have to be so literal with the Fey, or was it just him?

Niklas gave Larin a hard look. "Who wants to stop us?"

Larin shrugged. "I have no idea who is doing these things. They haven't asked for our help, and we are honor bound not to interfere unless we are asked. Even *our* powers are not unlimited."

"Can you help ward off this attack?" Brianna asked quickly. She glanced back at the giant ship that hung in space over them like a thief. It sat framed by the viewscreen. It looked intimidating with its weapons charged and glowing orange like eyes in the blackness of space. "Can you help us ward off this attack?" she repeated.

Larin shook his head.

Disappointment welled within Brianna. She'd been hoping for his help. She really wasn't looking forward to getting blown to bits. Her shoulders slumped visibly.

Larin sighed. "I *can't* help you repel them, Brianna. If I destroy the ship, I will be imprisoned in the land of Fey one-hundred years for every mortal life I take." He glanced back at the ship. "There are nearly one-thousand mortals on that vessel. I do not care to be imprisoned for one hundred thousand years. The last two thousand six hundred and seventy-two years were enough!"

Niklas nodded. "I understand. We cannot ask you to sacrifice yourself for us like that." He resigned himself to the fact that they would die this day. He gazed at Brianna with longing, wishing they had more time. Even one more day with her love would be a precious gift.

Larin looked at them and smiled. He threw a glance over his shoulder toward Brianna. His eyes shuttered. "Yet, I am not totally without the power to help you." He looked toward the viewscreen, held his hand in front of his face, blew across his palm and disappeared.

The bridge returned to the previous chaos. Minra

sat in her seat with a stunned look on her face. The rest of the crew looked confused for a moment before the sound of the proximity alarms caught their attention.

"I don't believe this! Where did that ship go and how did we get back to Terrna so fast?" Rodel exclaimed. "Brace for emergency shutdown. Docking compound in three, two, one."

They were nearly knocked from their feet. Niklas reached out and steadied Brianna so she wouldn't fall. She closed her eyes said a small prayer of thanks to the Gods. She also sent a heartfelt thanks to Larin. *Thank you, Larin, wherever you are. Maybe I will call you just to chat sometime.*

*I will hold you to it, lovely Brianna.*

She smiled and hugged herself. He'd heard her. She turned to face Niklas.

"We need to return to our quarters and retrieve your stone before we leave."

She nodded. Butterflies had taken up residence in her stomach. Apparently, Larin had somehow transported them to Terrna. She *so* wasn't looking forward to meeting her mother-in-law. Sighing, she realized her week had been taken away from her. After only one day of listening to the subliminal disks, she was going to have to learn to function in a totally alien environment. No matter how much she tried to stall, Niklas had her off the ship in record time.

Brianna wasn't sure what she'd expected, but it sure wasn't this. It was Earth with two moons. Well, sort of, that's what it felt like anyway. It looked like Earth, smelled like Earth. Some of the animals were different though.

She spent the first twenty minutes off the ship with her mouth hanging open and Killer cradled to her chest. Everyone here was tanned and beautiful. It made her feel like the ugly duckling.

Niklas leaned down, pressing his lips into her hair. "There is nothing ugly about you, *Laharra*. You are loveliness itself." He pulled her through the milling crowd. Family members of the crew hurried toward the docking compound to welcome their loved ones.

Word of their return spread quickly, that they had appeared virtually from thin air already legend. No one could explain it, and no one really cared, once they saw the blast scars on the hull. They were just glad their families and Niklas had returned home safely.

"What's this?" Brianna asked, when Niklas led her to a hoverpod, fastened her safely into it and climbed in behind the controls. She inhaled sharply when they took off. He drove slowly, most likely not wanting to frighten her. He was ever mindful of her condition. She wondered what his mother was going to say. She was about to acquire another daughter and three grandchildren.

Brianna rode silently, thinking and watching the scenery as they passed. It was exhilarating. They flew across the ground at speeds she'd only dreamed of. She inhaled deeply. The air was fresh, clean.

Niklas had told her that the industrial revolution had been over for centuries and scientists had perfected the process of drawing the unlimited energy from crystals. It was an ideal world, with virtually no pollution, no crime.

"*Terrna* is beautiful, Niklas." She smiled, turned her



head to look at him. Even his profile was perfect. She loved the way his jet-black hair was blown back by the air that entered through the opening in the top of the pod. She loved his soft sensuous lips, strong jaw and chocolate eyes that could melt her with just a look. "How can anyone be so perfect?" she whispered.

"Did you say something?"

Brianna's cheeks flamed. Had she really spoken aloud? If there was one thing she had learned to do over the last few months, it was to think quickly. "I said, how can anything be so perfect?"

Niklas smiled at her. "I'm glad you like it."

She looked out over the field to her right and saw a herd of horses grazing. Their colors were beautiful. White, black, roan and a palomino. She pointed. "Oh, Niklas, look at the horses. Are they wild? I don't see any fences."

"No fences would hold them, *Laharra*. The *Abicon* is a magical animal. It stays if it wants, it leaves if it wants." Niklas turned the hover pod closer to them, knowing she would want to see them up close. "Only a precious few have ever been tamed."

Brianna's breath hitched. "Oh, Niklas!" Her hand covered her mouth, her eyes filled with tears. "I never thought to *ever* see one of these." She stared out the side glass that revealed the herd of unicorn. She swiped at her tears. If this was the only good thing that came of her coming here, it was enough.

He squeezed her hand gently. "I knew you would want to see them. I saw the pictures and figurines in your house."

She turned, focused her blurry eyes on a small town

in the distance. They seemed to be heading straight for it. She pointed, "Is your home there?"

Niklas nodded. "Yes, that is my home."

She squinted, tried to distinguish between the buildings. "I can't seem to make out a difference between the buildings. Where exactly do you live in town?" She had expected to see some sort of castle or something, or at the very least a big house. She peeked at Niklas from the corner of her eye, then frowned. Why did he look worried?

He cleared his throat. "Ah, Brianna, that isn't a town."

Her eyes widened as she turned back to what appeared to be a huge structure in the distance. Oh, boy, was she in *way* over her head!

## Chapter Nineteen

Brianna shook her head in wonder. “Don’t even tell me that’s your home.” She pointed to the structure in the distance. “That’s a—”

Niklas put his hand on her leg and squeezed gently. “Breathe, *Laharra*, you must always remember to breathe. In and out, in and out.” He made a sweeping motion with his hand.

Brianna reached over and slapped his arm. “Don’t you *dare* tell me to breathe,” she snapped. Then she drew in a gulp of air because *she* wanted to breathe, not because he told her to. She glared at him, quickly losing her courage. Any anger she could dig up would be helpful. “You didn’t tell me that you lived in a...” She glanced at Niklas. “What do you call something that huge?”

“A palace?” Niklas offered helpfully, his eyes wide and brows raised.

Brianna dropped her head into her hands. “Gods, Niklas, I can’t live in a palace,” she groaned.

He stopped the hoverpod near a grove of trees, climbed out of the vehicle and walked around to help her stand on rubbery legs. He held her for a moment,

trying to still her trembling, letting his warmth and strength seep into her.

After a moment, he stepped back, took her face in his hands and looked deeply into her eyes. "You are my Queen, *Laharra*. But if you wish, I will surrender the mantle of rule to my sister, and we will return to your world. I only ask that you fulfill your destiny and save mine."

Brianna looked into his eyes. He was serious. He was willing to give up everything for her. Could she do any less? Tears rolled down her cheeks and Niklas wiped them away with his thumbs. "Niklas, I don't—"

He covered her lips with his finger. "Do not answer now, *Laharra*. Right now, all I ask is that you walk with me." He turned, held his hand out, waiting.

Brianna took it and followed him across a meadow into a stand of giant trees. She looked around. The trees looked like giant redwoods. She'd never seen any up close, but from the pictures she'd seen, she would almost bet that redwoods were not indigenous to Earth. The trees were huge, some of them so tall she wondered if it would even be possible to see the tops. The trunks were so wide she was sure tunnels could be cut through them if needed.

Niklas inhaled deeply, obviously glad to be home. "I wanted to show you where I go when I am troubled. It has never failed to give me peace." He led her to a small stream. The water moved gently over the boulders, dotting the surface and lapping gently at the rocks on the bank.

Brianna could see through the surface of the water to the colorful stones below. The soothing sound of the

babbling stream and the familiar scent of evergreen calmed her, reminded her of home. She closed her eyes and inhaled deeply. She could almost imagine she was on Earth, her father was still alive and they were camping.

"This *is* a soothing place, Niklas." Brianna opened her eyes and looked at him, noticed the worried frown he wore as he looked from the stream to her face. Reaching out, she took his hand.

"Don't let me ruin this place for you, *Laharru*. See the beauty." Lifting her hands to his face, she put her fingers over his eyes. "Close your eyes and hear it." She leaned her head back and inhaled deeply. "Smell it."

Niklas released her hand, knelt in the damp soil of the bank and whispered, "Taste it." He reached into the stream with his cupped hand and brought it to his lips.

"Eeeew!" Brianna cried. She grabbed his hand, pulling it away from his mouth. "Don't drink that, you don't know what kind of germs could be growing in there. That's so disgusting. If you're that thirsty, let's go, we aren't too far from your home." She flat out refused to say palace.

He smiled and leaned down. Putting his mouth to the stream, he drank deeply.

Brianna grimaced, "I don't believe you just did that." She waved her arm. "There's probably some animal upstream using it as a toilet and you're drinking it like it's nothing." She wrinkled her nose. "Yuck!"

Niklas laughed. "Don't upset yourself, *Laharra*. I

have drunk the water from this stream more times than I can remember. It is said that those who drink from the *Shantamoura* have unfailing health and longer lives."

Brianna looked down at the stream with interest. "It sounds like the legends on Earth about the fountain of youth." She kicked a stone into the water, watched it ripple. "It looks like any other stream to me."

"Reach down and feel the water, *Laharra*. Let it speak to you."

Brianna looked skeptical. "Let it speak to me, huh? Okaaay..." Kneeling down, she reached out and dangled her fingers into the water. It was cool, smooth and silky feeling. It was strange that it didn't make her feel wet. Not really. She withdrew her fingers and stared at them with disbelief. They weren't wet. Her shocked eyes met his. "How can this be?" She plunged her hand in and pulled it back out. Still, her hand was dry. Only a few drops of the water remained in the creases between her fingers. "I don't understand, Niklas. It's wet, but it's not wet." She looked to him for an explanation for the phenomena.

"I do not know why it is this way. It has always been the same. It is water, yet it is not water." He plunged his own hand in and pulled it back out, watching it as he spoke. "The *Shantamoura* is the only stream I have ever seen like this." He cast his gaze downward, looking at the stones lining the bed. "I have seen no other like it anywhere."

She watched him struggle for the words.

"I know there are still some words in my language you don't understand. I've been forced to try to

translate some of them to English. It is a difficult and sometimes confusing exercise for me. I also realize, even though you haven't that you are slipping in and out of *Terrnan* speech. It's a confusing mixture that keeps me on my toes." He grinned. "I never know what language you will use next."

"I didn't realize I was doing that." She didn't. How could she use another language without realizing it? Was it the disks?

Niklas stayed on the subject of the water, steering it away from her language skills. "The water has healing properties. It heals the sick and strengthens the weak." Reaching down, he cupped his hand and dipped it into the stream and brought his hand to her lips. "Try it, just this once."

Brianna frowned. "I swear, Niklas, if this makes me sick, I'm gonna puke all over you." She scrunched her eyes shut and parted her lips. Brianna's eyes flew open as she took the water into her mouth and swallowed quickly.

"It's sweet, it's really sweet." How could something that tasted so good be bad for her? *Ahem*. Her mind always had to mess things up. Make her think about things she'd rather not. *You do remember bacon, greasy hamburgers and fried chicken? Hello! Those tasted great, too, but were they good for you?* Brianna put her hand on Niklas's shoulder for support as she stood. She didn't want to think about it.

Niklas stood quickly, giving her a worried look. His gaze alternating from her to the stream and back again.

"What?" she asked. "What's the matter, Niklas?"

He swallowed. "I don't know what has happened,

*Laharra*, but you have changed. The water has never changed anyone before." He tilted his head to the side watching her.

Her hands flew to her face. "Changed? What do you mean changed?" she cried. She bent from the waist, trying to get a glimpse of herself in the clear water.

Obviously recognizing the shock and dismay in her voice, Niklas took her into his arms. "I didn't mean to frighten you, little one. There has to be some logical explanation for the way your body has reacted to the water.

"Your indigo eyes are now threaded with glowing silver. They flashed a kaleidoscope of color as you spoke. Your once, slightly rounded nose is thinner, your ears took on a more pointed shape. And your skin is now like cream silk, flawless. Whatever else the river has done, it has enhanced your beauty tenfold." He took her in his arms when she whimpered.

"I am sure there is nothing to worry about, *Laharra*." He smoothed the hair back from her forehead and looked into her eyes. "Somehow you are even more beautiful than you were before."

Brianna looked into his eyes, her mind a jumble of horrifying pictures that brought chaos in their wake. What had she done? She never should have drunk the water. She laughed hysterically, "This is just what everyone always warns you about when you travel. Don't drink the water." She called for Larin without thinking, hadn't realized until that moment that she *did* like him, smart aleck attitude and all. He felt comfortable to her, familiar.

"You called, oh beauteous one?" Larin appeared in



a full bow, sarcastic as usual. When he straightened, he noticed her stricken expression. He immediately waved his arm, using his immense power to pull her from Niklas's embrace and into his own.

Niklas glared at him. "What do you think you are doing with my wife?" He lunged toward them, trying to free her from the faery's hold.

Larin grew taller, more muscular, his eyes glowing a strange iridescent orange, an ancient Fey warrior in full glamour. "Do not test my patience, mortal!" he roared. His voice echoed through the glade, sounding eerie and hollow, and not quite human. Larin's hand shot out and a blue beam wrapped itself around Niklas, locking him in place.

Niklas couldn't move. He could only stare at them. The contempt in his eyes directed at Larin. He glowered at the faery, his eyes filled with hatred. Niklas lurched forward, trying to exert enough energy to drive his way through the force field the faery had erected around him.

Brianna looked from one to the other. "What have you done to him, Larin? Please, let him go."

\* \* \* \*

"Not until you tell me what *he* has done to you." Larin said softly, pointing his chin toward Niklas. He took her chin in his hand, tilted her head back and studied her thoughtfully. "You have changed." His eyes narrowed and he looked thoughtful.

She wrenched free of his hold, wrapped her arms around herself and stared at her husband. "That's what

Niklas just said." She bordered on hysterics. "He said my eyes nose and skin are different but I can't see myself—even in the river." She was nearing hysterics, her hands, her whole body shaking.

"Calm down, Brianna, these histrionics cannot be good for you." Larin patted her shoulder awkwardly.

She turned toward him. Her eyes sparked with anger. Her indigo irises flashed with a kaleidoscope of silver and sapphire. She pointed to the stream, one hand rested over her slightly rounded stomach.

"How good is *that* for my children?"

"Children?" He slowly shifted his gaze from Brianna's face to her stomach, then to look in the direction she was pointing.

Larin looked dazed. "*Nee la Shantamoura*. The river of life." He whispered, awed at the sight before him. He released the glamour, returned to his natural appearance and fell to his knees in front of Brianna, taking her hands in his. "Thank you, beauty. You have called me home." His elation was short lived. Soon, he looked at her with shock. "Children? You are with child?"

Brianna smiled softly, rubbed her slightly rounded stomach. "With three of them." She looked back to the stream. "What has the water done to them, to me?"

Larin smiled. A genuine smile that would have made almost any woman swoon. He wrapped his arms around Brianna and comforted her.

She stood within his embrace, thinking how strange it was that his embrace felt so comfortable. Like being wrapped in a warm blanket. He gave her a feeling of safety and security, of coming home.

Behind them Niklas growled. "Get your hands off of my wife, faery!"

Larin turned toward him and sighed. He shook his head, shifting his gaze back to Brianna. "I suppose *he* is the father?" He rolled his eyes at Brianna's nod, released her and waved his arm in Niklas's direction. He stepped back, allowing him to approach.

"Well, you *did* tell me I'd done good for myself." Brianna watched Larin, wondering why he'd been so protective of her.

Niklas rushed to her side, took her in his arms and looked into her eyes. "I truly did not know it would change you, *Laharra*. We should hurry to the Palace where Sarcha can examine you."

Larin shook his head. "You worry for nothing. The water of the *Shantamoura* has only enhanced what she already held within her." He waved his hand in dismissal.

"And what would you know about it?" Niklas challenged, tucking Brianna safely under his arm.

"I know much more about the *Shantamoura* than you could possibly imagine." He snorted and looked around him with awe. "This is my home, our home, the world my people have been banished from for eons."

Larin gazed over the stream as if it were a long lost lover. Kneeling down, he drank. The water made him look more unreal, more ethereal, more like the magical being he was. He stood and turned toward them, his eyes, once a glacial blue, were now nearly silver. Energy surrounded him, an aura that could be seen and heard as it crackled around him. He walked slowly

to Brianna and knelt at her feet. A silver tear slid down his cheek. "Thank you for calling me home." He bowed his head. "I swear fealty to you, second only to Morgaine."

Brianna knelt in front of him, looked into his eyes. "What has the water done to you, Larin? What has it done to me?"

He smiled, his face had become even more handsome than before. "The water of the *Shantamoura* has enhanced the magic within you." He took her hands in his, shot Niklas a warning glance and continued. "We of the Fey are not bound by the laws of human nature. We draw our power from the Earth, from *Terrna*." He waved his hand toward the stream. "We draw power from the *Shantamoura*. The river cannot harm us, as it will not harm you, or your babes. You are one of us. You are Fey."

Brianna shook her head. "No, Larin, you are mistaken. I can't do those things you do. I have no magical power within me at all." She stood up and began to pace.

Larin shook his head. "You have the power, but you deny it at every turn. Your denial is the reason your power has deserted you."

She turned toward him, her eyes flashing. "I never had any power. I am *not* faery."

"Deny it, if you wish, but you do have faery blood within you. It is your legacy. Just as your destiny is to be here, with him." Larin jerked his head toward Niklas, who stood watching them, speechless and wary.

"How, Larin?" Brianna wrinkled her brow. "How is

it possible for me to have faery blood?" Her confusion chased across her face, mixed with a hope she'd never dared to have. Could she have family amongst the Fey? Did she dare hope to have that elusive connection with someone?

Niklas stirred beside her. *I am your family, Laharra, our children are your family.*

Brianna felt the comforting pressure of his hand on her back.

Larin sighed. "Once, a very long time ago, a mischievous faery fell in love with the Queen of this world. Together they betrayed the King." He turned and sat down on a fallen log. He picked up a stick and began to doodle in the dirt, his elbows resting on his knees. "Affairs between the Fey and mortals were forbidden by both species. We were such an arrogant people then. Our council did not want our blood tainted by that of humans."

Dropping the stick, he rose and paced back and forth in front of them, his eyes distant. His thoughts clearly turned inward. "The Queen of *Terrna* gave birth to another heir, only this heir did not have the dark hair and eyes of the people of this world. The king was furious. He knew his queen had had a traitorous affair with one of the Fey. The light skinned, blue eyed newborn babe could not be his child. The king was furious. He banished the child from his sight, to live among the witches and sorcerers of *Nasha*."

Brianna listened in shock. How could she be part faery? How could she have so much magic within her when none of her spells ever worked? She glanced at Niklas and smiled. Well, most of her spells never

worked. She was glad that one had, at least.

Larin paced in front of them, his silvery blue eyes turned inward toward a long ago tragedy. He stopped and turned to Brianna. "He beheaded her. That great *benign* man!" he spat. "He sentenced her to death for a love she had no control over. He had left her lonely, rarely visiting her after the birth of his spare heirs. Then he beheaded her for finding solace in another man's arms."

Brianna reached out to him, wanted to comfort him. He seemed so angry that he had been imprisoned for another man's deeds so long ago.

Larin jerked his arm from her hand. He turned his tortured gaze on her. The pupils were so large that the silver blue irises were nearly invisible. He turned toward Niklas and pointed. "Your ancestor banished us from this planet. He, the weak *human* banished the all-powerful Fey from their own world. Never to return unless specifically invited by a member of the royal family." He turned, walked back to the fallen log and sat down with his head in his hands. "The council realized their mistake too late, that the humans were not so different from us after all." He laughed mirthlessly. "They had their own power, for we were sent to our own realm, never to return to this world without an invitation from someone in the royal family." He looked up and fixed his gaze on Brianna, his eyes filled with gratitude. "Brianna is now your queen and a member of your house. She has called me home, and for that, I will be forever grateful."

Brianna sat down next to him and linked her arm with his. She ignored Niklas's sharply drawn breath.

"There is more, isn't there? You're leaving something out. I don't know what, but it just feels like the story isn't over yet."

Larin smiled grimly. "It isn't over, but it is nothing that you need to bother yourself with. Just know that you do have Fey blood running in your veins." He stood, looked wistfully at the river, then disappeared.

"Wait, dammit! Why doesn't he ever stick around?" Brianna pouted. "He pops in, drops a bomb and leaves." She glared at Niklas. "And don't think that this gets you off of the hook either, because it doesn't. You're still in lots of trouble because you should have told me that you live in a...a—"

Niklas reached out and dragged her to him.

His lips swooped down onto hers in a flash and everything she had been about to say flew out of her head. Her arms snaked around his neck. Their kiss slowly broken, she smiled. "Hmm. How can I argue with that?"

## Chapter Twenty

If Brianna could have imagined what a mother was like, she would have been just like Silera. Niklas's mother was kind, gentle and cared for nothing more than her children and their happiness. She'd met them in the main hall, flying into Niklas's arms as soon as they entered. She examined him from head to toe, making sure that he had returned home in one piece with no wounds or missing parts.

"I've missed you so much, Niklas." She swiped tears from her eyes. "I was beginning to wonder if you'd finally had enough of us and ran away." She hugged him again.

He bent down and returned her embrace, lifting her nearly two feet off the floor. It was plain that he did not get his height from his mother. Niklas set Silera down, steadying her as he placed her back on her feet. "Mother, I have found my bride."

Silera's eyes widened as she looked around. No longer did she only have eyes for her son.

Brianna watched as she hopped up and down and clapped her hands, her face lit with her happiness for him.



"Congratulations, Niklas," she said, hugging him tightly to her. "I had no doubt that you would find your mate." She released him and turned toward Brianna.

Niklas straightened. "Mother, I would like you to meet Brianna, my *El'edal*."

Brianna could feel the rush of heat on her face. She knew the color was climbing up her neck to dust her cheeks. Nervous eyes darted from one of Niklas's family members to the other. She felt like crawling under the closest piece of furniture when she realized their attention had suddenly turned toward her.

"Welcome to the family, dear. Please, call me Silera if Mother feels too uncomfortable for you," she said, before she enveloped her in a comfortable embrace.

Brianna closed her eyes and inhaled. She smelled heavenly, a little like flowers and cinnamon, a mixture of summer and cookies. Just what she'd imagined a mother would smell like. How many people took this sort of thing for granted? She didn't have the nerve to hug the woman back, but she wanted to. Instead, she stood within his mother's embrace, her hands placed on the woman's sides.

Silera stepped back, holding Brianna at arm's length. "You look exhausted, dear." She turned to glare at Niklas. "Why haven't you been caring for her the way you should?"

Niklas opened his mouth to answer, but Silera held up a hand. "Don't give me any of your weak excuses, Niklas."

Brianna gaped at her, wondering if she would ever have the tenacity that this one small woman had.

Could you even develop at thing like that? She bit her lip to keep herself from grinning. To think that she'd thought Niklas answered to no one. She watched, her gaze alternating between them.

Niklas scrubbed his face with his hands, looking every inch the little boy his mother still obviously saw when she looked at him. "You don't understand, Mother."

Silera glared at him. "I understand completely." She cast a sympathetic smile toward her. "Isn't just like a man to think of his own needs over that of his *El'edal*?" She wrapped an arm around Brianna. "Come, my dear, we'll head for the kitchen and get you a bite to eat. You look absolutely famished." She turned, tossing a glance over her shoulder. "Put her things in the Rose Room, Niklas, while we have a little mother-daughter chat."

"Mother, the Rose Room is —"

Silera turned and gave him another glare. "I know exactly what you are going to say, Niklas. You may have claimed her, but you aren't truly wed until I witness it, and there most definitely isn't going to be any hanky panky going on in my home." She arched a brow at him. "You made me a promise, remember?" The last was said with an odd gleam in her eye. She gave him a look, which said she knew exactly what he wanted to do before she turned back to Brianna and took her hand. "Come, my dear, you need something to eat, and we have a wedding to plan." Silera looked back at Niklas and scowled fiercely. "What are you still doing here? Did I not tell you to put Brianna's things in the Rose Room?" She spoke slowly as if she thought he was simple.

Niklas sighed, "Yes, Mother." He looked at Brianna and raised his brow. "Do you see what you have been missing?"

Brianna smiled slightly. *Yes, Niklas, and I think I'm going to love your mother.*

Niklas scowled after her as she followed his mother from the room with a smile. "Why do women always stick together?" he groused.

The palace was huge! It was actually bigger than it had first appeared, mostly because Niklas's entire family lived there. Brianna wondered what her role would be in this fortress. It was a small city. Their servants had their own quarters and were treated with respect and deference. She found it hard not to stare as they walked through the massive structure.

Silera smiled. "You mustn't let it overwhelm you, my dear." She squeezed her hand lightly. "I know it can seem a bit much at first blush, but it is all worth it, you know. I wouldn't have chosen differently. Nico was—" Her face reddened. "Well, worth it."

Brianna swallowed thickly, trying not to pay attention to the fact that they had just entered a dining room that could easily accommodate a hundred or more people. The cathedral ceiling rose two or three stories over her head, interspersed with murals and skylights. Huge crystal chandeliers hung from the painted surface, their crystal links causing the light to prism, throwing colors throughout the room. "You weren't born here?" Brianna asked curiously.

Silera laughed and the light sound echoed slightly off the walls. "Oh, my, no! I was born on a backward planet that Nico was trading with at the time." She

reminisced with a smile.

"Our ruler brought me here as part of his entourage to care for him and his family. I was a servant who did the queen's laundry." Her eyes grew distant as she remembered. "I was just a girl at the time, barely thirteen."

Brianna was startled. She had assumed Silera had been royalty before she married Niklas's father. She had such a regal bearing.

"Nico saw me outside washing clothing one day. He took one look at me and asked my King for my hand." Silera sighed. "It was like something out of a story. He bought me from my people and I've been living here ever since." She sighed dreamily.

Brianna was appalled. "He *bought* you?"

Silera looked amused. "You must remember, dear. I did say a backward world. On my world I was property, chattel, if you will. It was the way for women there. If you didn't marry well, you were sold into service." She smiled sadly. "Unlike my world, this world honors its women. Sometimes even land is passed from mother to daughter." She shook her head and sighed. "On my world, women are bought and sold, and sent to marry for alliances. It has been that way for centuries."

Brianna was having a hard time believing that there were places that still practiced such archaic thinking. "On my world women live for themselves and think for themselves. No man can tell us what to do unless we allow it. And if a man did tell us what to do, we don't necessarily have to do it." She cast her gaze around the huge room, wondering what in the world

she'd gotten herself into.

Silera wrapped her arm around her once more. "Do not worry about such things, Brianna. It will only serve to make you ill. I know my Niklas would never try to impose his will on you in that manner."

The other woman's arm grounded her to the present, but her words only terrified Brianna. They didn't make her feel better about her situation. Silera obviously knew little about her son. He already had imposed his will on her, by forcing her to come to this world with him.

What would he do next? Would he carry her off to one of the worlds where women were property? Horrendous thoughts flew through Brianna's head. What if he'd been lying when he told her that he would take her home? What if he didn't intend to allow her to have any semblance of a normal life, whether here or on Earth?

She bit her lip hard. The coppery taste of blood hit her tongue, her fear was alive, a being that raised its head and roared. Brianna placed a protective hand over her stomach. How much more time would go by before she found out the truth?

"Try not to be frightened by it, my dear. Niklas would never treat you as property. His father had every right to treat me as such after he bought me from my former king." She smiled wistfully. "But he never did. I was enamored of him, of course. I thought I would die when Niko told me we were to be wed, but he would not consummate the marriage until I was nineteen. It felt like an eternity. Although I did get him to capitulate." She giggled. "I found a key to his room

and slipped into his bed totally nude when I was not quite eighteen. He couldn't resist me when I stood before him as naked as the day I was born." Silera's eyes took on a faraway look as she remembered Niklas's father. "I do miss him. He was such a kind and generous man. I loved him dearly." She smiled softly, just before she grasped Brianna's hand in a firm grip. "Come along, my dear. We'll just go into the kitchens and find you a bite to eat before I show you to your rooms." Silera half pulled her into the huge kitchen.

Brianna could do nothing but follow. The shock of Niklas's betrayal was still strong, so she allowed herself be pulled along like a child. When they entered the gigantic room, she was surprised to see there was a dish of spaghetti waiting for her on a large round table. She knew this was not a dish of their world.

"How did you know?" Her eyes met those of the apprehensive older woman standing next to the table.

The woman gave a nervous curtsy. "Hello, Lady, I am Urma, Sir Niklas sent the programs for the replicator as soon as he returned to the ship." The woman looked nervously toward Silera.

"Now, Urma, why are you so nervous?" Silera wrapped her arm around the woman and squeezed. "You're going to make Brianna think we don't like her."

The woman looked stricken. "No, Ma'am, I don't want her to think that! It's just that, well, she's to be the new mistress and all." Her hands twisted nervously in her apron.

"And you want her to adore you as much as I do, is

that it?" Silera teased, her eyes sparkling with laughter.

Urma giggled. "Oh no, Ma'am!" She cast her gaze to the floor, wrung her hands together. "I do want Lady Brianna to like me, but I wouldn't be so presumptuous as to tell her how much." She brushed imaginary dust from her apron with a trembling hand, looked at Brianna and gave her a tremulous smile.

Brianna smiled softly. "I'm sure I will like you and everyone else just fine." She brought her hand to her stomach and rubbed absently. "But, I'm afraid, right now, I do need something to eat." She waved her hand toward the table. "I must say, this is a welcome sight." She swayed on her feet as dizziness swamped her and she felt the blood drain from her face. The two women rushed to help her into the nearest chair.

Urma pushed the dish in front of her with a nervous look and went back to wringing her hands. "I hope you enjoy it, lady." She handed her the utensils. "Sir Niklas said this was one of your favorites."

Brianna gave her a wan smile. "It is, Urma. Thank you very much."

"Oh, you don't have to thank me, Lady. It's what I'm here for." She fidgeted beside the chair, waiting for Brianna to eat.

"I'll still thank you. There is no reason to think you don't deserve praise for a job well done." Brianna took the fork and swirled it through the spaghetti, enjoying the aroma.

Urma looked at Silera, obviously nervous.

Silera placed her hand on the woman's arm and smiled. "She likes you. Now stop making it look like we never thank you. You're making us look like

ogres."

The woman became more flustered. "I never meant to do that!"

"I know, Urma," Silera soothed. "Why don't you go see if cook has made any more of those *Kin-berry* tarts that I like so much?"

"Yes, Ma'am." Urma gave a little curtsy and crossed the room to talk with another woman by what looked to be the stove.

Silera sat down across from Brianna and watched her pick at her spaghetti for a bit. "Don't you like it? I could have Urma replicate something more to your liking." She started to stand.

Brianna held up her hand. "No. This is fine, really. It's just that, well, earlier you said that Niklas wouldn't impose his will upon me." Brianna watched as her wandering fork caused the spaghetti to weave in and out on the dish.

Silera nodded. "I don't believe he would. Unless, of course, it was for a greater good."

"What if I told you that he already has imposed his will upon me?" Brianna watched the older woman's reaction closely for a moment and wondered if Silera could be an ally. She had to know. This was all so overwhelming.

Silera pressed her lips together. "Then I would say it was for a better good. What that is, I couldn't even begin to say." She paused for a moment, a frown creasing her brow as if trying to choose the right words. "How did he impose his will on you? If it were a safety issue, I would understand, but obviously I would need more information before I accuse my son



of treating you poorly."

Brianna sighed. "It's not really as if he *has* treated me badly. Actually he's been everything that's kind." She looked thoughtful for a moment. How did you tell a woman that her son was an overbearing self-righteous pig about some things?

"Then I don't understand your concern, Brianna."

"He kidnapped me. He has stolen me from my home, my friends and everything I ever knew." She blurted. She would have added, *to bring me here*. But another glance around the room they were in told her that it most certainly was not a fate worse than death. So she just pressed her lips together, omitting that part.

Silera's eyes darkened to a near black.

Had Brianna sensed that the anger in those eyes was directed at her, she would have been nervous, but something told her, that the woman's anger was directed at her son.

"If you would excuse me." Silera nodded to her and sailed out of the room. The sound of her shoes made sharp clacking noises as she hurried away.

Brianna took a bite of the spaghetti and found it hard to keep the smile from her face. "Uh-oh. Somebody's in trouble," she said with a singsong voice.

## *Chapter Twenty-one*

Niklas looked up from the work he had gotten behind on during his trip, when he heard the clacking of a woman's shoes hurrying down the hall. He sat up and rubbed the back of his neck, glad for the respite. Looking down at the computer screen in front of him, he shook his head. This was certainly one thing that he hadn't missed while he was gone. There was an impatient knock at the door. Niklas frowned. Hoping something hadn't gone wrong so soon after his return.

"Come." He leaned back, stretching his arms above his head, waiting for whoever it was to enter the room. Niklas jumped up as the door flew open and banged against the wall behind it. The glass objects on the shelves behind the door shuddered ominously. The tinkling of glass heralded a doom he'd rather not face right now.

Niklas closed his eyes and inhaled deeply, then let his breath out slowly. He didn't want his mother to know that this interruption was not necessarily a welcome one, especially if this was going to be a demonstration of another one of her moods.

"Tell me it isn't true." Silera shook her head. "No, I

know it's true. I feel it. Just tell me you had a good reason to strip that woman of even the most basic of rights," his mother demanded, her hands on her hips. "I don't believe you kidnapped her." She looked at him with disbelief.

Niklas inhaled sharply, so *that* was what this was about. He opened his mouth to reply.

His mother held up her hand. "Don't." She paced back and forth. "I'm not even sure I want to hear it. Do you realize that you have jeopardized your relationship with your *El'edal*?" She slowly shook her head in disbelief. "You can't force people to your will, Niklas." She looked at him reproachfully. "I was certain I had taught you better than that. Even your father never used such highhanded tactics on me."

Niklas heaved a sigh and ran his fingers through his hair. He had known this would come out sooner or later, he'd just been hoping for the latter. After he could explain what was happening. "I know, Mother, but I didn't have the time to court her as I should have. There are circumstances not under my control that have to be dealt with." He turned and pulled Morwyyn's scroll from his desk. He handed it to Silera. "Read this and you will understand." He looked at her curiously. "You can still read the ancient text?"

"Of course I can!" she snapped. "Who do you think taught you?" She glared at him.

How was it that she always had the ability to make him feel like a child? Niklas placed his elbows on the desk and put his head in his hands.

Her eyes widened as she read the ancient text. She stumbled backward, settling heavily into the chair in

front of the desk.

Niklas raised his head and looked at his mother as she read the scroll that had changed his life so irrevocably.

"This can't be." She glanced up at Niklas. "Your *El'edal* has been guaranteed all this time?" She cast her gaze around the room, then stood and walked to the window. Looking up to the sky, she could still see the faint outline *Tomar* hanging in the distance. The bright light of the sun hid it in the purple sky. "What will it be like with *Tomar* gone?" she mused. Her lips drew up in a mirthless smile. "I'm sure you've wondered the same thing many times since you found all of this out." She took a deep breath. "So. This is why you went on your *extended tour of the galaxy*?"

Niklas nodded, watching her warily. He wondered how she was *really* taking this. He knew his mother was a magician at hiding her feelings when she deemed it appropriate.

Silera closed her eyes, pressed her lips together and took another deep breath. "I agree, you *didn't* have much of a choice, but now that you are here, you must give her the choice to stay or leave. You must earn her trust."

Niklas started to agree, but she cut him off, wagging a finger in front of his face.

"I don't want to hear any excuses. You don't understand." She pulled the chair closer to the desk and sat down. "Your *El'edal* can be the greatest partner you have ever dreamed of, but if she can't learn to trust you, she will hate you as no one else is capable of doing." She leaned over the front of the desk. "Once

that happens, she will be lost to you. Forever." His mother looked at him shrewdly. "I assume you don't want that."

"Of course not, Mother, I love her more than life itself," Niklas said.

She smiled. "Then show her, Niklas." Her hand swept out, encompassing the room. "Forget about all of this for now, it can wait. She cannot. Go to her and show her how much you love her, most importantly, *tell* her how much you love her. A woman needs to hear the words more than anything."

Niklas left his mother sitting in his office and strode to the kitchen where his mother had left Brianna. He hoped she was still there. He hated the thought that perhaps she'd started to wander around the palace without a guide. She could be lost for hours before someone found her if that happened.

He wondered briefly if anyone had shown her where the express lifts were. Probably not, and without knowing how to control them, she would think them a small room, not what she would call an elevator that moved in all directions.

Niklas's pace slowed as he entered the kitchen. She sat with her head on her arms, asleep at the table. He smiled slightly, this had been a long day for her and she had been sleeping more and more lately. He bent down, gently lifted her into his arms and carried her to the nearest express lift.

"Level twenty-six, *kina*." Niklas said softly as he looked down at Brianna. She was beautiful even while she slept. Her red gold lashes swept her cheekbones, creating small golden crescents against her pale skin.

She sighed and her lips parted invitingly. He felt his groin tighten at the thought of pressing his lips to hers, then smiled when he saw a piece of spaghetti stuck to her cheek and one in her hair.

She must have been exhausted. His arms tightened around her briefly, but loosened when she stirred. How could one person come to mean so much to him in such a short time? Niklas shifted Brianna in his arms and her head lolled to the side, resting just under his chin. He nuzzled her softly, inhaling her unique scent.

The doors to the lift opened and Niklas stepped out into his wing of the palace. He had yet to take over the master wing. Even though his father was gone and he knew that rightfully it was his, he didn't want to ask his mother to leave the rooms she'd shared with his father for so many years.

Besides, it didn't matter. He was comfortable here. Niklas walked toward the door that allowed entrance to his main chamber and the door slid open. He carried her over the threshold into his life. Aware of the meaning for both of them, Niklas knew it was customary for the man to carry his bride over the threshold on her world. On *Terrna*, it meant the bride entrusted herself to his keeping. He closed his eyes and prayed to the Goddess that he could earn her trust once again.

\* \* \* \*

Brianna was a bit startled when she woke. The ground was moving! Cracking one eye open, it didn't take long to realize that the swaying motion she'd been feeling

wasn't her falling off her chair like she'd first thought. "You can put me down now, Niklas."

He looked down at her and cocked his brow.

Brianna looked away, he must know she liked that. A lot!

"I beg your pardon?"

She risked another glance. The brow was still up. Gods he looked so sexy like that. "You can put me down now, I'm not helpless and I'm damn sure not going to tour this, this..."

"Palace?" Niklas filled in helpfully.

Brianna crossed her arms and scowled. "Citadel, being carried around like a sack of potatoes." She glared at him for good measure as they passed through a doorway and sighed. "Please put me down."

He grinned. "As you wish, my Lady."

He took a few more steps and gently settled her onto the biggest bed she'd ever seen. *And* it was one that didn't immediately adjust to her size. She looked around warily and raised herself on her elbow. "Is this a regular bed?" She looked at Niklas, her eyes filled with wonder. She'd been so sure that they'd left such normal things like this behind on Earth. She bounced on it a few times to be sure.

Niklas sat down next to her and gently brushed a lock of hair from her face. He reached up and plucked a piece of spaghetti from the side of her head.

"I was tired," she said apologetically. Her face grew warm and she was sure she was blushing. She loved to watch him. Her appreciative gaze wandered over his handsome face and broad shoulders. How had she ever gotten so lucky? He was truly a work of art. His

sculptor had indeed been a master. The man was perfection itself. He was the complete manifestation of every single one of her late night fantasies come to life. Brianna shook her head slowly, she had even dreamed of him. Watching his perfect lips, she unconsciously moistened her own with a slow movement of her tongue.

\* \* \* \*

Niklas inhaled sharply. What he imagined her doing with that tongue was illegal in at least three systems. He smiled at that, it wasn't illegal here. Not anymore anyway. Sometimes it was a blessing to be King. Niklas smiled inwardly, Brianna would probably faint if she could see herself now.

One long golden curl hung over her shoulder. Smaller curls framed her face with little wisps of color. Her cheeks were flushed, whether with embarrassment or anger he couldn't tell. She had no idea of her beauty, her natural allure or of her absolute power over him.

If she had the slightest urge, Niklas was sure she could rule this world through him. And he knew he would love every minute of it. He closed his eyes for a moment and said a small prayer, thanking the Goddess for bringing them together. "You're so beautiful," he whispered. He reached out, his hand gently cupping her face.

\* \* \* \*

Brianna closed her eyes. How did he always know how



to say just the right things? Just when she was feeling like something the cat had dragged in. Not that she'd seen any cats since they'd arrived. "Thank you, Niklas."

He bowed low, took her hand in his larger one and kissed her palm. "Thank *you*, Brianna, for forgiving me and trusting me after all you have been through."

Brianna looked down, suddenly very interested in the comforter on the bed. She felt bad, she really did, but how could she really trust him after he'd kidnapped her? She *had* trusted him once and look where that had gotten her!

*Yes, look where it has gotten you. You're in a palace with the most handsome man you have ever seen in your life drooling on the back of your hand. And he's willing to give you anything you could ever want.*

Brianna bit back a groan. Sometimes she hated her inner monologue. It usually prodded her to say things she knew were better left unsaid. She bit her lip and peered up at Niklas, he was still staring at her mouth. What was it with him and her mouth for crying out loud? "What?" she asked impatiently.

His smoldering gaze met hers. "I was just thinking how perfect and full your lips are, and how much I want to kiss you right now."

He rubbed his thumb over her bottom lip, causing her to shiver when a shot of warmth ran through her body, travelling all the way down to her toes. Brianna closed her eyes enjoying the sensation. Wasn't it about time she came to terms with the fact that she was stuck here? Should she take advantage of the fact that this man couldn't seem to live without her touch? Things

really *could* have been worse. If she had to be kidnapped, Niklas was infinitely better than some fat, unwashed biker with no teeth and an attitude.

She may not be sure that she could trust him, but boy, could he kiss like nobody's business. Brianna remembered their times together and her libido started galloping away with what little sense she had left in her. It galloped past a cheerleader that had been lurking on the right side of her brain whispering all sorts of good ideas. While a pinched-faced party pooper from the left and logical side of her brain kept lecturing her on why she should maintain her lack of trust.

There was a spectacular display of fireworks when Niklas's lips covered hers. He threaded his fingers through her hair, tilting her head to the side for better access and exposing the slender column of neck. He nibbled behind her ear and Brianna's libido galloped up and whisked the pinched-faced pooper away, leaving nothing behind but the brazen cheerleader with her very good ideas. "Mmmm. That feels so good, Niklas." His tongue probed her ear, made a circuit of the outer shell. His hands wandered across and down her back, massaging her hips.

"Yes, it does, doesn't it?"

His right hand wandered back up and cupped her sensitive breast. The nipple pebbled against his palm. She arched up and into him. A small bit of sanity had her wondering why this was a bad idea. Her hand left his shoulder and brushed the front of his pants.

"Yes, Brianna." His breath hitched in her ear. "I need you so badly, *Laharra*." He pushed her back on

the bed.

Someone pounded on the door.

"Niklas! I know you're in there. I told you there isn't going to be any mischief under this roof!" The tone of Silera's voice brooked no argument. "I'm not leaving here without her, Niklas." She rattled the knob. "Don't make the mistake of thinking it's been so long, that I don't remember how hard it is to stay in the mood with someone standing outside of the door listening."

Niklas set Brianna away from him and hung his head. "You'd better go, *Laharra*. When she has her mind set on something, she just won't give up." He leaned down and gave her a chaste kiss on the forehead. "I will see you at dinner tonight." He shifted himself within his clothing. "I just hope I can survive until our wedding."

## Chapter Twenty-two

Brianna smiled in her sleep. Light from the window tickled her senses. She opened her eyes slowly. The last few weeks had been storybook perfect, would have been even more so had the threat of the end of this world not been looming over their heads.

The wedding was tomorrow. Finally she and Niklas would be able to sleep in the same bed again. She stretched as she slowly came awake. As usual, she was deliciously sore in a few select places, and she wouldn't have it any other way. Silera would certainly have a fit if she'd known about their hideaway along the *Shantamoura*. She'd been so diligent in keeping them apart at the palace.

Brianna frowned as her hand bumped the wall beside her. She didn't remember moving the bed against the wall. There wasn't really a need for that in a room the size of this one. She opened her eyes and looked around, finding that she wasn't in the room she'd grown accustomed sleeping in.

Her stomach rolled as the usual morning sickness began to make itself known. She squeezed her eyes shut, willing her rebellious stomach to settle down, just

this once. She needed to think.

A picture of a shadowy stranger loomed into her mind. Only he wasn't a stranger, Brianna had recognized him. The same man from the ball, with that same cold smile. She remembered now, he brought her here. What did he want with her? It must have been him. His face loomed in her mind.

Brianna cupped her head in her hands and felt a lump there. He must have hit her with something. Her head ached. The throbbing was a steady cadence torturing her already abused head. The bitter taste of bile hung in the back of her throat, making her swallow convulsively.

She inhaled deeply, needing to gain control of her emotions, trying to be strong. Brianna did this even as she gagged from the mixture of the foul taste in her mouth and her morning sickness. The smell of dankness and mildew that permeated the room didn't help with her queasy stomach. She squeezed her eyes shut when she heard the faint scuttling noises in the corner. Rats? She shook her head. She didn't want to know.

Trying to look around without moving too much, she wondered what she was doing here. Where in the world was she? Or perhaps a more appropriate question would be where in the universe was she? There wasn't a way to tell if she was even on a world or not. They could be on a ship drifting through space for all she knew.

Brianna pressed her trembling hand to her mouth, trying to stifle a hysterical giggle. With any luck, they wouldn't realize she was awake yet, and that would at

least give her some time to think. She closed her eyes and prayed for her strength to return. She took another deep breath. Just a little while longer and maybe her head would clear enough to formulate some sort of plan, at least she hoped so.

She opened her eyes again and examined every inch of the dimly lit cell. It was too small to be a room. Six feet by six feet was just big enough for a bed and one small table and chair. The door was flat with no decoration. The cream-colored walls and brown floor blended well with the natural wood furnishings. She looked down. The bed was covered with a gray utilitarian blanket. The small table held one pitcher and one glass.

The bed was hard, and her muscles were sore, from resting on it in one position for Goddess knew how long. She ached all over. Bruises marred what she could see of her arms and, if the pain was any indication, her legs as well. Brianna needed to move, but didn't dare, not wanting to make a sound—and she was sure she'd make plenty of noise if she tried to move right now, it hurt so much. She feared the creaking of the bed or the rustling of her clothing would alert her captors to her conscious state.

She gazed longingly at the pitcher on the table and licked her dry, chapped lips. She was so thirsty. She worried about that. Would they drug her? Had they drugged her already? She slid a protective hand around her slightly rounded stomach. Had they already harmed her precious cargo? She swiped impatiently at a tear. There was no time for crying. If she was going to protect her children, she had to find a

way out of here.

Brianna closed her eyes and concentrated. She tried using the mind link to call Niklas to her. There was no response. Either they were too far apart or her captors were somehow blocking their mental link. She refused to consider the thought that he could be unconscious or dead.

*Niklas? Please, answer me Niklas, I'm so scared.* She closed her eyes, took a deep breath and concentrated on staying calm. Getting hysterical was not going to help matters. She needed to stay calm so she could think her way out of this. Trying to keep her movements to a minimum, she itched to bring her hand to her mouth. Her horrible nervous habit of nail biting was taking a tremendous toll on her ability to think right now. If they were monitoring her, not only would they see her horrible habit, but they would know she was awake. Surely they wouldn't see just a nibble...

Brianna had almost lost the battle with her inner nail biting self when the door was flung open so forcefully she'd forgotten to feign unconsciousness. Her eyes were wide with fear as she looked at the man in the doorway.

He was tall, like Niklas, but that was where the resemblance ended. Where Niklas had laugh lines at the corners of his eyes. This man had lines between them from scowling. His mouth slashed cruelly across the lower half of his face, showing his contempt for her, or perhaps his contempt for the entire human race.

*It was the same man from the ball.*

*Niklas!* She could hear herself screaming, yet her

mouth was firmly closed. She had to calm herself. This could not be good for her or for the babies. The thought of her unborn children had a calming effect, allowing Brianna to take a deep breath and think. "What do you want with me?" she asked him levelly.

He smiled. "Who said I wanted you?" He stepped further into the room and sat down on the chair. "You have something I want." He held out his hand. "Give it to me and perhaps I will be kind and let you go."

*Go to hell!* "I have no idea what you're talking about, sir." Brianna rolled onto her other side and brought her legs up to her chest, wanting to do whatever she could to prevent him from noticing her pregnancy. This man wanted to destroy the rightful heir and she was carrying three more. She had no doubt that he would take great joy in murdering them all.

"The stone," he said impatiently. "I want the stone." He wiggled his fingers as if that alone would make the stone appear from its hiding place.

Brianna sighed, pulled on the chain that held her lucky Petoskey stone out from under her shirt. "This stone?" She feigned a look of total confusion. "This is just my lucky Petoskey stone. I don't know why you'd want this so badly." She drew the chain over her head and handed it to him.

The man flung it across the room where it cracked against the wall. "Do you mock me? Do you think that I will not kill you where you lie?" He snarled, his ominous dark eyes turning black with rage.

*You won't if you want the stone, buddy. Niklas won't give it to you and I don't have it.* It was a wonderful thought, even if it didn't make her feel any better. She



closed her eyes and thanked the Goddess that she'd taken Niklas's advice and never worn it. Brianna yawned.

The man glared at her, his fists clenching and unclenching at his sides. His inky black hair hung loose and lank against his forehead, looking greasy.

"You seem a bit strung out, maybe you should try decaf." Brianna closed her eyes against his penetrating glare.

"I don't need your primitive stimulants. They are beneath me," he snarled.

She shrugged, trying to appear nonchalant. "It was just a suggestion. You appear so tense." Why did he want the stone? Did he know of its powers? "What do you want with this stone anyway? It's not like its anything special." She gave a delicate shudder. "It's not even pretty. The only reason I even kept it is because my mother gave it to me. If we're even talking about the same thing." She pasted an innocent look on her face, hoping it appeared genuine.

"What I will use it for is my concern. You only have to provide me with the means to obtain it."

"You have no right to hold me here like this, let me go." She raised her chin, looking into his hard eyes.

His eyes gleamed and he smiled cruelly. He looked around the cell he was keeping her in. "To think I never imagined I would have to point out to you that you are in no position to make such demands, Your Highness." His tone was mocking. He reached out and trailed a finger down her cheek.

His touch was abhorrent. It was all Brianna could do to not flinch or pull away when he touched her. But

she was not going to give him the satisfaction of knowing he scared her. She suppressed a shiver of revulsion, somehow knowing that if she wasn't careful, this man would drop all pretence of civility. "Why have you brought me here?"

His mocking gaze raked her from head to toe, making her feel dirty in the wake of his look. His lips curled in a parody of a smile.

"Why to have my wicked way with you of course."

Brianna scooted away. "I would rather die." He rushed forward, much faster than she could have anticipated. He grabbed her neck, forcing her against the wall. She choked. His hand squeezed, blocking her airway.

"That can be arranged!" he enunciated every word carefully. "Do you understand, Your Highness?" he spat. He released her, throwing her to the floor. He indicated the water on the table. "Clean yourself up, I will be coming to escort you to dinner."

"You'll never get the stone. I don't have it anymore." Brianna choked past her sore throat.

"Where the stone is, is of no consequence. I *will* possess it." He turned and left the room, slamming the door behind him.

"Well just wait and see if I invite you to another one of my barbecues, mister. You're right on the top of my go to Hell list!" she shouted after him. Brianna looked around the room and was glad he left her. With all of her bravado gone, she needed a respite.

She stood and winced as her body protested the abuse it had suffered at the man's hands and limped over to the corner to retrieve her necklace. She gave it a

dirty look "Some lucky charm you are," she said as she slid the chain back over her head and limped back to the bed where she concentrated on contacting Niklas again.

*Niklas? Please answer me. Why is it I can never make contact with you?* Still nothing. It must be the distance. Otherwise she should be able to communicate with him. She wasn't as strong of a telepath as Niklas. She sighed and sat down with her head in her hands. How in the world was she going to get out of this mess?

Brianna closed her eyes and a picture sprang into her head. A man with silver hair and silvery blue eyes and next to Niklas, the most beautiful man she'd ever seen. "Larin!"

"You called, oh beauteous one?" He was bowing again.

"How can someone be so appealing and yet so annoying at the same time?" Brianna glared at him. "You can be so damn obnoxious." She limped to the table in the corner and poured herself a glass of water. She sniffed it suspiciously.

Larin took a good look around the cell that served as Brianna's accommodations. His surprise was evident.

"You know," she said, leaning against the wall. "I find it a bit comforting to find that you obviously don't know everything. Even though you try to make it seem as though you do." She had to hand it to him though. He recovered very quickly.

"What is the occasion of your summons, oh lovely flower of the desert? Your incredible beauty is startling, though surrounded by thorns." He put his

hands together, the tips rested against his lips. "Yes, a cactus flower, a beautiful white blossom surrounded by the most horren—"

"Will you cut the crap? Geeze, I thought you were supposed to help me if I needed it. Not make me sick to my stomach at every opportunity." She looked around the sparse room. "Well I obviously need your assistance. Need I say more?"

Larin crossed the room, took her chin into his hand and looked into her eyes. "I do not understand why you don't use your own power to save yourself."

His slim hands gently brushed over her bruises, taking some of the pain away. He massaged her head, his magical hands removing the pain of the goose egg she'd discovered there. "I don't have any power, Larin. I've told you that already."

Larin eyed her with disbelief. "How can you so readily believe everything that has happened to you, yet still deny your own power, your own heritage?" He held his hand out to her, clearly wanting her to take it. "You are, at least, part Fey, Brianna. Your power is your heritage, much the same as the color of your hair and your eyes. The blue in your eyes comes from your Fey blood, just as the lightness of your hair." He smoothed a tendril of her hair behind her ear. "Just as you have accepted your blue eyes, you must accept your power. You must learn to accept it, Brianna, otherwise you will be unable to help him." Larin smiled at her softly and snapped his fingers.

## Chapter Twenty-three

“Brianna!”

She turned at the sound of Silera’s voice. Larin had unceremoniously dumped her into the dining room, where Niklas’ mother sat drinking tea with another woman.

Silera’s eyes were full of tears. “Where...where did you come from?” She shook her head. “I don’t care, I’m just glad to see that you’re back.” She rushed to Brianna, her arms open. “I was beside myself with worry.” Silera wrapped her in a warm embrace. “Are you well?”

Brianna nodded, hugged her back, then reached up to push the hair from her face.

“Oh my Goddess, what happened to your neck!” Silera put her hand to her neck and felt gently.

Touching her neck, Brianna felt the welts there. She could almost feel the imprint of the man’s fingers. No wonder it hurt so much when she talked.

Silera brushed Brianna’s hair back and frowned at the multiple bruises she saw on her face, neck and arms.

“Ahreelia, find Niklas, tell him Brianna has

returned. Tell him," she looked at Brianna's bruised face and arms. "Tell him she is well, but she needs him." She turned and gave the woman a stern look. "Go. Quickly."

Brianna suddenly felt faint. Silera grasped her by the shoulders, took her to the adjoining room and told her to lie down on a long surface with flat cushions. In the short time she'd spent on *Terrna*, she found this was what passed for a couch.

Silera left the room for a moment and returned with a basin of cool water. She took a cloth and began to bathe Brianna's cuts and bruises with it.

Brianna closed her eyes. What was it with people wanting her to bathe all of the time, did she smell or something? Geeze, she'd just had a bath last night.

"I won't ask you to speak now." Silera wiped Brianna's brow gently. "Any questions can wait until Niklas has seen you to your room and you are comfortable."

Silera's ministrations were so soothing, she felt herself drifting off... She woke with a start when she heard a loud crash. A scream lodged in her throat. Who was it? Had the man found her again? Sitting up, Brianna saw Niklas walking toward the corner of the room where Silera had cared for her contusions. Tears filled her eyes. He was the most beautiful sight.

Silera was hurrying behind him, talking frantically. "...the doctor, he is on his way. Niklas, what if—"

Brianna shook her head. Still not totally fluent in *Terrnan*, she had trouble understanding everything that was being said when they talked so quickly. She tried, but her head pounded mercilessly, making it hard to

concentrate. Even with her head aching so badly, she couldn't help but admire the way Niklas walked, the power in each stride, the way his hair framed his face. She had eyes only for him, watching as he carried himself with an air of confidence.

Even through the cloud of her exhaustion, Brianna's senses were on overload. What was it about him that had every one of her nerve endings acutely aware of his presence? She looked down toward his hands. He had such good gentle hands, long fingered and strong.

He reached out to brush the hair from her face. His touch only served to add more fantasies to her libidinous thoughts. He looked down at her arms, gently lifting her leg to raise the hem of her slacks so he could inspect it. Brianna watched as he stiffened, his jaw tensed, a muscle jumped under the skin, he was angry. Niklas reached down to pick her up.

Brianna flinched away. "Don't..." Regretting the words almost as soon as she said them, she bit her lip. Looking everywhere, but his beautiful eyes and tempting face, she searched for the words to explain how she felt.

Niklas closed his eyes. "I will not hurt you, *Laharra*. I am not angry with you, I am simply angry at what has been done to you. Please let me carry you to your rooms where I can bathe you and see to your wounds." He waited patiently for her permission.

Brianna nodded her assent. She closed her eyes, biting her swollen lip as he lifted her in his arms. The pain serving to distract her from the closeness of their bodies pressed together.

\* \* \* \*

Watching the tears run down her face, Niklas berated himself. He had promised to protect her. And he had failed. There were kidnappers, quite possibly even assassins on his world, in his home. He was sure the rage he felt poured from his gaze.

When Brianna looked up at him, the blood drained from her face and she whimpered in alarm.

Niklas closed his eyes, and sighed. "I'm sorry I cannot shield you from my anger, *Laharra*. Only know that I would *never* hurt you. I would sooner cut my own throat." He leaned his head down to press his lips against her hair. Laying her gently on the bed when they reached her suite of rooms, he left for a moment to arrange the bathing chamber. She would need the familiarity and the therapeutic advantages of real water.

When he returned to Brianna, he sat down beside her. He didn't want to cause her more grief, but he had to know. "Were you...violated?" He looked down, amazed to find that his hands were trembling. He closed his eyes, unaccustomed to such tremulous feelings. He would never forgive himself if she had suffered the worst because of his failure to protect her.

Brianna watched him carefully before reaching out to cover his trembling hand with her own.

Niklas looked up, amazed that she'd reached for him. It was the last thing he'd expected.

She closed her tear-filled eyes. Tears that had once trembled on her lashes, slid down her dirt-smeared face, leaving lighter trails in the grime covering her



cheeks. He wanted nothing more than to reach out and brush them away, hold his *El'edal* in his arms and revel in the fact that she was safe.

"It wasn't your fault, Niklas," she whispered hoarsely.

He returned his gaze to his hands. It *was* his fault. He had failed to protect her and she had somehow managed to escape her captors on her own. He scowled for a moment. She had probably called Larin again. He scrubbed his face with his hands. Even now, he could begrudge the faery what little time he spent with her? He should be grateful.

"How can it not be my fault? I brought you here against your will. Then I promised you my protection and I have failed you." Niklas stood, picked Brianna up in his arms and carried her to the bathing chamber.

The pool was filled with steaming water. It was the first time she had ever seen it full. Niklas led a busy life and usually didn't take the time for such simple pleasures.

He carefully placed her on her feet in front of the pool and began to undress her, careful not to frighten or alarm her.

When she was completely nude, he lifted her once more and placed her into the warm water. The hot water must have stung her injuries as hot water will and her breath hissed out between her teeth.

She sighed softly as he began to bathe her as gently as he could.

Niklas was careful to keep his emotions hidden. His mate was already frightened. If she saw the intensity of his desire he would frighten her more, and he didn't

want to make matters worse. Whenever Brianna turned from him, or cast her gaze in another direction, Niklas found it hard, nearly impossible to keep his thoughts under control. She was the epitome of everything he had ever hoped to find in a woman. Tall, elegant, graceful, she was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen. He watched her closely, noticed when she relaxed as he bathed her, her body floating gently on the surface of the pool.

\* \* \* \*

Brianna, finally able to relax, lay back in the warm water as Niklas's gentle hands massaged her scalp thoroughly. She leaned back onto the edge of the pool, her lower body bobbed to the surface. The air was cool on her warmed skin, causing gooseflesh to rise and her petal pink nipples pebbled at the contact. She took a deep breath, and leaving the world behind, reveled in her mate's touch. If only for a moment, everything was perfect here in this time and this place.

Niklas rinsed her long hair with the warm water, careful not to get any soap in her eyes, making her feel cherished. Brianna was so relaxed she didn't even feel Niklas release her. Comfortable and calm, her body floated freely through the water. She sat up, the water splashing around her. Droplets ran down her torso and she looked over her shoulder at Niklas.

He was watching her with an intensity she'd already become accustomed to. She stood and waded to the edge where he knelt. She took a moment to watch his reaction and eyed the bulge she knew was

there for her alone. It was intoxicating to know she could have such an effect on him. Niklas was total male perfection. She'd never, in her wildest dreams, believed she would be able to hold the interest of such an incredible man like him. He devoured her with his gaze. Brianna could tell he was trying to hide his desire. She felt a surge in her heart. How could she mistrust a man who behaved so selflessly?

Brianna let her gaze drop to his arms, they were bare to the elbow. His sleeves were rolled up, exposing his tawny skin. She wanted nothing more than to reach out, to feel the soft down on his forearm, to take his strong hand in hers. She looked into his eyes and knew he'd been tortured by her disappearance.

Brianna could feel the strength of his self-loathing at being unable to protect her within his own home. She knew she had no other choice than to comfort him. She needed his comfort as well, to wash the feel of the evil touch she'd been subjected to from her body and mind. The strange man who took her away from here may not have violated her physically, but mentally, she wondered if she would ever be the same.

## Chapter Twenty-four

Brianna slowly opened her arms to Niklas. If she'd ever had any doubts at all, they were forgotten the moment she saw the despair in Niklas's eyes turn to hope. He quickly stripped and lowered himself into the water. He reached out, obviously needing to touch her. He took her hand in his much larger one, lacing their fingers together.

"Can you forgive me, *Laharra*?" he asked, pressing his forehead against hers.

Brianna reached up with her free hand, threading her fingers through his silky hair. "There is nothing to forgive you for, *Laharru*. We are both victims of circumstance, forced into situations beyond our control." She closed her eyes and inhaled deeply, finally coming to terms with what had happened to her. Niklas had told her the truth. She knew that now. If she still wanted to return home, he would take her. The knowledge was freeing. It let her look at Niklas in a new light. Her love blossomed with the knowledge that he, also, had been acting in a manner alien to his nature.

Niklas released her hand, rested his on her hips,

drawing her closer into his embrace. "Just let me hold you for a moment, *Laharra*. I need to know that you are truly well."

Brianna knew what he was feeling. As before, when his emotions were strong, he couldn't keep her from reading them, just as she couldn't keep him from reading her emotions. They were overflowing from his mind to hers. It was incredible to know that he cared so deeply for her. "I'm fine, Niklas." She drew his hand to the soft swell of her stomach. "The babies are fine." She reached for him, taking his swollen member in her hand. "There's no reason why we can't—"

Niklas stopped her from fondling him. He gritted his teeth. It was quite possibly the most difficult thing he'd ever had to do. "No, *Laharra*, I want Sarcha to examine you first. I am afraid for you and for the children, let's be sure."

Brianna stepped back, ashamed that she hadn't thought to have a doctor check her to see if the children were fine. "Yes, of course, Niklas. I should have thought of that myself."

He put his finger under her chin. Tipping her face up, he kissed her lightly. "Don't worry yourself over it. You have been through much these past days. I would have you rest now until Sarcha can arrive." Niklas lifted her from the water and carried her into the bedroom where he toweled her dry.

"Past days, Niklas?" She turned a perplexed gaze on him. "I have been gone for days?"

He stilled, as his hands holding the towel, rested over her bottom. "Yes, *Laharra*, you have been missing for three days." His eyes searched hers, unreadable.

Brianna brought her hand to her mouth. "Three days? I was really gone that long?" She turned to Niklas with horror-filled eyes. "I don't remember, Niklas. I only remember today!" She collapsed in a faint.

\* \* \* \*

He caught her in his arms and carried her limp form to the bed. He pushed the button for the communication link and called urgently for Sarcha. "Get your butt down here." He growled. "Now!" Niklas took the time to dress Brianna in a white nightgown, wanting her covered for the doctor's examination. It flowed over her curves like gossamer lace.

Niklas tried to ignore the urges stirring in the lower regions of his body. After such a long abstinence, his libido was making one hell of a comeback. He held Brianna for a moment before he placed her on the bed, covering her with his *Meer* quilt. Niklas paced the room, anxious for Sarcha to proclaim her hale and hardy. The last three days had been hell. It was no wonder he found it hard to believe he'd gotten her back.

There was a knock on the door and Niklas rushed to answer. Sarcha stood on the other side, holding his bag with a worried look on his face. Like the rest of Niklas's people, he had thought his king had lost his life-mate. It was written on his face.

Sarcha waited for Niklas to move aside before entering the room. "How is she?"

"She is bruised nearly everywhere, she has cuts on

her hands, arms and legs. I have not asked her how she obtained them. I didn't want to tire her before your visit." He gestured to the bed. "As you can see, I have helped her bathe the filth from her body to help stem the onslaught of infection." He paused, waited for the older man's attention. "She did not realize she had been gone for days, Sarcha. She must have been rendered unconscious." Niklas cast a worried look in Brianna's direction and was surprised to see her awake.

\* \* \* \*

Brianna glared at them. "I *am* awake, you know. You don't have to talk about me as if I'm comatose or something." Brianna hated it when Niklas acted like this. She fought the urge to stick her tongue out at him. Such gestures in the past only made him smile and lift his eyebrow as if the action alone supported his theory that she couldn't run her own life. *Men!* Brianna crossed her arms over her chest and scowled.

Niklas crossed the room, walking to the side of the bed furthest from the door. Sitting on the edge, he took her hand in his. "You were unconscious, *Laharra*." He put his palm to her forehead. "Do you not remember?"

Brianna squeezed her eyes shut. If everyone here didn't stop treating her like she'd break, she was going to scream really, really loud. Feeling just a little frustrated, she wondered how in the world was she ever going to be able to assert herself in this world where she was given a Goddess status. She was barely able to go to the bathroom without someone wanting

to help.

Still, she let Niklas take her hand in his without putting up too much of a fight. Airing their dirty laundry in the presence of others wasn't a wise choice. She knew it undermined his authority with his people. Though technically, she wasn't one of his people, on this world she belonged to him, and that rankled.

Brianna watched as Sarcha took some things from his bag. It was amazing how much more advanced these people were, yet their doctors still made house calls and they carried the equivalent to a little black bag. It was enough to cause Brianna to snort as she suppressed a giggle.

Niklas frowned at her suspiciously.

How could a man be so beautiful even when he was frowning? "What?" Brianna asked. They both glanced at her expectantly.

Sarcha gave her a watchful look. "Do you feel any pain anywhere, Highness?" He seemed uncomfortable with the look Brianna gave him.

"Do you see these?" She lifted her arms and showed them to the doctor. Indicating her bruises, she couldn't help but be something of a smartass. "I have them all over. Sooo...I hurt pretty much everywhere I have them, which, as I said before, is all over." Brianna closed her eyes for a moment, instantly sorry for her outburst. "Look I don't mean to be rude, but I have been through a lot over the last few months." She gazed at Sarcha, her look repentant.

The two men looked at each other and came to some silent agreement. Sarcha finished his examination quickly and began to pack his instruments back into



his bag.

"Go on to my office, Sarcha, we will speak there in a moment." Niklas leaned forward to plump the pillows behind Brianna's head and back. "I will leave you now so that you may be alone. I do not want to distress you further." He paused at her panicked look. "What is it?" he asked, looking around.

Brianna didn't want to be left alone. She didn't really remember how she came to be in the possession of that strange cruel man, but she somehow knew that she had been alone when it happened. She reached out and grasped his hand. "Don't leave me alone. Please don't. He'll come again if you do."

\* \* \* \*

The frightened intensity in Brianna's eyes gave Niklas pause. He would not leave her alone. If it made her feel better to be by his side, then that was where she would be. He uncovered her and picked her up in his arms.

Settling her on a chair, he fashioned a robe for her to wear using the replicator. He returned to her side and helped her to dress. It would serve a dual purpose. It would cover her well enough so that everyone seeing her would not be able to see through the nearly transparent gown he had fashioned for her, and it would help to keep her warm.

Niklas shook his head. When had he become such a prude? Not too long ago he would have *wanted* a woman to parade around wearing nothing but a transparent gown. Now he wanted to be sure that every inch of his *El'edal* was covered from prying eyes.

He lifted her into his arms, reveling that he was able to bear her weight in his arms once again. Taller and heavier than the women on this world, she still was no match for the strength he possessed and he was glad of it. His *El'edal* was so self-conscious of her weight, had he made any sound of struggle she would never give him the honor of carrying her again. Walking down the hall surrounded by her sweet scent was almost intoxicating. He was in heaven and knew he would never wish to be anywhere else. Ever.

\* \* \* \*

Brianna relaxed into his embrace, knowing she would rather be here than anywhere else. Even on her own world with her own life. What she had on Earth wasn't a life. Brianna realized that now. She'd existed, but never really lived. There was a life here with Niklas. Now, having tasted what had been missing, she refused to give it up without a fight.

She snuggled closer. Burying her face in his neck, she inhaled deeply, loving his unique scent. She could live very happily in his arms for the rest of her life. Brianna wrapped her arms around his neck, burrowing her face into the crook of his shoulder, her fingers tunneled in his silky hair. "I love you, Niklas."

Niklas paused for a moment, his step hitched. It was the only indication that he had even heard her, at first. Then his arms tightened and he bent his head to hers, kissing her lightly on her temple. "I love you, too, *Laharra*." He took her to his office where he'd agreed to meet with Sarcha.

The doors opened as he approached and Sarcha stood with deference as they entered the room. Sarcha cleared his throat. "I thought her highness would remain in your chambers?" he asked, looking uncomfortable.

"She decided to accompany me." Niklas sat her on his chair and straightened. "And since I live only to please my *El'edal*, I have brought her with me." He smiled. His hand rested on Brianna's shoulder, a connection he apparently needed.

"I'll try to behave myself. I *can* be civil when I try," Brianna said with a smile. "I'm sorry about what I said earlier. The only excuse that I have is that I am not completely myself right now." She reached out, covering Sarcha's hand with her own. "Can you forgive me?"

Flustered, Sarcha blushed. He removed his hand from under hers and straightened his suit. He had abandoned the jumpsuits since they reached the planet, just as everyone else had seemed to. He looked rather nice now, dressed in his cream-colored suit. "As you wish. I was just looking at the examination records, and the children are fine. You have changed somewhat, in your appearance, and in your blood. Do either of you have an explanation for that? Have you been eating differently since you arrived perhaps?" Sarcha alternated his gaze from one to the other.

Niklas snorted. "Not likely. She eats mainly replicated earth food. I can't seem to get her to acquire a taste for our more substantial diet."

Brianna resisted the urge to kick him. "I can't help it if your food sucks!" She looked at Sarcha

apologetically. "No offense."

He bowed his head. "None taken."

Brianna thought she saw a smile hovering around his lips for a minute. Then it was gone. She gave herself a mental shrug. It was probably her imagination anyway. Nothing ever made him smile, or frown for that matter. Someone needed to find his buttons and start pushing them. She turned to Niklas. "You want me to eat don't you?" She smiled at his nod. "Then stop complaining. I can't help it if I find your food bland and tasteless."

He arched a brow at that. "Tasteless?"

"Yes. So stop trying to cram it down my throat. I wasn't raised here, so it would stand to reason that I would find your food a bit on the strange side." Besides, she wasn't giving up pizza for anybody.

Niklas sighed. "You're eating habits are not what we are here to discuss." He looked at the doctor. "They are fine then?" At the doctor's nod Niklas proceeded. "Good. The changes you found in her system are no doubt due to the fact that she has drank of the water of the *Shantamoura*." He held up a hand as the doctor began to interrupt him. "We have found, much to our surprise, that Brianna is of the Fey." Niklas sighed. "We have all taken a drink from the river from time to time. It has never had any effect on us, except to strengthen our ability to fight disease." He looked at Brianna. "For one of Fey blood, it changes their powers, increases them and gives them enhanced abilities, including greater power and greater beauty. Surely you have noticed that she is even more beautiful now?"

Sarcha nodded. "I have. I think everyone in the palace has noticed the beauty of your queen." He frowned at Brianna's snort.

\* \* \* \*

Niklas nodded at Sarcha's reply, ignoring Brianna's *comment*. "How could anyone not notice the changes in her beauty?" Well, other than Brianna. She had never seemed to notice her beauty before, and she didn't see it now. It was a flaw he could live with. "As long as they are all healthy, I am happy." He smiled.

"They are all very healthy, My Lord." Sarcha assured him. "As a matter of fact, it appears as though they are all growing at a very rapid rate." He cleared his throat. He obviously wanted to finish what he had to say as quickly as possible. "What you have just told me could explain a great many things." His gaze darted from Niklas to Brianna, not staying on either of their faces for long.

"What are you saying?" Brianna asked, her hand at her neck, massaging a particularly ugly bruise.

Sarcha gave her a level gaze. "Your children are growing at an accelerated rate. I can only assume that your delivery date will accelerate as well."

"How soon?" Brianna's hand covered her rounded abdomen, her eyes wide with shock.

Sarcha frowned. "A few months still, to be sure. But not the usual nine months you would expect. It is difficult to say."

She closed her eyes as tears slid down her face. "I never should have taken a drink of that water." She

reached up, dashing the tears away with her hand.

Niklas rubbed his eyes and sighed. What she really meant to say, was that she never should have let him talk her into drinking that damned water. That she never should have trusted him. Perhaps she was right. "Call him," he searched her eyes. "You know you want to. He has the answers that we all would seek. Call him to you. You know he will come."

Brianna nodded. She sat straighter in her chair, for some reason, she didn't want Larin to see her slouching and feeling sorry for herself. Why she should care was beside the point. "Larin, please come to me, I need to talk to you."

There was a flash of white light and Larin was before her, a smile on his handsome face. "Thank you for asking, Brianna. It does get rather tiresome to be ordered about constantly." He bowed. "What is it you wish?"

Brianna's mouth hung open for a moment before she snapped it closed. He could be really charming when he wanted to be. "Do the Fey carry children like mortals do?"

Larin found himself a seat and made himself at home before he answered. "Not in the same way, no. The Fey do not have children in that way, unless we choose to." He shrugged lazily. "We think that we would like to procreate, and a child appears before us, if we do not want to live for several years in the mortal realm so the child may mature, we think of a grown child." He held up a hand at Brianna's look. "I already know what you are going to ask. Until a member of my race reaches the age of ten years, they age. After that,

we remain much the same.”

“You looked like that at ten years old?” Brianna asked, mouth agape.

Larin looked down at himself, then at Brianna. “What’s wrong with the way I look? Yes I looked this way at ten years old. We mature very quickly compared to mortals.”

“Has there ever been an instance of a human and a Fey interbreeding?” Niklas asked, not sure how much Larin wished Sarcha to know.

Larin’s gaze flicked toward Niklas “You know there is.” He shrugged. “In the instance that a human and a Fey procreate the gestation period for the human is dramatically reduced.”

Brianna heaved a sigh. “So this is normal then.” She was so relieved she could have slid to the floor in a heap.

“What is normal?” Larin asked as he casually picked at his fingernails.

Sarcha cleared his throat. “Since she has arrived, the babes in her womb have doubled in size. We have only been here for three weeks, and that much growth in such a short time is unheard of.”

Larin nodded. “It is because she partook of the waters of the *Shantamoura*. The water helps our kind rejuvenate. Since Brianna is part Fey, the waters of the river have given that part of her the rejuvenating powers of our kind.”

Brianna smiled and sighed with relief. “So what you’re saying, is that for someone like me, this is completely normal. Right?”

“Did your parents ever tell you tales of how you

were born? Did you come earlier than expected, yet you were of a sufficient size to not be endangered?"

Brianna nodded. "Yes, of course, I remember now. My father said it was so strange that I was six weeks premature yet I was still nearly eight pounds. The doctors all thought there must have been some mistake with the dates."

Larin shook his head. "No, not a mistake with the dates. Just a peculiar family trait." His mouth quirked at the corner in a half smile, that for once, reached expressive eyes.

Niklas heaved a sigh, relieved the rapid growth was due to Brianna's Fey blood and not something that he had caused.

Brianna smiled. "I'm so relieved, I was afraid that there was something wrong." She stood and rushed to Larin, giving him a kiss on the cheek.

Larin stood still for a moment, his eyes wide. He turned an accusing look on Brianna. "Now what did you go and do that for?" He snarled, before he snapped his fingers and promptly disappeared.

Brianna looked on with astonishment. "What in the world was *that* about?"



## Chapter Twenty-five

Brianna followed Silera through her wing of the palace. Their shoes clacked on the marble-like floor. Windows, scattered along the long corridors, delivered light throughout the length.

"Follow me, dear." Her soon-to-be mother-in-law tossed a look behind her. "We'll be there in just a minute." She stopped, looked at Brianna and sighed. "There's just no help for it." She shook her head. "I wish you weren't getting married with all of those cuts and bruises marring your beautiful face." She smiled softly. "What I wouldn't give to have your light, translucent skin."

Brianna chuckled. "On my world, everyone would be envious of your perpetual tan."

Silera laughed. "perhaps I should visit your world." She turned left at a juncture leading Brianna to a door. She pushed it open, ushering Brianna inside. "This is the *mooreenah*."

"More-eena." Brianna repeated. "What is that?" She glanced around the huge room filled with smaller doorways and crates. It almost looked like an attic.

Silera walked to one of the small doors and opened

it. "We keep our heritage in this room. Every wedding gown ever worn by a queen of *Terrna* is stored in here." She closed the door and headed for another. "You can choose one of these dresses, or we can replicate one of your own choosing." She opened and closed several doors before she found what she'd been looking for. "Here it is." She reached inside, removing a beautiful sapphire blue gown.

Brianna looked at all of the smaller doors. "They're closets." She turned her direction toward the dress. "It's beautiful. It looks like satin."

Silera grinned in her direction. "It is very like satin, my dear." She draped the dress across one of the chairs in the room. It immediately changed size so the dress wouldn't drag on the floor.

Brianna shook her head and looked away, trying to ignore furniture that did such alien things as turning from a chair to a garment rack in front of her eyes. She ran her hand lightly down the material, admiring the attached stones that resembled diamonds and seed pearls. "Where did you get it?"

"From time to time we send ships to planets that we have peopled. They collect information, sometimes influence industrial revolution." She turned back to the doorway, closed the door and headed for another closet. .

Brianna examined the room with awe. This was one huge dressing and fitting room. "Did you influence Earth?" Brianna wandered through the room, opening and closing doors, gasping at the finery she found behind each of the small wooden doors.

"Oh, my, yes." Silera smiled. "Your planet would

still be in the dark ages if we hadn't interfered." She shook her head in disbelief. "Science is heresy? My goodness." She clucked her tongue. "And the way they measured time was absolutely horrible. It was one of us who taught your Gregorian Monks to make a plausible calendar."

"That's why you measure your time in years like we do." Brianna understood a lot of things she'd seen since getting here now. Even some of the architecture here was similar.

"Actually, my dear, you measure your time like *we* do," she said with a smile.

Brianna nodded. "Yes, of course."

Silera smiled softly. "We influenced many things on Earth. Including the emancipation of slaves and women." She shook her head. "Your world was filled with such stupidity."

Brianna nodded her agreement and gave the sapphire dress one last, longing look. Niklas's mother would look stunning in it. "You're going to be beautiful in that dress, Silera."

She laughed. "I won't be wearing it, dear. You will." She frowned. "Unless of course you don't care for the color." She started to dig through another closet.

Shocked, Brianna stared at the dress. "I love the color." Who wanted a plain white wedding dress? White always made her look sallow anyway. Brianna swiped at the tears seeping from her eyes. "I don't know why I have to cry all of the time. I feel like such a big baby."

Silera left the closet and wrapped her arm around Brianna's shoulders. "Because you're pregnant, my

dear. The tears come so much easier, when you're with child."

Brianna sniffed. "I suppose." She gave her mother-in-law a worried frown. "I know you want a big celebration, Silera, but I don't think I can wait to marry Niklas."

The other woman began to speak and Brianna held up her hand. "Hear me out, please. I know I was kidnapped because I was alone in my room." She circled the room, found a chair and sat down. Prepared for the seat to change shape, Brianna continued after the chair stopped its movement. "I'm sure that you've noticed that he hasn't left me alone today. I hate to think of what is going to happen tonight when I go to bed." She leaned forward with her head in her hands. "We need to be married today. Even if it is without a big service."

Silera knelt in front of her. "Niklas has already explained this to me, my dear. That is why we are here. The bride is not to see her gown until the wedding day. In the past it was brought to her, if she wanted one of her own choosing the bride must choose between gowns already made by others on the day of the ceremony." Silera waved her hand in dismissal. "Some strange superstition. Since you were to be married just two days ago, everything is still in readiness for this event." She covered Brianna's hand with her own. "Come, we must get you dressed before Niklas finds us and breaks down the door."

Silera called Urma to the room to help them. When she asked Brianna who she wanted to have be a part of her preparations, Brianna could think of no one, other

than Silera and Urma.

Urma curtsied when she entered the room. "I must thank you, Lady, for including me in this." Her gaze darted around the room. "Usually, this is reserved for family." Her chin quivered and her eyes looked suspiciously watery.

To Urma's complete surprise, Brianna hugged her.

"What are you doing, Lady? You shouldn't be embracing the likes of me!" Urma stiffened and tried to pull away.

Brianna smiled and held on tight. "Why not, Urma, you are a part of my family." She hugged her again. "You and Silera, have been the closest to a mother that I have ever had." She smiled, looking between them. "A mother and an aunt."

Urma lifted her apron and dashed the tears from her eyes. "Thank you, Lady, I will cherish this memory, always." She took Brianna's hand, and not unlike a drill sergeant, began barking orders.

Brianna sat in the chair for what seemed like hours while Urma fiddled with her hair. "What are you doing?" She twisted around, trying to get a look at herself in the mirror Silera had drug out from behind another one of those magical doors.

Urma grasped Brianna's face between her two plump hands, forcing her to face forward again. "How many times do you have to be told? You can't see yourself before you're ready for the ceremony!"

"I don't believe in bad luck. I make my own destiny," Brianna argued.

Urma chuckled. "And that's why you're here, making your own destiny?" She smirked as she

walked around to face Brianna, a comb in her hand. "I know why you are here, lady. Silera told me."

Brianna shot a surprised look at Silera. "I thought no one was supposed to know?"

Silera shrugged. "I tell Urma everything." She stared at Urma wistfully for a moment before she seemed to shake herself and began to bustle around the room again.

Urma put the finishing touches on Brianna's hair and declared her ready to dress.

Brianna had been afraid they were going to try to squeeze her into a corset, but the dress fit perfectly without one. Her high firm breasts didn't need the added lift of a corset and her waist, though not tiny, was small enough to fit into the dress without difficulty, thanks to the empire waist. Besides, she thought with a frown, she didn't think pregnant women could wear corsets.

Finally, Urma let her turn to the mirror. The color of the dress enhanced the blue of her eyes and the golden sheen of her hair. The maid had piled her hair atop her head in curls. Ringlets, like large sausages, tumbled down her back, framing her face.

The gems on the dress glistened in the waning light, shimmering as she breathed, every time she moved. The low cut bodice framed her high firm breasts showing off her décolletage. A necklace Silera found in another of the anterooms glistened around her neck, the diamond-like gems shining. The sapphire that fit snugly between her breasts matched the color of her eyes.

Brianna stared in the mirror, stunned. She was

beautiful, really and truly beautiful. Is this what Niklas saw every time he looked at her? "Oh, I hope so."

"Did you say something, dear?" Silera asked as she stepped closer.

Brianna shook her head. "No, I just don't believe that's me." She indicated her reflection.

Holding out a small book, Silera said, "It is customary for the bride to carry the Book of Life with her to the ceremony. It symbolizes her willingness to give life to this family by bearing children." She grinned. "We all know of your willingness, dear, but it is custom."

Brianna took the small oval book in her hands. She nervously turned it over and over as they left the room and headed for the temple hall.

Silera and Urma led her to the nearest express lift and she followed them into it. She looked around the small room, yelping when it started to move. Okay, this was an elevator. She scowled. Someone could have told her as she'd been walking everywhere.

The doors opened onto an opulent corridor. Statues representing Gods and Goddesses lined each side of the long hall. Carved wainscoting lined the walls and intricately carved pillars accented the doorways they passed. Candles burned brightly at the foot of each statue, next to the offerings of flowers and fruit that sat at their feet.

Brianna walked slowly down the long hallway, feeling blessed to have the eyes of the gods watching her approach the very temple that honored them. That honored their presence on this world.

Brianna blinked, realizing that there was someone

missing. Someone who had every right to see her married, if that was what he wished. She paused near the end of the long hall. Staring at the ornate hand carved balustrade that led up the stairs to the intricately carved doors on the next level. "Larin." Brianna said, softly. "I'm inviting you to my wedding, if you'd care to come."

Silera looked at her sadly. "It's a shame you have no male relatives to give you away. It is a very significant gesture during the ceremony, stating that your family entrusts your care to Niklas."

Brianna nodded. "Yes, it's a shame I had hoped..."

Suddenly a bright light appeared at the top of the carpeted stairs. Larin stood leaning his hip against the swirling, carved banister. His clothing glowed with a magical light as if a silver aura surrounded him. He held his arm out. "I felt your need for family," he swallowed visibly. "Will I do?"

Brianna could see his fear of rejection. This poor, lonely man, he joked and played pranks to cover the fact that he was so lonely. She bet he'd never admit to it though. She gave him a brilliant smile and hurried up the stairs. Taking his offered arm, she said, "I would give you another kiss for this, Larin, but I'm afraid you'll disappear again." Brianna leaned closer and whispered, "It's a good thing there is a transport pad up here or you would have some explaining to do."

Larin gave her an unfathomable look. "I'm sorry your father could not be here to do this, or one closer in your lineage." He hooked a finger beneath the neckline of his top and pulled it away from his throat.



Brianna smiled up at him and covered his hand with hers. "You are just the person I wanted. If I couldn't have my father, I wanted my friend."

Larin bowed deeply. "My gratitude, fair Brianna." He stood, and toned down his glamour a bit so he didn't glow so brightly, then indicated the door. "Shall we proceed?"

Brianna's eyes widened as they stepped through the door. She had expected to see the inside of the temple. Instead, they stood just inside a huge inner courtyard. She could see the temple quite a distance away. The temple was a huge square shaped building, which stood four stories high. The steeples, three of them in all, looked at least three times as tall as the rest of the building, one steeple on each end and one in the middle.

"See the steeples, Brianna?" Silera said. "They were designed to house the bride and groom. You will be on the right, there." She pointed. "And Niklas will be on the left." She smiled softly. "You will meet in the middle, symbolizing your partnership in your marriage, and throughout your lives."

Brianna inhaled deeply. She was getting married today. She'd never dreamed to have a wedding of this size, and she had certainly never dreamed that she would have a male member of her family, no matter how distant, standing by her side.

Brianna reached up and dashed the tears from her eyes. This was her wedding day and she refused to ruin it with silly tears.

They walked slowly across the inner courtyard, up the huge marble-like steps and into the massive

temple. Brianna followed Silera and Urma to the right tower where they would await the hail to descend to the wedding steeple.

Brianna gazed at Urma fondly and was glad that she'd insisted the woman wear one of the dresses in the *morreenah*. She was beautiful and she looked so familiar, but Brianna couldn't figure out why. Silera stood next to Urma, holding her hand. How many times over the years had she wished for a mother? And now, she had two.

Soon the summons came from the marriage steeple. The butterflies fluttered in Brianna's stomach, protesting the stress she was under. As they walked from the bride's steeple to the middle one, Brianna hoped to get a glimpse of Niklas, but he was nowhere to be seen.

"Where is he?" she whispered softly as they entered the small room, and it sure was small in here, for being such a big building on the outside. Silera crossed the room to another door. "We wait here, until summoned further." She stood with her ear to the door. She grimaced. "There is some strange male ritual that we have to wait for them to complete." She grinned. "It's most likely a good strong drink to toast away their freedom."

Brianna giggled and nodded. She sat in a chair in the corner, surprised it didn't change shape.

It felt like they'd been waiting forever when the door finally creaked open ominously. The screech of the door had Brianna jumping from her seat.

"Shall we?" Larin asked, holding his arm out for her to take. "I hope you don't regret asking me here,

Brianna. Niklas," he stressed the name unkindly, "could have a problem with my presence." His icy blue eyes bored into hers.

Brianna shook her head. "No. He won't mind that you're here because I am happy. And if I'm happy, he's happy." She smiled. "Don't ask me why, but he takes pleasure in it."

Larin looked at her with his ancient eyes. "Then you are indeed lucky, Brianna. Most people, whether they are Fey, or human, do not find that within a mate."

They rounded a corner and the full temple was spread out before them. Brianna gasped. "There's so many people here! It looks like the entire city has come."

"It is the entire city," Larin said with a nod. "And if I haven't already done so, I will tell you that you are beautiful today, Brianna." He touched a bit of the blue sapphire satin, a faraway look in his eyes. "This is a copy of your great grandmother's dress. She married Niklas's ancestor in this. You look stunning." Larin bowed low over her hand.

He led Brianna up the long aisle. She was in shock. She had no idea the entire village was to attend, though she probably should have known. Their king's nuptials were a very important event for them, and no doubt, most of them just wanted to get a good look at their new queen. Brianna clamped her lips shut at the thought. She'd almost giggled right here in front of everyone.

Brianna raised her eyes when she noticed a movement in front of her. Niklas was moving out into the aisle. He looked stunning. Brianna's step faltered

for a millisecond before she continued down the aisle.

Niklas wore silver. His eyes widened for a split second when he recognized Larin. His lips twitched, then he smiled.

The butterflies in Brianna's stomach stopped fluttering and took flight. She pressed her free hand to her stomach. Suddenly, she felt as though she may be ill. She swallowed thickly and struggled to control her stomach.

*It's just nerves.* Brianna rubbed her belly slightly, trying to make it look as though she was holding the Book of Life for all to see, instead of pressing it to her middle in an effort to keep what was left of her lunch down. *You're just nervous because he is the most handsome man you have ever seen in your life and you're about to realize your dream of marrying him.*

The silver and gleaming white suit Niklas wore clung to him like a second skin. The white pants hugged his muscular legs, emphasizing his thighs. The black, calf-high boots shone. The light from the crystal chandeliers above his head reflected perfectly on the glossy ebony surface. Niklas's torso was fit snugly into a silver and white tunic that hugged every luscious inch of his well-defined upper body. It contrasted well with the color of his bronzed skin.

Brianna licked her suddenly dry lips. If she'd thought him a God before, what could possibly compare to him now? She looked into his eyes. They crinkled around the edges and Brianna realized he smiled at her. She closed her eyes for a moment, to thank the gods who brought them together, and to mentally thank the Fey for helping her.

Larin gave her arm a light squeeze to let her know that they'd heard her heartfelt thanks.

"This is where you leave me and go to your husband-to-be, sweet Brianna. Larin leaned down, kissed her cheek softly and gave her a look that was almost tender.

Releasing Larin's arm, she walked toward Niklas, praying her legs wouldn't give out. She looked into Niklas's dark chocolate eyes and knew he was the best thing to ever happen to her. She smiled brightly and took his hand, gazed down at their joined hands and marveled that soon, they would be truly married, in a ceremony that was almost as old as time.

## *Chapter Twenty-six*

Brianna snuggled closer to Niklas's warmth and smiled. This was one of the things she liked the most. The lazy mornings, being able to wake slowly and cuddle with Niklas. She'd missed them since coming to the palace. Brianna understood Silera's need to see her son wed. Though she wished they wouldn't have had to be separated for so long. Being held in his arms made Brianna feel like the most beautiful woman in the world.

Niklas snaked his arm around her and kissed her ear. "You *are* the most beautiful woman in the world. How are the babes today, Mrs. Voortag?" He placed his hand above her womb, cradling her and their children in his big hand.

"I didn't know you were awake, you sneak." Brianna sighed softly and smiled. Sure the fluttering sensations she was feeling weren't all because of the children growing within her. "They're fine, Niklas. And you? How are you this morning?" She pushed her bottom into his growing erection—which said good morning very nicely on its own—and wiggled. "I've missed sleeping with you." She reached behind

her, raked her hand through his hair. "And waking up with you."

Niklas chuckled, sending gooseflesh racing down her arms and legs. "I've missed you as well. I missed doing this." He buried his face in her hair, inhaling deeply. "You always smell so nice, sweet, like fruit or berries." He licked her ear. "Good enough to eat."

"It's berry explosion shampoo, my favorite." She frowned. "I'm almost out. I'm going to miss it." She closed her eyes, enjoying the sensations he awoke in her.

Niklas fondled her breast, kissing lower, nibbling and suckling on the sensitive spot just below her ear. "Give it to me and I will program the replicator to make more for you, you shouldn't be without your favorite things." His hand moved to her other breast, giving it equal attention.

She turned in his arms. "Thank you, I never thought of that." She inhaled sharply when he took the tip of her breast in his mouth and suckled. He nipped it with his teeth, then soothed it with his warm velvet tongue.

"You always smell nice, too. I kept meaning to ask what soap you use." Brianna fisted her hand in his hair, loving the very talented way Niklas's mouth moved over her sensitized skin. Her body melted at his touch, as Niklas slid his warm hands down the length of her back.

"It's not soap, it's a scent generated by the sonic bath. I know you like to take tub baths. Perhaps we can take one together tonight. And use your berry explosion." He was back to kissing her neck. "What

do you think?"

Brianna shivered in anticipation. "Hmmm. I can't wait. I've always wanted to know what it was like to... Well, you know." She finished, blushing.

He squeezed her tighter. "Yes I know." He kissed her lightly. "But enough talking for now." He gave her a wicked smile. His hand moved lower to caress her hip. "I seem to remember that you made an offer yesterday, which I had to refuse until you had been examined. I never did get to collect."

His hand wandered down over her stomach to the thatch of curls between her legs, which opened nearly of their own accord. His fingers moved sensuously, testing her readiness. "Oh by all means, Niklas, collect. I should never have made you wait." She pulled his head down to hers, her fingers tangled in the hair at the nape of his neck.

Niklas kissed her deeply, positioning himself between her legs. "I intend to." He nibbled his way down her body, kissing her stomach, giving special attention to the indentation just above her pubic bone. He thrust a finger inside her, wanting to give her as much satisfaction as he could.

Brianna moaned as his finger entered her, her inner muscles clenching and milking, her hips undulated on the bed wanting more. When Niklas slid a second finger into her, Brianna arched off the bed as a scream tore through her throat. Niklas used his fingers without mercy, pushing up against the secret spot inside her, causing Brianna to buck and jump, screaming another release.

Brianna whimpered when he removed his fingers.



Niklas knelt between her spread thighs, lifting her legs. He placed them over his shoulders and lowered himself to taste her spicy core. She screamed again, her whole world, nothing but the sensation of Niklas's hands and mouth upon her skin.

He reached up with both hands and kneaded her breasts, pinching her sensitized nipples lightly, while suckling on her engorged nub.

Brianna covered his hands with her own, wanting him to stop, yet not wanting the sensations to cease. She wanted to bring him the same pleasure he brought her. She was torn between the two fires raging in her body. Soon the burning raged, an inferno of love and lust that she couldn't control and wouldn't manage to sustain much longer. The flames swirled and surged within her, a whirlpool of feeling and pleasure. Brianna screamed as she finally reached the pinnacle. She flew over the edge, drowning in the pleasure of his touch.

Niklas crawled up her body and chuckled. He eyed her appreciatively as she lay panting and breathless beneath him. He brushed the hair from her forehead, wiping away the fine sheen of moisture that covered her brow.

"I love you, *Laharra*, never doubt that." He gazed deeply into her eyes. "If I should ever forget to tell you, you have my permission to hit me." He smiled. "As you have such a fondness for it." Niklas reached down and tilted her hips up beneath him. "One day I may let you take charge, like you want to, but for now, you are mine." He entered her with one long smooth thrust that pushed her up on the bed slightly.

Brianna groaned. "That feels so good, Niklas." She sighed, lifting her hips to meet his thrusts. "I think you're tickling my brain."

Niklas chuckled softly. "I doubt it *Laharra*." He thrust deep again. "You must let me know if I hurt you." He groaned. His thrusts became shorter and faster, harder, more intense.

Brianna climaxed, screaming his name. The waves washed over her, her sheathe gripping and milking his shaft.

Niklas threw his head back and groaned, emptying his seed deep within her as she continued to climax around him.

Afterward, the two of them lay on the bed, replete, listening to the sound of their combined heartbeats. Brianna's breathing slowed, returned to normal.

Niklas rolled onto his side. "I need to talk with you." He was slowly drawing small circles on her skin, causing a trail of gooseflesh. "I know I brought you here to save my people, but I find that I am more selfish than I ever thought possible."

Brianna rolled onto her side and leaned up on her elbow, facing him. "I don't understand what you mean." She gave him a worried frown.

Niklas shifted his hand to her hip. "I don't want you to risk hurting yourself." He looked into her eyes. "I will find a way to stop this evil without your help. I don't want to put you in danger."

Brianna pushed herself up into a sitting position, pulling the sheet up to her breasts. "I thought you said the ancient scroll said only I could stop the evil that threatens your world?" She raked her hand

through her hair, tucking a few errant strands behind her ear. "If you didn't need me, or, if you had no intention to have me participate, why did you force me to come with you?"

Niklas watched her warily. "I had every intention of allowing you to participate, *Laharra*, until you became pregnant. I don't want you to injure yourself or our children."

"Allow? Allow? You were going to *allow* me to participate!" Brianna jumped from the bed, dragging the sheet behind her. She wrapped it around herself, her eyes filled with contempt. "No one *allows* me to do anything, Niklas!" she snapped. "I do it because I want to, or because I don't want to. People stopped *allowing* me to do things when my father died." She stomped into the bathing chamber, waited for Killer to follow her into the room, then slammed the door behind her.

\* \* \* \*

The click of the lock settling into place was loud in the silence of the room. Niklas ran his hands over his face. Could anything else possibly go wrong this day? A knock sounded on the door. "What next?" He rolled his eyes and climbed out of the bed. He cracked the door open and glared at his cousin. "What are you doing here in the middle of the night, Ethanos?" Some of Niklas's anger dissipated when he saw the cuts and bruises on his cousin's face. One eye was swollen shut, his lip was bleeding and it looked like he was missing a tooth.

Ethanos stepped closer to the door and whispered, "It's Haron, Niklas." He looked around as if expecting someone to be lurking around the corner, listening to him. He swallowed convulsively. "Haron kidnapped our queen, it is Haron who had the leviathan, he wants to drive you from here." He paced back and forth. "I wish I had known about it before. I was suspicious of his actions and have been following him for some time, but I just found out about this. He nearly killed me when I tried to stop him."

Niklas looked back toward the door Brianna had disappeared through and shook his head. There was always something. Niklas opened the door wider, oblivious to his nudity, and indicated his cousin should enter, then closed the door behind him.

"He found an old document, a scroll left hidden by the dark forces of the uprising. It contained a spell to bring about the death of one of the sisters." He followed Niklas to his office where he poured a large drink. Ethanos gulped it greedily and set the cup down. "Ugh. That stings," he grimaced, holding a hand to his mouth. "Niklas, he wants to destroy the world and he means to use Brianna to do it."

"Where is he now?" Niklas walked to the replicator and programmed it to make a jumpsuit then dressed.

The other man shrugged, held his arms wide. "I don't know. After he tried to kill me he left."

Niklas inhaled sharply. "Brianna!" He ran toward the bedroom. "I left her alone. I promised I wouldn't leave her alone." He threw open the bedroom door and rushed to the bathing chamber door where he tried the knob. "Brianna. Are you in there?" He

waited a moment, then pounded on the door. "Brianna, I promised to not leave you alone, and while I did forget for a moment, your well being is uppermost in my mind. If you don't answer me I will break this door down."

Silence greeted him and a feeling of dread settled itself in his stomach. Niklas stepped back from the door and kicked at it with a strength that was fed by fear and alarm. The door burst open to an empty room. Water still ran into the huge tub. The sheet she'd worn when she so scornfully abandoned him to lock herself behind the door, lay on the floor in a heap.

Niklas's shoulders slumped. Even her friendship with the Fey may not help her now. He bent and picked up the sheet, holding it against his face like a talisman. Niklas threw his head back and howled. "No!" He turned his anguished gaze on Ethanos. "Come, he has taken her, show me where he hides." Niklas strode past his cousin and through the door.

Ethanos followed. "Niklas, I'm not sure I can find him. I don't think he will return to the cave. That would be the first place we'd look. He knows I came to warn you."

Niklas turned to Ethanos and smiled mirthlessly. "Then that is where he will take her. He has always been predictable. Heron will believe that we will not look there. He will be positive we will think he abandoned it and look elsewhere." He entered a nearby express lift. "Transport station." He looked to his cousin. "Where is he?"

Ethanos was wiping the blood from his lip with the

hem of his shirt. "He was in the *Carboda* caves near *Nasha*."

"Then that is where we shall begin." The express lift doors opened into the transport station. The hoverpod was right where he left it. He climbed in, barely waiting for Ethanos to join him. He looked at his cousin from the corner of his eyes and wondered if he could trust him. He *was* Haron's brother after all. "We'll stop along the *Shantamoura*, you could use a drink to help you heal."

Ethanos laughed. "Surely you don't believe that old wives tale!"

Niklas gave him a solemn look. "I have seen the Fey, Ethanos. They have returned to *Terrna*. Brianna has called them home." He stopped the hoverpod along the riverbank and climbed out. "They drink of this and it strengthens them, and it *does* heal us."

Niklas took a small cup from the hoverpod and dipped it into the river. He took a long drink. He may need the power of the *Shantamoura* flowing within him before long. He dipped the cup once more and handed it to Ethanos who shrugged, tipped the cup back and emptied it with one tip then handed the cup back to Niklas.

"I hope you're satisfied." He wiped his mouth on the back of his hand. "There's probably an *Abicon* upstream taking a piss in it."

Niklas smiled sadly. "Brianna said the same thing." He tossed the cup back into the hoverpod. "Let's go." He struck out toward the hovercraft and *Carboda* hills with Ethanos following closely behind. He'd often believed in keeping his friends close along with his

enemies. He only wished he knew which category his cousin fell into. He hoped it was the former. "What's holding you up?" Niklas turned, staring at his cousin who had stopped a few feet behind him. He was looking at his hands.

Ethanos was turning his hand over, looking at first the palms then the backs of his hands. "Niklas, you have got to see this."

He stepped closer and his cousin looked up. Niklas watched as the cut above the other man's eye sealed shut slowly, then disappeared. He raised a brow. "Well, cousin, it seems as though you may be of some help after all."

Ethanos shook his head in wonder. "Yeah, if he's there. I might just be able to beat the *drak* out of *him* this time."

"Me first." Niklas shot back as he climbed into the hoverpod. "Get in."

## *Chapter Twenty-seven*

Brianna woke with a start. She remembered this time. A man had entered the bathing chamber just as she'd been about to step into the tub. She shuddered with revulsion. He'd touched her bare body, leered at her with his cruel eyes. It wasn't the same man she'd been kidnapped by before, but Brianna was sure he worked with him, or for him. She'd tried to run, but he'd stepped on the trailing sheet and she fell on the cold, hard tile.

She rolled over and winced. Her body was still covered in bruises from her last ordeal and now she had new ones. "Bruises on top of bruises." Brianna knew there was no reason to feign sleep, it hadn't helped last time. Somehow they knew when she was awake. They must have some sort of new technology, too. How else could they transport her without an MTU pad?

Brianna took inventory of her injuries, and, noticing she was still bare, scurried beneath the blanket before she had to put up with the indignity of another person seeing her nude. She placed a hand over her churning stomach. Even the children could



feel her upset this time. It must be the reason they were so active today. She sat up, pulled the covering from the bed and wrapped it around her like a toga. She stood and wandered the room, trying to get an idea of where she could be. Brianna picked up the glass on the table and flung it in frustration. It bounced off the wall and landed near the table at her feet. She closed her eyes and tried to concentrate on finding Niklas. *Niklas, can you hear me?*

*I hear you, Laharra. I know where you are. My cousin Haron has taken you. My cousin Ethanos has warned me of his brother's involvement in your abduction. He has brought me to you.*

Brianna gasped. *You're here? What if this Ethanos is in collusion with his brother?*

*There was a short pause. I have thought of this. I am accompanied by a security force, in case he should pose a threat.*

She sighed with relief even as the ground began to rumble beneath her feet. Brianna held onto the table trying to stay upright. She didn't want to be pitched onto the filthy floor. Closing her eyes, she concentrated. "I could really use your help again, Larin."

Brianna heard soft music playing in her head and a female voice said, "We're sorry, the member of the Fey you are trying to reach, is not available at this time. Please try to correct your problem alone, or try back at a later time."

Brianna's eyes widened with shock. "Oh, my God! He has an answering machine?" She plopped back down on the bed with disgust. "Now, what do I do?"

She eyed the door. Hadn't Larin said she could have gotten out of here on her own the last time? She went to the door, and tried to find a way to open it.

*Concentrate*, a voice whispered in her head.

If she didn't know better she would have sworn it was Amber.

*Stop being so stubborn, Bri, concentrate!*

It *was* Amber, all of this distance between them and she knew Brianna was in danger. She really *was* a powerful witch. Brianna looked at the door and concentrated on seeing it open. There was a small click and the door opened a fraction of an inch. She ran to it, placed her palm on the door and pushed slowly, just enough so she could see through the crack to make sure she wasn't walking into another trap.

It was a cave, a very well designed cave, and it was empty. She bit her lip. Which way now? The passage was at a slant. Should she head up or down, right or left? Up was the logical choice, but what if he was up there waiting for her? She closed her eyes and concentrated on which way to go to avoid recapture. A breeze came from above her, the air smelled fresh and clean. Brianna went up.

She walked slowly, listening to the wind outside. There was a storm. Wind howled. She could hear it whistling through the caves above her. Waves crashed against a nearby shore. The ground shifted beneath her feet. It was a large quake, unlike any of the previous ones. Rocks began to tumble from the ceiling of the underground chamber.

Brianna ran for the surface, knew she had to get out of there. The man who had taken her, had left her

there to die. Brianna leaped the last few steps, leaving the shelter of the cave to bear the brunt of the wind whipping the ends of the blanket and her hair about her.

The ground rumbled beneath her feet. The force of the coming cataclysm threatened to rip the world apart. Dust billowed from the cave as a shaft collapsed. The sea below rumbled with the force of the waves crashing against the rocks beneath the precipice where she stood.

The moon, being ripped from its orbit, threatened the stability of the entire planet. She would have to stop it soon. They didn't have the time that her grandfather had first predicted. She fell screaming as the ground shook violently beneath her feet.

How in the world was she going to concentrate? Brianna felt the chain appear around her neck and clutched the stone hidden next to her skin. Somehow she knew Larin would find a way to get the stone to her. He knew she needed it.

Brianna bowed her head. Her right hand clutching the stone, the fingers of the left dug deep into the ground. She needed to empty herself of her fear and the negative energies she'd been exposed to over the last few hours. Closing her eyes, she concentrated on the negative energies flowing from her left hand into the ground. She inhaled and exhaled deeply, in with the good, out with the bad. The dark energies within her swirled down through the dark soil, down into the ground to be purified by the positive energies of the planet, if she wasn't already too late.

The ground shifted beneath her again, nearly

knocking her over the edge of the cliff near her. She'd come to the end of her run. If she couldn't stop it here and now before he found her, she wouldn't have another shot.

Brianna closed her eyes and prayed. She prayed for success, but mostly she prayed for help. But who could help her now? She was alone on the precipice. A distant rumble caused the small stones near her left to rain down into the dark abyss. She screamed again. "Help me. Someone, please help me!"

A bolt of lightning struck behind her and Brianna was no longer alone. A shadowy figure stood to her right. His cape billowed behind him. The force of the wind pulled his silver hair from beneath the hood to dance around him. A glowing Larin to her left, smiled at her softly.

Brianna felt no apprehension and knew that they were here to help her. She breathed a sigh of relief at the knowledge that she would not have to face this alone, after all. They had no intention of allowing her to face this darkness by herself.

This evil was a presence too long denied. It was time to release it, let it find peace. Its ever-thickening presence threatened to strangle her. She felt it sucking the very life from her body, the oxygen from her blood. Brianna nearly collapsed from the lack of air.

The tall figure moved from the shadows and gently took her hand, whispering in her ear. She heard, even over the sound of the blowing wind and the groaning of the land beneath her feet, she heard the low timbre of his voice.

"We are here to help you, Granddaughter." He

waved his hand through the darkness that surrounded them, showing no fear. "Do not fear the darkness. Your fear only serves to feed it." Gently, he pushed the hair from her face, looking into her eyes. "You must be brave. Your courage will weaken it."

Larin took her other hand. "We must send it back now. It is searching for the stone. Soon it will find it, if it does, all will be lost."

They grasped hands, walked slowly in a circle, marking the boundary before they released each other. Closing their eyes, they began to call the quarters. Larin took the East, where he was the strongest, where he would be better heard by the Fey.

Morwyyn took the South and North, since he was the stronger of the two humans, and the most knowledgeable.

Brianna took the west. Water was her sign. She was a Scorpio and of the water, it was there, where she would be the strongest.

Morwyyn took the lead. Starting with the North, he began to call the quarters. There was no Athame, candles or incense. No wand to direct the energies within. Just this strange threesome, Morwyyn's stone and the magic within themselves.

They raised their hands into the air as one and Morwyyn began. "Guardians of the North and the elements of the Earth, hear me! Please, come lend your distinctive energies to this circle and protect all those who would step within its protective barrier with perfect love and perfect trust."

Larin repeated what Morwyyn said, for the East. His Fey voice was musical, where Morwyyn's had

been deep and gravely. Energy surged around him as he said his words of power. "Guardians of the East and the elements of air. All ye who reside within the land of Fey, hear me! Lend the distinctive energies of all that is Fey to this circle and protect all those who would enter its protective barrier with perfect love and perfect trust."

Brianna watched in awe as the power of the circle revealed itself to her. It extended from the North to the East where Larin stood. He lowered his arms and watched as Morwyyn called the Guardians of the South and the elements of fire.

The circle was nearly complete. One more step would complete the sphere of protection. She raised arms and trembled. She stood among legends. Would they be proud of her or disappointed? She took a deep breath, and in a loud clear voice, called her quarter. "Guardians of the West, hear me! All ye magical beings of the water. Mermaids, mermen, undines and sprites, if your hearts are filled with good, I ask thee to lend your unique energies to this circle and protect all who enter its protective barrier with perfect love and perfect trust."

There was a loud hum and a short burst of static electricity and the circle was complete. Brianna was stunned. Her hair danced on end as she stood just outside the completed sphere.

The blue white energy hummed and crackled. Morwyyn pointed his finger, and using the tip, cut a doorway for them. He walked to Larin, took his upper arms and kissed each cheek. "I enter this circle with perfect love and perfect trust." He did the same with

Brianna, then stepped through the doorway he had made.

Larin repeated this step, first with Brianna outside of the circle, then with Morwyyn when he stepped within. They both turned and held out their hands for Brianna.

She reached out and took their hands.

They asked, "Do you enter this circle in perfect love and perfect trust?"

Brianna nodded, kissing each of them on both cheeks. "I enter this circle with perfect love and perfect trust."

Larin waved his hand and the doorway closed, sealing them within the circle of energy.

Brianna looked around, awed by the power she could actually see. There was a sphere of white light surrounding them. The stone resting between her breasts began to vibrate and grow warm.

Morwyyn smiled. "I can no longer wield the power. The stone has grown too fragile over the centuries for one such as me to handle it." He gave her a grin. "Or, perhaps I have just grown too strong."

Brianna pulled the stone from under the blanket. She removed the chain, and holding the stone in the palm of her hand, raised it to the sky. She took a deep breath. Now was the time she needed to know that she had truly paid attention to the lessons Amber taught her. Larin and Morwyyn were lending her their power, but she could tell by their silence that the rest was up to her.

"Apollo, Asclepius and Enki, Gods of healing, please, hear me now! Artemis, Goddess of the Moon,

Mother of nature and mistress of magic, please join me now!" Before she was to ask the next Goddess to help her, she saw the embodiment of a bear. Callisto, the Moon Goddess who would often show herself as a bear, had already come to join the circle. "Callisto, Goddess of the Universe, please help me now!"

Brianna saw the Gods and Goddesses she called forth enter their circle. She glanced first at Larin, then Morwyyn who were both looking on with apprehension as the Gods began to turn to energy and, enter her body.

One after another, the energy of the Gods filled Brianna, her body jerking every time the power entered through the center of her forehead. They joined with her in the same order as she'd called them forth. Finally, when it was Callisto's turn, she shimmered into a beautiful human form. Their minds merged for a split second and Brianna heard the lovely sound of her voice.

*You are brave, child. I shall do all I can to protect you. You have called many of us forth, it is good that you called Artemis and I last, that we may protect you.*

Before Brianna could wonder at that, Callisto's energy entered her and her body was no longer her own.

\* \* \* \*

Larin and Morwyyn watched with a mixture of fascination and horror. No one had ever invoked the power of so many Gods at once and lived to tell about it.



Brianna began to glow with the power of the gods within her. She stood with her arms and legs outstretched, the stone floating just above her head, suspended there by some invisible power.

Tears slipped down Morwyyn's face as he realized his granddaughter had just given her life and the life of her children for their world. He looked to Larin who watched with a pained expression on his face. One would almost think that after all of these years he'd grown a heart. Perhaps he had.

Power radiated out from Brianna with the hum getting louder and louder. It was no longer a soft light. It was bright, forceful. Warmth rolled off it in waves. No one could survive such high temperatures.

Brianna's body turned into that heat, into the energy that filled her. One by one, separate beams of energy shot from within her to the sky above them, surrounding the moon. Nine beams of light, nine pure souls, three times three, one of the most powerful magical numbers.

There was a great explosion far above them. The moon moved back into a safe orbit and the rumbling of the land ceased. The horrible wind died down to a soft breeze and the waters below them slowly reverted to a normal tide.

Morwyyn shook his head. He had foreseen this, yet he was in awe of the power Brianna had harnessed to save them. "Granddaughter!" He spun around quickly to see her lying in a heap. Her body lay still within the sphere of light they had wrought.

They ran to her, a soft glow of energy still surrounded her. Not her own aura, but that of another

being. No, two beings. Artemis and Callisto. They were trying to save her.

Larin and Morwyyn exchanged worried glances before nodding to each other in silent agreement. They both closed their eyes, lending their powers to help heal Brianna, the bravest woman they had ever known. Soon others of the Fey race stood surrounding the circle, each lending their power to save Brianna, the courageous woman who had saved their world.

Slowly, the two beams of light faded. Even the Goddesses were weak, their light fading as they said their farewells. *She is a good woman with great powers. Not many could have survived this. She still may not,* Callisto whispered her voice soft, almost unintelligible, her light fading to nothingness.

*Brianna needs reason to live, to not give up. She needs to be given a reason to fight. She already has this, but it will take the right person to remind her. Find him. Or you shall certainly lose them all.* Artemis faded out of their existence and into her own. Apparently even the Gods could be weakened.

Larin watched as Morwyyn leaned over his granddaughter. "What do we do now?"

"We find Niklas. It was he the Goddess spoke of. Do you want to lose her?" He glared Larin's way. "Do you really want to sacrifice her life after all she has done for us? For you?"

Larin had the grace to flush. "I know all that she has done for me. More than most could possibly understand. You, of all people, do not have to lecture me."

Morwyyn bowed his head. "Of course you are

right." He began to close the circle. "Help me finish this, so we can get her home."

\* \* \* \*

Niklas left Haron groveling in the dirt.

"I tried, really I tried. They were too strong for me." His swollen eyes filled with tears, he looked at Niklas, his face beseeching. "Tell them, Niklas, tell them I tried. You were just too strong for me."

Niklas turned to Ethan. "Take him to a medic. See if there is anything that can be done. If not, take him to the asylum of *Nasha*, let the witches deal with him."

"No, not the witches!" Haron screamed as Ethan dragged him off.

Niklas looked to Hale who had met him near the caves.

"There is no sign of her, Niklas," the other man said sadly. "There is still hope. The moon has returned to her orbit and the tides are returning to normal." He shrugged. "These things must mean she has survived."

Niklas ran a nervous hand through his hair. He reached out with his mind, calling her. He sighed when he received no answer. "No, Hale, it only means she survived long enough to save *Terrna*." He scowled back at the caves then turned to his chief of security. "Have these caves searched. Hold anyone you find for questioning. After you've cleared the caverns destroy them. Leave nothing of them. I refuse to leave them as they are for someone else to reuse them for some nefarious purpose."

"Your Majesty!" Hale called from his hoverpod.

"It's the palace, they say someone has found Her Highness and is taking her home.

Niklas grabbed Hale and jumped into a hoverpod. They traveled so fast that Larin and Morwyyn barely beat Niklas there. It seemed that Faeries could move rather quickly when they wanted to.

Niklas's heart jumped to his throat when he met them as they entered the palace. The sight of Brianna held limp in the arms of a stranger nearly sent him to his knees. But his mother calmed him. Now, relying on the hope that she had instilled, he was holding Brianna's hand, telling her he loved her and she had to live for him and for their unborn children.

"They won't be born, *Laharra*. If you give up now, they will never know life. You must come back to us." He held her limp hands, rubbing them between his own. "I need you, Brianna. Do not sentence our children to death and me to a half-life filled with loneliness. Please come back to me." Niklas looked at her pale face and saw the dark circles beneath her eyes. He cupped her cheek in his hand, his thumb brushing over one dark crescent.

He wished so strongly that Brianna would open her eyes, he was sure he'd seen the translucent lids flicker. But no. Her breathing hadn't changed at all. He prayed. He prayed to every God and Goddess that he'd ever heard of. Ever worked with. Then he prayed some more.

"Look!"

Niklas turned toward the voice. Morwyyn stood off to the left. His look was one of hope. He was staring at Brianna, his eyes wide. Niklas turned slowly. He

hardly dared to hope she would come awake. Still, he prayed that she was finally coming back to him. He watched as her eyelids fluttered open. Her unfocused eyes found him and steadied.

She smiled slightly. "Niklas." She brought her hand up to her head and grimaced.

"Do you have a headache?" he asked.

She nodded gingerly.

"It isn't any wonder. She invoked the spirits of five Goddesses and Gods at once. It's a wonder she's even here to tell the tale." Morwyyn stepped up a grin on his face. "I couldn't be more proud of you, Granddaughter." he said grasping her hand.

Brianna smiled at Niklas's surprised look. "Yes, he is Morwyyn. He has lived these past years in the land of the Fey on Earth." She gave him a smile. "Which explains all of the legends about him, how he would one day return. And, how good he looks for his age." she added smiling.

Morwyyn cleared his throat and scowled at Brianna. "None of that, my dear. No one here needs know my true age." He leaned down and whispered with a smile. "They would be jealous."

Brianna grinned at him for a moment. She rubbed her stomach. "The babies don't seem to like the fact that we just saved the world, Grandfather."

He chuckled. "Well, they will just have to get over it, won't they?"

Brianna inhaled deeply and closed her eyes. "Yes I suppose they will, just as soon as they are born." She placed both hands on her stomach, opened her eyes and looked at Niklas. "Could you please carry me to

our room and call Sarcha, Niklas?"

"Carry you?" Niklas was flabbergasted. She *never* wanted him to carry her.

"Yes, Niklas," Brianna said as she tried to stand on her shaky feet. "Carry me." Just then, a puddle appeared at her feet. Her water had broken and everyone understood the reason she was finally willing to let Niklas carry her without a fight.

"Was it just me, or was it my imagination that the babies' souls were fighting with the rest of us?" Brianna asked tiredly.

Larin and Morwyyn both nodded. "They were. Morwyyn answered. "There were nine souls fighting the evil. Those of the five Gods you invoked, you and your babes." He stood up straighter, already playing the proud grandfather. "It seems I may have some new apprentices soon."

## Epilogue

“Are you happy, my dear?” Morwyyn asked as he tried to extricate his long beard from the feisty grip of little Niklas. He frowned in consternation as he extricated the little fingers only to have them replaced by the child’s other hand.

Brianna smiled. “Very happy, Grandfather, except if you go to the faery realm again, I would ask that you come back every hour or so. I don’t want you to disappear for another year. You’re my family.” She turned, looked over at him and suppressed a giggle.

The more he tried to get little Niklas to let go of his beard, the more hair the child got caught in his chubby little hands. Morwyyn gave up with a sigh then glared down at Killer who had taken a liking to his robes. The dog had grabbed onto the hem and was tugging as he growled.

“Why do you ask, Grandfather?”

“My beard will never be the same,” he groaned. He looked rather uncomfortable now. He flinched every time little Niklas moved and yanked on his hair.

Brianna wasn’t sure if it was from the tiny hand fisted in his beard or from what he was about to say.

"I had to cast a spell. Of course I said it should harm none. But sometimes..." He shrugged. "People will still fight what is ultimately best for them."

Brianna frowned. "What spell?" She shifted the babe she was holding to her shoulder so she could gently pat his back, trying to coax a burp out of him. She nudged Killer gently with her foot. "Stop that, you little heathen."

Killer looked up at her, growled, then trotted off to more interesting pursuits.

"I cast a spell upon you when you were born, that once you became interested in the craft. And I knew you would..." He cleared his throat. "That Niklas would find you and bring you here. I set the plan in motion years before you were born, with the knowledge that you could be unhappy here. But I did it to save this world." He was looking at his feet, avoiding her eyes.

Brianna leaned over and hugged him. "You did it for everyone. Didn't you say that it should harm none? It wouldn't have worked if it was against my best interests, would it?"

Morwyyn shifted in his seat as he mulled that one over. He gave Brianna a pained look when little Niklas gave a particularly vicious yank on his beard. "Well, no. But it still doesn't help the more stubborn people from fighting what's best for them." He glanced down at the baby in his arms. "I think, perhaps, it's time for me to shave." He sighed. "Though, I shall miss the beard. I've had it for over two millennia."

Brianna laughed and covered his gnarled hand with her own. "I may be stubborn, but I'm certainly not



stupid. I love Niklas, and I know he is the best thing that ever happened to me."

Niklas walked up with a smile. "I am?" he asked, sitting down next to Brianna. He wrapped his arm around her and pulled her close to his side.

She elbowed him in the stomach. "Yes, and you know it. Do I have to tell you every day?"

Morwyyn glanced at Larin, who walked up carrying Alyssa, a look of pure bliss on his face. "She looks just like your mother, Morwyyn." He lowered his head, kissing her crown.

"Yes she does, doesn't she? It was fitting that she be named after her."

Brianna looked down at the bundle she held. "And it was fitting that he should be named after your best friend. Morwyyn meet your new apprentice. Arthur."

Tears slid down Morwyyn's face. He wiped his face on his sleeve. "I never hoped to be included in your family. I feared you would never forgive me for casting the spell that would manipulate your life. You have given me so much, Brianna. And for that, I thank you."

She wrapped her free arm around her grandfather. "Not nearly as much as you have given to me, Grandpa." She looked around the garden at the people in her life that meant the most to her. "You have given me a family." She smiled sadly, the only way this could be any more perfect, was if Amber was here."

Larin looked around. "I am included in this?" he asked, his hand on his chest.

Brianna laughed, "Of course you are. You saved my life. How could I not include you in my family?" She handed Arthur to Niklas and stood to put her arm

around him.

Larin shot her grandfather a panicked look. Morwyyn cleared his throat. "Well I suppose we need to see to the rest of the prophecy."

"What do you mean? It has already been fulfilled," Brianna said, as Niklas shifted, bringing her down onto his lap. "Hasn't it?"

Morwyyn shook his head. "No, my dear, it has not. Not until you have given this world a thousand generations of peace."

Niklas shot him a confused look. "I thought it was our children and grandchildren who would bring the thousand generations of peace."

Morwyyn shook his head. "No, it is you two."

"How can we live to be thousands of years old?" Brianna's voice squeaked with panic.

Morwyyn stood and smiled. "I will show you the secrets of the Fey." He waved his arm toward the faery.

Larin shook his head frantically, then sat heavily on the bench behind him, still holding Alyssa. "Don't you say it!"

"Just as my father has shown me."

Larin groaned. "Now what did you go and have to do that for?"

## *About the Author*

Tianna Xander is an eclectic author of numerous paranormal, sci-fi, time travel, romance erotica books. Gaining inspiration for her characters and dialogue through her family and her addiction to the internet, she never fails to amaze readers with each new book she creates. As a reading junkie herself, Tianna has no problem reading whatever is available at the moment from romance novels, murder mysteries and encyclopedias to books on solar energy.

Tianna's life wouldn't be complete without a "happily ever after" of her very own. She resides in Michigan with her husband, two children, three cats, two dogs and an intimidating bunny. Never one to fail to give credit where it's due, she commends her family for their constant support. After writing many books and receiving rave reviews, her family is just as proud of her. Always full of ideas, Tianna rarely puts the pen down, so readers can look forward to many more exciting stories in the future.

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