



Dark Phoenix

By

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Chapter One

Planet of Delania
The Future

She couldn't, and she wouldn't let them mind rape her. Alora Bishop fought back the desperate tears she felt prickling behind her eyes. Her situation was grim indeed. Every day, the mind wraiths surrounding her attempted to fully infiltrate her mind, and every day, she fought them off. If she failed in her struggle against the mind wraiths, they would take full control of her mind, making her live out her worst fears and then, they would force her to live out her death in her mind before killing her for real. The illusions they made her see in their attempt to totally infiltrate her mind was nearly driving her mad. She still clung to her last semblance of sanity, despite the odds, she would not break.

Her hands were shackled, as were her legs. Her friends were already dead. Crammed beside her in the wagon laid her comrades--their hearts had failed them during the journey through the hot and terrifying desert. She had spent most of the day hitched to the back of the caravan, forced to walk fast enough to keep up with the tamed Manton Beasts that pulled the wagon.

Now, she sat in a living hell, with what was left of her friends.

The mind wraiths inhabiting the wasteland had fed off their psychic energy until they could no longer survive. They had drained every last drop of their life force, leaving an empty shell behind. Those shells were turning rancid under the burning desert heat. No matter what she'd endured she was still around.

She lived.

Hellish though her conditions now seemed--she was half starved, her clothes were a filthy tattered mess, and yet life still flowed within her.

It was a miracle--or a curse.

Her mouth was dry--parched beyond belief. Still, she waited, hoping for a rescue that seemed elusive.

Her people--her tribe revered her as their leader, and yet, she could not feel their pursuit. Where were they in her darkest hours? She kept hoping for a rescue that hadn't come, and in the pit of her stomach, she suspected it would never arrive.

Her psychic powers were strained and nearly drained. Even in her full strength, she had not possessed seer-like abilities. Instead, she was endowed with the even more coveted power among her tribe. She could move objects with her mind, and when at her full strength, she could actually project psychokinetic blasts from her hands.

All of that power failed her five weeks ago.

Their enemy long thought defeated had returned to their lands, thirsting for blood. Her people had been no match for the barbarians--for the barbarians could nullify their powers with but a single projected thought.

Oh, how the mighty had fallen.

Hard.

She looked around her, grimacing at the single action. Now, she would be sold into slavery--her future was uncertain at best.

How many nights had she survived through a harsh beating? How many times had one of her jailers been pulled away, just before he could rape her?

She didn't know why the one barbarian would not allow the other to take her against her will--she only thanked the Gods for bestowing such a simple act of grace on her.

Her luck would soon run out. Soon, she would be sold into slavery--it remained to be seen if she would be sold as a sex slave, or as a laborer. Either way, her entire life as she knew it was over.

"We're here. We should get out and get the dead ones deposited. I can smell them all the way up here, it's beyond rank."

A decent burial was not to be had for her fallen friends. A thick knot continued to form in her throat. What she would do for a glass of water.

The sounds of a busy marketplace reached her ears. Delania was a small planet. It had one sun and three moons. Her people had settled here long ago, believing the three moons to be a sign from the divine. Now, after seeing so much bloodshed, she wasn't so certain that this planet was their promised land. Perhaps, her people should have remained on Earth--from the rumors that traveled to her from the various star travelers, Earth was a far more idyllic planet than Delania.

"Well, the prissy bitch still clings to life. You should give in and die, you stupid cunt. I don't even know why I didn't dump you out in the desert."

The one jailer that always seemed to want to take not only her mind but also her body eyed her with disgust. "You reek. You smell worse than swine. You smell like you've rolled in your own shit." He laughed cruelly. "But then, we can expect nothing less from an inferior piece of fungus like you."

She ignored him, titling her head away from him. To say anything in her defense would be futile. As it was, her mouth was so parched that speaking seemed impossible.

"Take her to the auctioneer, and ask how much we can get for her."

A fat thick hand, reached for her, pulling her roughly forward. "I would whip you again, but we don't have time. We're due back to see the boss soon. He'll be overjoyed to hear that we decimated your tribe."

She kept her body rigid, staring straight ahead. Tears pooled behind her eyes, her nose stung.

She would not cry. Weeping seemed almost a release, no matter what she couldn't give them the satisfaction of seeing her weakened, not now.

"Just get a move on, Jim. I'm tired and hungry. Plus, I can't wait to get back to my wives. I'm due for a good fucking."

"Well, you should have just let me do this bitch--then, I would have let you sample some of her wares."

"You can't risk touching her. She might infect you with a contagion that would make your balls shrivel up to the size of peanuts. Remember what happened to Dirk? He turned out to be a whole lot of sorry for taking that one girl from a neighboring tribe of this bitch's. She cursed him while he was giving it to her...and four weeks later, he died. But you do recall what happened to him first, don't you?"

Jim's face turned a sickly color. He almost looked green. His eyes were stricken

with the worst fear. His hold on her slackened.

"You're right, Del, thanks for reminding me." He shuddered. "You won't catch me touching her in that way again, I can sure as hell tell you that. I'll be sure to keep my lips sealed when I take her to the slave auctioneer. They won't know squat about her being the filth she is."

"Good plan. I'm off to report back to the boss. I'll see you in ten."

Ten minutes, and she'd be free from one butcher and sent into the hands of another man that would alter her life forever.

She swallowed past the dryness in her throat as they walked past vendors selling food. Her mouth almost watered when she saw a woman reach for a glass of liquid. It was cold. She could tell that by the way the glass frosted. In her hand, she held a bag of popcorn that said "straight from Earth". She coughed.

Her stomach ached with hunger. Sourness boiled within it, and if she weren't careful she'd throw up all over Jim's boots. When she looked down, her eyes snapped to attention at the sight of dry blood caked on his boots. Her stomach rolled again.

Jim tugged her forcefully along. People moved out of their way, clearing a path not only because Jim had a huge body, he was built like a Rhonderan Mountain Bear, but also because she did stink to high heaven. People probably smelled her before they saw her.

Out of the corner of her eye, she caught sight of a man that made Jim look like a mouse. He wore a long crimson colored cloak. The hood was pulled over his head, shielding his face from her line of sight. For some reason, nervousness started to flutter through her stomach. The man exuded power. It radiated off him in strong almost suffocating waves. Even with her powers suppressed, she could feel and taste his strength, and it made her weak in the knees. This man was someone you wanted on your side--not working against you.

She wanted him on her side. With him working with her, nothing and no one would ever be able to hurt her again. She yearned to be free.

Why didn't anyone even try to help her? Couldn't they see past her tattered clothes, to realize what station in life she had held before Jim and his crony had taken her captive?

Her only comfort was that she had killed many of the warring Barbarians before her powers fizzled out.

Her head throbbed. Her gait faltered, and she fell to her knees.

Jim just pulled harder on her chains. The metal once again cut into her ankles and wrists. She grimaced when she saw the new rush of fresh blood around the cuffs on her wrists. Pain no longer bothered her. She was numbed against it.

"Stop it."

The stranger spoke the two words as a command, not a request. Blood hammered in her ears at the sound of the crimson-cloaked man's voice. Her heart did a jig in her chest. She couldn't get up. All of her strength finally abandoned her. She wanted to die.

"Come on, you dirty little skank. Get up." Jim turned back to her, his hand reached out for her and he slapped her hard across her jaw. Blood trickled from a cut on her face. Sweat dribbled down from her forehead blurring her vision.

"Maybe you didn't hear me the first time, asshole! I told you to stop it."

Jim whipped his head around. A sneer cracked his scarred and pockmarked face.

"I don't listen to someone like you. You don't belong here. I'd hasten away, little man. I'm connected to some pretty powerful people in this town."

"Really? Then, I'll give their asses a good whooping too if they come down to lend you a hand. That's not the way to treat a woman."

"I'll treat this little piece of shit, any way I see fit."

"Not while I'm around."

She didn't know why he was trying to help her. She finally recognized the crest on his robes. He was a mystic traveler from space. His home planet was light years away. Some people even whispered that they didn't come from this dimension, but she knew better. This man was real. There was nothing too fantastic about him. True, he made Jim look like a runt, but he was still shaped like all of the other human men she'd come into contact with. Everything on his anatomy seemed to be in the right place...of course, his robes covered up much of his body...but still.... Her mind wandered as he stepped forward and his hood fell away from his face.

She gasped.

He looked like a God. He gave off a light causing her heart to flutter. Peace flowed through her. His flaming red hair caught the sun and seemed to command its vibrant rays.

His face affected even Jim.

"I..." Jim stuttered. He glanced down at her. Panic shone in his eyes.

"Give her to me!"

"No."

"I said, give her to me, and I shall let you walk away alive."

"I was supposed to sell her."

"Hand her over to me, and I'll let you live--that's a fair bargain."

"I can't..."

"Do you know who I am?"

Jim nodded his head. Sweat beaded across his brow. "Oh, hell, yeah."

"Do you want to live to see another day?"

"You bet your ass I do."

"Then, run. Fast."

Her body trembled with exhaustion. Jim released his hold on her and took off like his ass was on fire. She still hadn't moved. The hard gravel cut into her knees. She couldn't move even if she tried. Her body failed her--even if her mind had not.

"Come on, lass. Get up." His voice softened.

Her ears burned, while her eyes watered. Being overcome by emotion wasn't like her--but she'd been through so much, everyone had a breaking point, didn't they?

She shook her head. He seemed to understand what she meant even though she hadn't uttered a word. Strong arms picked her up.

"Gads, you need a good scrub. But first, I have to get you off this godforsaken planet. If they come for me, I won't be prepared unless I'm on my ship. That little piss ant is no doubt ratting on me as we speak. I came to this planet for a woman. I guess, I'm leaving with you."

She shook her head. "NO!" her voice was a weak rasp.

He chuckled. "Actually--yes. I can't leave you here, and since you were the one that screwed up my plans, you'll have to be the consolation prize. I wanted a woman from

here because no one on this planet should know who I am--but that prick sure as hell did."

He cradled her in his arms. Why he wanted her was beyond her comprehension, but so far he seemed a better man than Jim. And, at least she hadn't been sold into slavery. His long strides covered a great deal of distance in a relatively short amount of time.

"Your name?" he asked.

She shook her head.

"I take it that you don't want to tell me anything about yourself, but I can tell one thing...you've been to the gates of hell and back, little one. All of the blood over your outfit...is it yours?"

She shook her head.

* * * *

She drank in his comforting scent. He smelled like cinnamon. Her stomach grumbled.

"I thought as much. I will make them pay for hurting those close to you." Coldness blanketed his voice. Rage lined his features. Tightly controlled rage--but rage nonetheless.

Silence resonated between them.

"I think we're going to have company soon." She looked over his shoulder, at the men on horseback that rode toward them.

"Damn, when someone told me this was a backwater planet, they weren't shooting smoke out of their ass. Does anyone know how to act civilized on Delania?"

She shook her head.

"You know, we're having a great conversation." He chuckled again. The husky throatiness of it made her skin tingle. The ship he ran toward was larger than any other space faring ship she'd ever seen.

She couldn't let him take her off the planet.

Delania was her home.

She tried to struggle in his arms. Truth be told, she was at his mercy. With the way she had grown so weak, she wouldn't even be able to fight him even if she wasn't chained.

"As soon as we get into space, I'm getting those chains and everything else off of you."

Warning signals flared in her mind. He could strip her naked, and rape her. She was helpless.

His gaze met hers. "The spark is ebbing from your eyes. I'm thinking you need medical treatment, like yesterday. What did they do to you?" His voice wavered with emotion. Maybe he wasn't the type to violate her after all.

She closed her eyes. Weariness tore through her body. After sleeping fitfully for the past five weeks, she finally had to give into the exhaustion that plagued her. Maybe she would get lucky, and fall asleep, never to awaken. She wanted to forget. If she could erase all of the pain and hardship she'd suffered she would. Whoever told her that ignorance was bliss had been correct. She wished she could just drown in her sorrows.

"Shit. Don't look like that. I can sense what you're thinking. No. You will not die on me. Not after I sullied my robes, and put my reputation on the line...no way. You are

going to cling to life with every last shred of your will....do you hear me?" He reached for her chin. Pulling it toward him, he grimaced. "I'm going to hate myself for doing this!"

His lips met hers in a torturously sweet kiss. He teased her mouth open, and thrust his tongue inside. She didn't know what he was doing, but something rushed into her as he made contact with her. The pain in her head faded away. It was a kiss before dying.

"You're not going to die. Not today...hell, now, you'll probably even outlive me. You're one lucky little lost soul."

She shook her head.

"Oh, aye. You are. Because now, you've just shared a spiritual kiss with an Immortal of the Hidden Realms of Magick, and if you truly become mine, you will share my immortality."

Her heart stopped. The legends were true.

And now, she was not just a prisoner for life. She was his prisoner for all eternity.

Chapter Two

She looked like a forlorn waif, and smelled like something out of the seediest part of the stink hole of a planet she called home.

His heart tugged at the sight of her cradled in his arms. Her wide almond shaped eyes filled with fear had closed only moments before. He had to get her to the Med Bay and make certain that she received the sort of medical care that mortals required. As an immortal one from the Hidden Realms, he could take far more physical hardships than she could. And, if a mortal did happen to stop the beating of his heart, he would heal and live again. Nearly nothing could kill him--and that thought had terrified her captor so badly that he'd willingly forfeited his prize.

"Sir..." the nurse on duty came to intercept him at the med bay doors. "What do you think you're doing? She will contaminate the area."

"Section her off in a private room then until you can treat her...after that have a few of your nurses assist you in bathing her."

"She'll need to be scrubbed from head to toe. Look at her hair. I can only think of what is crawling around in that!"

At the nurse's words, he gazed down at her matted blood streaked raven hair.

"Just follow my orders."

The nurse looked at the woman and then back at him. She chewed at her lower lip. "I really don't think...she seems like a lost cause, sir. Why don't we just give her back to the people you took her from?"

"Here's an idea..." he drawled out. "Why don't I just give you to them in her place?"

Her spine stiffened, she let out a shocked gasp of horror. Her eyes widened to the point of falling clear out of her head. "You can't be serious!"

"I am."

If she weren't an android, she'd be sweating at this very moment. "I'll take her. We'll get her cleaned up." With resignation, she held out her arms.

"Actually, I don't think you're the best person to be attending to her needs. You are now dismissed from your post as a medical nurse. You may go down to the laundry facilities and see if the head laundress needs your help. If she doesn't...I will send you for reprogramming so you can be given a new personality. One that will be more compassionate toward the suffering of others."

Her eyes still wide with as real of an expression of fear that he'd ever seen, she quietly padded past him, and out the door.

Another nurse walked toward him from the back area of the med bay. "I see that Gertrude didn't fulfill your desire, sir."

"She didn't."

"Not to be out of line, sir, but are you going to hold that dear girl all day? I do think my team of nurses and the android doctor would be more suited to taking care of her. By my scans of the planet, you will be required on the bridge in less than four

minutes."

He smiled. Now that Gertrude was gone, he remembered why he'd always favored Bernice.

"I trust you will see to her injuries, and see to it that she is fully..."

"Decontaminated. Indeed, sire. The poor dear. She looks as if life has thrown her more than a few lemons. Rock hard lemons at that. Her injuries are extensive. It will be my highest honor to take care of the woman you have selected. I was wondering how long it would take you to find the comforts of a woman that had real flesh and blood rather than the manufactured kind."

He chuckled. Bernice always could give him the sort of answers he admired.

"Just make sure that she is treated as you would treat any member of my family."

"Aye. We shall treat her like royalty," Bernice murmured.

He nodded his head, and walked out of the Med Bay doors. Turning his direction, he headed straight for the bridge.

Bernice was right in her assumption that the inhabitants of the seedy little town he'd rescued his angel from would want to exact revenge. Fortunately, any of the space faring vessels the enemy commanded were no match for his spaceship. If they even tried to attack them, he'd make mincemeat out of them.

"Captain on deck." His second in command announced.

He listened to his crew murmurings.

"Sir, should we disable the ships preparing to fire on us?"

"Use enough force to blow them into the next life."

Incredulous faces stared back at him.

"I gave you my orders, Lieutenant Mitchell."

"Aye, sir." The young man nodded his head. "We have never attacked this planet before...you always said their backwater ways made them ignorant, and that ignorance didn't deserve our attention or our wrath."

"Well...let's just say I have the prerogative to change my mind, Mister Mitchell."

"Yes, sir."

He wanted to get away from this planet as fast as possible. Hell, even better, would be to get right out of this solar system. He didn't want any reminders of the sad and sorry state he'd found his angel in. He didn't even know her name and she didn't even know his. As soon as she was fit for company that would change.

Alora didn't know how long she'd been unconscious for. Her eyes pained her. Opening them made another searing slice of agony streak through her eyeballs and echo behind them.

She grimaced. She was in a large soft bed. The covers on her felt like they'd been snuggled around her to keep her warm...and she smelled like the clean scent of lavender.

Opening her eyes, against the dim artificial light, she searched the expansive room for any sign of an occupant.

Her powers slowly reawakened. Soon, she'd be back to her optimum strength. That could only mean one thing...she was away from Jim and his kind. Relief surged through her--coupled with trepidation, as her keen senses opened to her surroundings.

She was in space.

The thought both terrified and thrilled her to her very core. She'd only been in

space once--and it had been enough. After only a few hours out of her planet's atmosphere she had fallen ill with what her father had called, Space Sickness.

She could hear someone moving around in the next room, and yet, no mind met hers when she reached out to give it a psychic touch.

Strange.

Her head turned on the pillow and rested on the water bottles sitting beside her bed. Licking her lips, she tried to sit up, and found that doing just that simple act made her muscles clench and scream out in misery.

Her hands shook as they clamped around the water bottle. She quickly broke the seal on the bottle, and drank like she'd been deprived for days.

"Ah, so you are finally awake. You were a sight to behold before I got you cleaned up and fit for company. Now, you do look like an angel."

A female voice met her ears. It echoed around the room, and made a shiver race up and back down her spine. Why couldn't she read this woman?

"I have tended to your wounds, cleaned your body, and you have been given nourishment. You should not be as thirsty as you seem to be."

"I was thirsty for so long--"

"Indeed. Well, then drink until you are satisfied. I am your nurse. My name is Bernice and I will do whatever you ask for or whatever you desire."

Her words were slightly stilted. She sounded almost as if she recited something that had been programmed into her. Was she one of those humans that had been conditioned automaton-like so that they could be molded to suit the existence of a slave? Her mind raced.

"I can see that my presence here is troubling you. Perhaps, you are not accustomed to seeing my sort on that backward planet you called home."

"It is still my home."

"Not according to my master. He has taken you away from the barbarism of that planet. You should be most thankful. In fact, when you see him next, you should fall over yourself to express your gratitude. I should get down on my knees and pay him the homage he deserves."

She narrowed her eyes at the woman that called herself Bernice. Obviously, Bernice didn't understand her situation. She didn't even know the Immortal that had rescued her. She didn't know his name, and most importantly, she didn't know his intentions. Not much was known about his kind. They cloaked themselves in secrecy, and rarely shared their incredible knowledge with outsiders such as her.

"I shall send my report to my master to tell him that you have awakened, and that you can indeed talk. The translator worked just as it is designed to."

Bernice gave her a curt nod, and left the room. The weird whooshing noise she made when she walked was quite disconcerting.

She drank the rest of the bottle, and set it down upon her nightstand. Time was slipping away. The sooner she figured out how to get off the ship and away from the Immortal, the better off she would be. If he found out what she was--if he found out what she could do...he might just be tempted to use her for her powers. She couldn't let that happen.

She flung back the covers, and realized too late that she wore nothing but a sheer negligee. Whoever had put her in this outfit had to be stark raving mad.

Cool air kissed her skin. The black abyss of space was much chillier than the humid planet she was accustomed to living on.

She swallowed. Someone approached. If her powers didn't betray her, it was he. Now, she needed to probe his mind, not too much, just enough to glean the information she needed. While not highly skilled in telepathy, she had enough of a talent to get by when her abilities weren't being repressed.

She made contact with his mind. The startling sensation, made her weak in the knees. She bolted back toward the bed, her bare feet slapping against the cool hardness of the floor. The troubling sensation of the world closing in on her swirled around her. She felt like a caged tiger...ready to pounce but unable to.

"Halt, and turn to face me."

His commanding tone could not be ignored. It enthralled her. Try as she might, she couldn't resist the fervent compulsion to pivot slowly on her heel and meet his gaze. Their worlds collided. Images flooded her brain--images that depicted him and her in the most startling of positions. She fanned her eyes, quickly pulling herself back into the present.

Her breathing became strangled. Blood rushed in her ears. Her heart raced. Looking into his eyes, quite literally took her breath away.

His luminescent eyes were the color of smooth amber, their luscious depths beckoned to her, calling her forward. She wanted to drown in his memories, evoke the feelings of desire that he kept bottled up inside of him. His hair was a flaming red and made her heartbeat quicken even more. Everything about him captivated her. He was beguiling. His magnetism was unlike anything else. She knew then and there that he was a force to be reckoned with. No one would be able to stand against this man if he had deemed him or her an opponent.

She exhaled, her breath shaking. Her palms were sweaty, and she found to her deep embarrassment that her body trembled.

"Cease what you are doing. I don't know exactly what you are, but heed my warning, little one. I can feel your mind powers pressing against my temple. I could force you out quite easily. It is apparent that though you realize I am an Immortal, you have yet to deduce what sort of an Immortal I am, even though I did tell you before you lost consciousness. I hail from the Hidden Realms of Magick." He waited for her reaction.

And, she gave it to him.

The gasp that shot out of her mouth, made him incline one perfectly shaped reddish-blond eyebrow. She'd known but she hadn't truly believed it, until now. His hair was the most beautiful shade of red that she had ever seen. It almost made him like as if he was wearing a glorious crown kissed by the sun. Despite the shade of red that it was now, when he'd entered the room it had looked almost reddish blond.

"You are still weak. I bid you to sit back down. I shouldn't want to impede your recovery, in any way. You have a long road ahead of you, filled with much responsibility." She shook her head. His drawn out sigh set her on edge. "I pray that you use your tongue to form words rather than shaking or nodding your head to answer me. It is most tedious, especially when I know you possess a voice. And from what Bernice tells me, you sound like a songbird when you speak. I might even have to nickname you Lark."

She swallowed. Nervousness clawed at her being. She couldn't speak in front of

him. He would laugh at the way she sounded. It was to be expected, she was accustomed to being singled out and ridiculed for the way she spoke.

"How about we start with an introduction? You know what I am, but I'm quite certain you never heard my name. My name is Garrett. I am your humble servant."

He gave her a gallant bow. She stepped backward, inching her way closer to the bed.

"I..." Her voice cracked. Summoning what little courage she possessed at the moment, she cleared her throat. "You must have a surname, surely?"

He smiled. It was a slow smile that touched his lips, and then gradually touched his eyes and the rest of his features. He relaxed his stance. "Of course you are not without wit. I am glad to see it. You would have been wasted if that piss ant had succeeded in selling you as a slave."

Her knees did buckle at the horrible thought. Images of her slaughtered friends coalesced in her mind's eye. She could hear their screams, and their moans of agony as they had slipped from the living land to the dying land. She faltered, and would have fallen to the floor had he not reacted with such swiftness.

He caught her in his arms before she could slide to the floor. "I am sorry. I did not speak with thought. It was carelessness on my part. Do forgive me."

One minute he was hard and demanding with her, the next minute, he treated her like she was his most coveted treasure. His mood swings perplexed her greatly.

"I am alive!" Her raspy voice gradually grew in strength.

He nodded his head. "I am thankful for that. I know that you might not believe it now--but our paths were meant to cross. From now on you belong to me!"

His vow of possession didn't rankle her as much as it would have a few months ago. So much had been robbed from her that now she viewed everything in a much altered light.

"I lost so much." She heaved a heavy sigh. "I have forgotten...my name is Alora Bishop." She gave him only her name, and left her title of significance within her tribe off. He was holding back on his surname with her, and so she would hold back with some of the details of her past life as well.

She looked around the ship. She doubted she would ever be able to return to her tribe. Would she want to even if the opportunity presented itself? They could have rallied their braves, they could have come to her rescue--or at least died in the attempt. Instead, they had left her to die or face the cruel fate their enemy intended for her.

No doubt they had been infuriated that she had not been slain in the first attack. Indeed, she had killed many of Jim's party in the first wave. She had taken out as many men as she could before her powers had been suppressed to the point that she had been rendered helpless.

Her mind started racing again.

"Your breathing is becoming labored. I see the haunted look in those beautiful violet blue eyes of yours. Do not mourn the past, only look to the future. Your future is with me, Alora."

He spoke her name almost reverently. She looked at him in surprise.

"You do not know me!"

The words were almost accusatory and the cutting edge in her voice made her wince.

He didn't seem affected in the slightest. She forced a smile to crease her lips.

"I don't know you...but that will change. Soon, I will know you better than you know yourself...but I warn you...there will be things about me that you can never know."

"I do not like the sound of that." She gazed into his eyes. His height made it so that she had to crane her neck right back so she could meet him square in the face. His hands held her arms in a gentle but firm lock.

"Nonetheless, it is, as it is. You cannot even begin to understand what I am or who I am. In truth, you don't need to understand, you only need to know that I require you for one purpose. My kind has a hard time finding willing females to join with us--not to mention the fact that we must find the right woman."

Again, warning klaxons rang in her head. She tried to wriggle out of his hold.

"Release me...or I shall be forced to take action against you."

"Nothing you can do to me will hurt me. Do you remember the kiss we shared as we boarded this ship?"

"Yes." The thought made her cheeks flame.

"Then, you will be happy to know that whatever powers you possess will no longer affect me in any way. I have linked with you. You are powerless against me. Therefore, I caution you to act kindly toward me. I don't think I need to point out the disparity in our sizes. You are no match for me in a physical fight. I would never think to beat you, but I will move to restrain you if you start to behave like a spoiled brat. I saw the pitiful way you looked when you were at the mercy of that madman. I do not seek to resurrect that look of terror. It would pain me greatly. The rawness of the hurt would, I fear, never go away."

"I have a hard time believing that you care an iota about me. You barely know me--" He started to speak, she raised her hand, and unbelievably, he fell silent. "I would like for you to cast off your pretense of continuing concern. I am forever in your debt for saving me from those monsters back on my home planet. As it stands, I must insist that you return me from whence I came."

"Back to face the slave market, then?"

She grimaced. "Not literally. I have a home. Those berserker beasts passing for poor excuses as human beings attacked my tribe. Fortunately, we were able to stand our ground against them. That is until their biology started to infect us thereby nullifying our powers. You see, Jim's kind emit a form of a pheromone that proves quite debilitating for us when it comes to using our powers."

"I understand."

His amber eyes flicked with keen interest. She wasn't going to have an easy time convincing him to change his mind and return her to her people. The question was, if she did succeed would she even have a home to return to? Many had fallen, and those that had survived no doubt believed her to have perished with the rest of the dead--or wished she had.

"However, I cannot release you. Not now. Not ever." A muscle in his jaw twitched. He was holding himself back from kissing her. Could he be so tempted?

She studied his kissable looking lips, feeling a twinge of desire flow through her. Steady. She couldn't weaken in her resolve against him. For so long she had been shielded by the touch of a lover--now, she felt her body screaming out for him to touch

her...she wanted him to touch her with those able looking hands. She wanted him to caress her all over. She just wanted him to hold her within the protection of his embrace.

A spark entered his eyes--could he sense her thoughts? Her cheeks continued to flame red.

"I must insist that you return me to my home."

"I will never be going back to that planet. As to your thirst for vengeance, I assure you, it is unwarranted."

"What are you talking about?"

He sighed again. Looking to the side, he briefly closed his eyes. "I have wiped every last person that presented a threat to your well being off the face of that little planet you so bravely proclaim as your home."

Her stomach sank. A deluge of strong emotions rocked over her. She felt the need to sit down once again. She gasped. "You are not lying to me?"

"Why would I have any reason to tell you a falsehood? I vow to you, Alora that I would never lie to you."

His eyes remained steadfast. Though she was having a hard time reading him psychically, he did seem sincere.

Her gut wrenched. "Then, those that I watched die have been avenged."

"Indeed. And, I might also remind you of the vow you made to me just minutes ago. You told me you were forever in my debt. I accept your pledge."

Her mind whirled. "In that case, name your price."

"You."

Chapter Three

Alora's world swayed again. "I beg your pardon?" Her ears rang with the loud rushing noise of the blood pounding in her head.

"Do not play the innocent with me. I can tell by the surprise and indignation in your eyes that you heard me perfectly fine."

She shook her head. He gave her arms a gentle squeeze. "Oh, no, Alora. We are not going to play that game again. You are stuck with me. Get used to the idea."

"You ask too much." Her voice strained. "I am mourning the loss of my family and my friends, and yet, you are thinking of ravishing me into oblivion?"

"I never said anything about oblivion. I'm just staking my claim on you."

"Staking your claim? I am not a piece of land to be claimed, nor am I a new galaxy to conquest. You should be ashamed of yourself!"

"Actually, I should be quite proud of myself. I was the one that came to your aid when no one else was lifting one finger to intervene on your behalf. Do you know how many men and women in that marketplace could have rendered you assistance? And yet, they all stood idly by willingly allowing that beast to treat you like you were the scum beneath his feet. They condoned something they should have acted out against! I don't need to have you tell me what he did to you. I can already guess. I know that time will be needed in order for you to even contemplate being near a man again, and my holding you this close right now must be pure agony for you." He slackened his grip on her.

She lowered her eyelids. Her heart ping-ponged in her chest. He sounded so worried...his concern touched and thrilled her. Even though he could be a stubborn git he still wanted to make sure she was safe. In his own way, he was staking his claim on her because he thought it was the only way to keep her from falling prey to the same fate he'd rescued her from.

Her back tingled. She pulled away from him. Surprisingly, he allowed her to slip away from him.

"How did you get me healed in such a short amount of time? Do you have humans on board this ship endowed with healing powers?"

"Indeed. Alas, no. My linking with you couldn't fully heal your extensive wounds. Fortunately, I have a fully capable Med Bay here on the ship."

Her voice turned to a whisper. "I still can't understand how I managed to stay alive. For all of those weeks when we were traveling across the world on that bloody hot desert, I watched my friends that had been captured with me slowly wither away and die. Sometimes, I would fall into a deep sleep, only to awaken to the feel of cruel hands racing across my body."

He flexed his jaw again. She watched him ball his hands into fists. He looked like he wanted to strike something or someone.

"I do know that though Jim tried, his companion would never let him rape me. Instead, his companion allowed him to beat me until all I could feel was pain. My world became consumed by misery."

"Never again." His words turned solemn with determination. They were hollow comfort to her, though she did appreciate his sentiment.

"I became a filthy, pitiful little echo of the woman I had formerly been." She walked hesitantly over to the mirror in the room. Drawing in a quick gasp of air, she looked back toward Garrett.

"How? My face had welts on it from the sun...how did you do this?" She pushed back her long blue-black hair to finger the area on her forehead where she had sustained a nasty cut several days ago. Miraculously, it was gone. She touched her back. The searing pain from the whiplashes had also faded.

"I told you. This ship is equipped with a state of the art Med Bay. We can do almost anything, save resurrecting the dead." He gave a short laugh. She smiled.

Her hair was back to its glorious shine and luster. She touched her back again, trying to see with her mind's eye whether or not the whip marks had healed. He padded softly toward her. The hairs on the back of her neck lifted as he gently touched her back, kissing the nape of her neck. She felt an electric spark shoot through her.

"You shouldn't get so close to me."

"Why not? I've never seen any woman with such gloriously thick hair." He stroked his hands through her tresses, making her scalp tingle deliciously.

At the moment, she couldn't think straight enough to form a coherent reply. His touch was bliss.

He roamed his hands across her back. "I see no scar tissue through the nightdress you wear."

"This isn't a nightgown. It only keeps the air off my skin, it certainly doesn't give me the sense of modesty, I so crave. Whoever put this on me did so with explicit orders from you, no doubt."

His sudden silence disturbed her. When she glanced back up at the mirror she saw that he wore a frown.

"What's the matter?"

His eyes snapped to attention, he stared straight ahead into the mirror. "Nothing. I was just having a moment of quiet reflection."

She didn't know how he could feel so at peace. Her heart was ready to burst right out of her chest. The atmosphere was thick with their tension, or was it arousal?

Licking her lips, she cast her eyes downward away from the mirror.

"I don't understand the way that my powers are affected by your presence."

"You needn't concern yourself with that...I am merely absorbing your powers so that you cannot use them against me."

"And yet, you do not completely stifle them? With Jim's people we are rendered helpless."

"Indeed. With my kind, you will find that you can affect them greatly with but a thought..." His voice trailed off. He cleared his throat. "However, as I stated before, the dynamic between you and I have been altered. You will be forever changed when it comes to existing around me."

"Then, we should put as much distance between us as possible. I implore you to release me."

"I could no more do that than I could have left you in the hands of that thing. I will have you, Alora."

Her hackles rose. Despite his tender touch, she wanted to dash away from him. "Do not think that you will ever master me, Garrett."

"Do not say words that you don't truly mean. I would never make you into my subordinate. Indeed, our kind prefers our women strong and vibrant with a passion for both lovemaking and fighting. I see that with time, you'll perfect the divine balance between the two."

"Don't bet on it," she snapped.

His eyes danced. He was getting more and more aroused each time she squared off against him.

"I don't think you should be here. Not with me, not while I'm in this state."

"I think you look radiant. Physically, you are completely healed. Emotionally and mentally, I still would wager you have a long road ahead of you. Being traumatized in the way you were--no one bounces back from that in only a few days."

"A few days?" Her breath hitched. "Do you mean that I've been aboard this ship for more than twenty-four hours?"

"Aye." He looked nonplussed. In her distraction, he had once again closed the small distance between them. As he drew near, his essence started to reach out toward her. She felt heady...her personal space was being invaded, and he was overwhelming her with his powerful spirit.

"I must sit." She took a shattering breath. She'd made her way to the bed, and sank wearily onto the edge of it.

"You still need time to digest what has happened to you."

He glanced tenderly down at her.

The world closed in on her.

"Why do you really want me? I know I was the consolation prize, you told me so yourself, but what truly brought you to my home world?"

He averted her penetrating stare. If only she could move him away from her with her mind. She looked to the flower vase on a nearby table. Reaching out with her mind, she made it shake. Then, as her mental fingers wrapped around it, she picked it up and levitated it through the air.

His body stiffened. He knew that she was using her powers.

"I wouldn't do what you're about to do, Alora. Fight the urge to be a naughty witch."

"Why should I?" she taunted. "I am not a witch, I just have special abilities." He had nothing to fight back with. If he tried to grab the vase out of thin air, she would simply move it out of his way. She could not let her need for him overwhelm her.

If she didn't run now, she'd be begging him to make love to her. She knew she'd enjoy every single excruciating moment of it, and the thought terrified the hell out of her.

"If you do, when I catch you, you will never escape from me again."

"Is that a threat?"

"Take it as you like."

She couldn't stand one more minute of being near him. The vase whipped toward him. He tried to stop it, but he was too slow...either that or he was allowing her to do this--

She shook her head. Impossible. No man would willingly want someone to break a vase over his head. The vase shattered, knocking him out cold.

She reached for him to see if he still had a pulse. Of course he did. He was an Immortal of the Hidden Realms of Magick. Why wouldn't he? Something so little like this couldn't take his life.

Gasping for air, she slipped the long outer robes he wore off his body. Beneath the robes he wore a loosely fitted shirt and a pair of trousers that molded to his legs in all of the right places. She took a moment to simply take in his handsome physique. Shaking her head she felt the soft material of his outer robes. Never before had she felt such a rich material. Wrapping them around her, she looked for shoes. If she had to escape in her bare feet then she would.

Running to the door, she stopped. "Open." Her voice didn't do a damn thing. "I said open!" She searched for a control console. Nothing. "Just my luck." He would be rousing soon, and then she'd really be in for it.

She was in over her head. How could she be so bloody stupid?

He wasn't going to hurt her. Sensibility finally gave her insight. He wouldn't have saved her if he intended to cause her harm. She might have just screwed that up by finding a loophole in the way her powers affected him. Now, he wouldn't have any reason to trust her, and in turn, she would have to continually wonder if he would suddenly turn on her, the way she'd turned on him. She'd betrayed him. The sinking sensation made her feel as if she was going to be sick. Vertigo tore at her.

He was a stranger to her--but he had saved her from a most gruesome fate. To leave him, in pain on the floor would be a cowardly act. She could not stand the type of person that left someone in peril as her tribe had abandoned her.

Two wrongs didn't make a right. At least that's what her mother had always told her. Was she right?

Hesitating, she slowly turned.

His groan pierced the stillness of the room and made her gasp in reaction.

Frozen to the spot, she watched him sit up.

"Blast and damn. Woman you will be the death of me--if you want me to pursue you--I can oblige."

He wasn't looking at her, though he either sensed or knew she was still in the room.

As if he could hear her thoughts, he answered her question. "Honestly, do you think me to be so incompetent that I would set the stage for you to escape me? I had hoped that by asking my nurse to dress you in that poor excuse for a nightgown that it would detract you from attempting to leave this ship. I was mistaken. Of course, I'm never one to go into something without a contingency plan."

Swallowing, thickly, she remained silent.

"You should grace me with that beautiful voice of yours again, Alora." He stood. "I'm going to love hearing it in the days ahead."

Her mouth went dry. "You can't seek to keep me with you." The plaintive keen in her voice surprised her. She sounded like a crybaby. Did she care? What had happened to her steel backbone? When had her courage been stripped away from her to reveal this shadow of a person she neither knew nor admired?

"You can't expect that you'll be able to return to your old life." His words jarred her. She didn't know if he could hear her thoughts, and wondered if she even wanted to know the answer to that question.

"You are right. But you are wrong in the assumption that I wish to stay with you." He rubbed the back of his head where the vase had hit him.

"You are fortunate that I heal so quickly, or else I would be giving you a good old-fashioned spanking right now. You are a grown woman, do not act like a whiney child again, are we understood? You may also get the escape fantasy out of your head. It's never going to happen. I have full control of the security on this ship. That means no one gets in or out unless I give him or her clearance. Understood?" She nodded her head. "And, under no circumstance are you to give me the bloody silent treatment again. I've had my fill on that one."

He stopped short.

"What?" she asked, shifting uncomfortably beneath his heated and penetrating stare.

Hunger seeped into his eyes. She shivered, pulling her borrowed robes closer around her body.

"I do think you look more delectable in the clothes of my kind than you did in that flimsy negligee."

"Now you admit it was a negligee."

He waved his hand dismissively. "Negligee, nightgown, there is little difference."

"In your world, maybe--not in mine."

"Perhaps." He stalked toward her. "If you will not oblige me, by taking off my clothes, then, I will simply have to relieve you of them myself." He licked his lips. The feeling of dread forming in her body intensified. "You look good enough to eat, Alora.

Shit. Now, she'd really gone and done it.

Chapter Four

Garrett had her backed into a corner so to speak and yet, she didn't seem in the least bit terrified. Her eyes widened with anticipation, not fear.

Could he forge ahead and move into a game of seduction with her?

Alora was right, they were almost literal strangers to each other, and he was never one to make rash decisions based on his carnal appetites. He'd always prized himself on his control, but sometimes a man's tethers could only be pushed so far.

Seeing how passionate she could become concerning her escape had caused him to admire her even more than he already did.

To survive the ordeal she had lived through meant she had a most courageous heart. His heart started to beat faster. His hands clenched tightly into fists. He had to take it slowly with her, and give her the opportunity to push him away if she wanted to.

He hadn't told her that he planned on making her his wife. It was tradition for members of his family to roam the stars looking for their mates. Some unidentifiable force had called him to Alora's planet, it had compelled him to land and investigate the inhabitants. Though he was known as a freedom fighter, he hadn't realized that Alora's planet dealt so heavily in slave trafficking.

Rescuing her had been the only certain path. Even if she hadn't been a woman, he still would have helped. He hated to see any human being in chains. It wasn't right--and it wasn't something his people tolerated.

He closed the distance between them. Resting his hand on one of her rosy cheeks, he felt her stiffen beneath his touch and then, gradually relax, to the extent that she actually melted into his touch.

She let out a soft moan, implying that she was definitely enjoying his soft caress.

"Your skin feels like silk."

She met his gaze. He could literally drown himself in the glorious depth of her sky blue eyes, sometimes the color darkened to that of a blue violet. He'd never seen someone with such a startling hue of blue. Lifting her hand, she placed her fingers around his wrist. Thinking that she was going to push him away, he started to withdraw his hand.

"I will not force you into anything against your will."

"Tell me more about your people. I have only heard whispers of what your kind is--they say your kind are living hands of justice. Rumor has it that you go and round up less civilized humans and you do away with them."

"We do mete out the hands of justice against those that can't be touched by ordinary law, if that is what you are asking. Our justice system works far differently than most mortal courts of law."

Her mouth dropped open. "So, you exterminate them?" Fear lit her eyes. He could see she was reliving the bloodbath that had no doubt happened to her tribe so many months ago. Eager to relieve her anxiety, he whispered some words of comfort in his native tongue. Her eyes relaxed and took on a dreamy glint. He liked watching the way that his native language affected her.

"We give them a trial in our court of law, and then our judges sentence them appropriately."

"That sounds quite grim."

"Suffice it to say, I usually only drag people like Jim back to be sentenced. If he gives me a struggle, I have full authority to take matters into my own hands."

"Ah...so you have a license to kill?"

"I don't think what I can and can't do is anything for you to go poking your nose into. The less you know, the better. Besides, right now, you shouldn't be concerned with me. I'm more worried about you."

She gave a harsh laugh. "You saved me from a fate worse than death. What is there for you to worry about? You said yourself that I am in safe in your arms and in your possession."

His jaw clenched. He could no longer resist folding his arms around her. She let him pull her to him.

"Your powers, how many do you have and how strong are they under normal conditions?"

"You might not even believe me if I told you."

"My kind are well versed in mystical ways."

He felt her shiver. "You mean magic?"

"Perhaps," he murmured.

"The leaders of my tribe and some of the ones chosen by our Gods have always been endowed with certain gifts, though we can't cast spells, shape shift or alter matter in any other way. Our abilities range from precognition to telekinesis. Only my direct line has ever been able to do these two things. The rest of my tribe only does simple things like making healing potions, etcetera. They have no active powers. My powers include a little bit of everything...I have also been known to be able to channel my psychic energy into energy blasts."

"Impressive. That is a rare trait to be sure among the mortal humans of the vast galaxies that I have visited."

"What is your home realm like?" Her voice dropped to a faint whisper.

"My home realm would have you awestruck. You would be most amazed. Our lands are like no other planet. I have never come across such a place of beauty that would rival the Hidden Realms despite my vast explorations."

"And yet, you wander amongst the stars, hunting down evildoers?"

He laughed. The warmth of her body molding against his, made him feel most contented, even if it wasn't doing anything to sate the restless burning inside of him.

"It is my vocation. I was born into my destiny. To shirk my duties would be to betray myself."

"And what will you do if you ever get tired of trekking across the vast expanse of space? Don't you ever feel like settling down and making roots?"

"I would like to make some roots with you." He leaned down to whisper in her ears. He felt her body thrill as a shiver rippled through her.

Her cheeks flamed once more. The close proximity of their bodies was making her feel as if she was going to burn up.

"I should think we could have this conversation later. I'm rather--" Swallowing, she sighed. "Hungry."

His eyes flashed. "I am hungry as well. Indeed, you haven't had any real food in a great age, I'd warrant."

"No. Bread and a very small pittance of water was my daily ration when the barbarians had me." She flexed the muscle in her jaw. Grinding her teeth together would accomplish nothing. She shouldn't fixate on the negative aspects of her past. She had the future and the present to think of. She was safe--of that she had no doubt.

"I shall call for some food."

"My clothing--I would like something more substantial to wear." His eyes raked over her in silent approval. She could see the lust in his eyes; she could feel his attraction for her growing by leaps and bounds. It would be so easy to let him take her to the bed. It would be so easy to drown her sorrows in his arms. Perhaps, she should throw caution to the wind. Allowing him to make sweet love to her might just be what she needed to let go of the last few days with the barbarians. His gentle tender touch made her yearn for more.

Her heart continued to dance a merry jig in her chest. Fighting her impulses were beginning to be quite the challenge. Licking her lips, she glanced quickly over at the bed. He followed her gaze.

"I thank you for saving me."

Her voice transformed to a soft tone of gratitude. His visage relaxed. His eyes filled with tenderness.

"I couldn't allow you to be treated in such a way."

"And I am grateful. However, if you didn't finish off the barbarians, then, they will return for me. They will hunt me down to the very ends of space."

"They can try. I will fight them at every turn."

"I believe you."

He gave her a curt nod. "You are stuck with me, Alora."

Her senses reeled. The emotions he gave off now were strong enough to flatten her.

Without realizing her direction, she'd slowly eased her way out of the corner he'd backed her into and now, the back of her knees touched the mattress.

"I think we're getting in way over our heads, here." Her voice rattled.

"I don't think so. I have full certainty that you will never be leaving me."

"I don't care for the control freak aspect in men."

"You said yourself that you are indebted to me. Perhaps, I am only looking to ease your worries."

"Ease my worries by seducing me?"

"It would be most pleasurable for you. Joining with me, would ease the clenching sensations in your gut, it would also ease the burden of pain you carry with you. You can't shield yourself from the living world forever, Alora."

"I've known you for like a second. I think I can shield myself. I need time to learn who I am again. I've been like a slave for the last five months. I've been beaten, humiliated, and taunted with the deaths of my fellow comrades in arms. I am at a breaking point, Garrett. One more push from you and I will fall into a deep abyss never to find myself again!"

"You are far stronger than you give yourself credit for. You would not falter. You will survive...against all odds, you made it through. You rose above what the barbarians did to your people."

"My people--that's exactly what I'm talking about. I don't belong here. I need to return to Delania and reunite with my tribe. I must return to them."

He continued to bear down upon her. Her nipples tingled as he drew nearer. Her mouth went dry--she yearned to feel the touch of his lips on hers. She wanted to rake her hands through his blond hair and most of all wanted to lose herself for just a few hours. She wanted to feel his tender caresses. She wanted to reassure herself that her entire world though shaken--was not destroyed. She couldn't live in fear--she couldn't isolate herself in a bubble of her own making, fearing the touch of a man.

Jim had broken down her resolve. Jim had tested her courage. Jim had been the demon of her dreams. Jim was dead.

The thought made her gasp and a smile slowly touched her lips.

"I have survived." Her words escaped her lips, sealing the conviction she felt growing inside of her. "I have defeated the little devils."

"Aye." He nodded his head. His hands wrapped around her waist. Pulling her closely to him, she reveled in the feeling of his breath against her cheek.

"Spend a few blessed hours with me, Alora. I will make sure you won't soon forget it."

"Nothing could ever make me forget you, Garrett. You blew into my life like an angel from heaven. You dropped out of the sky and found me at my darkest hours. You are my savior."

He grinned. It wasn't just a smile. It was the sort of grin that stretched right to his ears. She could feel the light glowing from him. If he did indeed wield magical powers, than they were powers used only for the betterment of humankind.

He kissed her neck. She arched at the sensations that spiraled through her. His kiss was different from any other man's that she had ever felt. Though she had little experience in the ways of lovemaking, men had kissed her within her tribe. Her tribe was vast, and so there was always men available that were not part of her familial bloodline. Many had vied for her hand in marriage. None had won it. Several had pleased her with their charming mannerisms but when she'd tested them with the age-old ritual that had been passed through many generations of her family, their true motivations had been revealed. They had not wanted her for her--they had lusted after her wealth, power and place within the tribe. They had loved what she possessed, not what she was.

"Sadness is starting to shine in your eyes again. I must ask that you walk away from the shadows in your mind."

"The shadows in my mind are always trying to overtake the light. I have had such bad dreams since my tribe was attacked."

"I wish I could take your memory of it, away, but I doubt you would allow me."

Jerking her head, she looked him squarely in the eyes. "You possess such raw and absolute power? No mind seekers I knew could do that. I myself could never dream of being able to erase a person's memory. I can't even manipulate a person's memory. Those abilities are far beyond my ancestors and me. This only goes to show that the two of us are millions of light years away in ever being able to work together. I am an uncivilized monkey in comparison to your kind."

"You are certainly no monkey. You are a woman in every way I can see, feel and most importantly touch." He caressed the swell of her right breast lightly, making her breath hitch in her throat. She let out a small moan.

Her skin tingled again, when he reached out to stroke her breast once more and run his fingers straight down her side.

"You said yourself that Delania was a backward planet. I'm quite certain you thought its inhabitants were uncouth, uneducated bottom feeders. In a way, you'd be correct in that assumption. There is nothing lower on the pyramid of life than the barbarians that murdered most of my tribe."

"And yet, you still want to return. This is my exact point. Your tribe should have at least sent a rescue party out for you."

"They had suffered much--they probably couldn't spare the resources." Her voice sounded hollow and unconvincing to her own ears, she doubted he would buy the tall tale she spun to him.

"I don't think you really believe that. You speak bravely, but the tone of your voice belies your true thoughts. You are hurt beyond repair--not by the actions of the ones that imprisoned you but by the actions of your tribe. Only cowards leave their leader to die a brutal death--or worse, to be sold into slavery as you almost were. Do you know what the fate of a slave is in this part of the galaxy?"

Her mind numbed, she could guess but she dared not say the words. The horror of it would only increase the feelings of despair that washed over her.

An uncontrollable urge to touch him washed over her. She reached up, grabbing one of his hands. Power surged through her as their palms made contact. The ensuing jolt made her fall back onto the mattress, away from him. He too, now looked short of breath. She struggled to recover, and realizing the close proximity of their bodies with him hovering over her, she pushed herself up to her feet, and stood facing him. Her knees shook, if she weren't careful they'd buckle and she be back on the mattress. Her mouth went dry. She wanted desperately for him to touch her again. She wanted to feel his hands roam along the full length of her body. She needed to feel it.

"If you won't come to terms with what almost befell you then, I will get you up to speed." His hands rested firmly on her shoulders. "If you'd been bought as a sex pet, you would never have known life without pain. Many men would have tortured you with their carnal lusts, you would have been used so many times that it would age you quickly, and make you wither away into a shell of a human."

"I don't want to hear this." She tried to clap her hands over her ears. It was a childish gesture, and he called her on it, by catching her hands and pulling them down to hold them at her sides. She struggled against him in vain. She should have been terrified, and yet, she wasn't. Instinct told her that he would never harm her. Even now, though he held her firmly, his fingers were not bruising her skin.

"You should. Why do you think I chose this work? I chose it because in this brutal galaxy, the downtrodden must have a champion, they must have the ability to hope for a better day. I have androids on my ship, and the ones that are flesh and bones are made up of those that were rescued from similar situations as the one I found you in. Only a select few have joined me from my own realms in the hopes of one day commanding a ship like mine. I know they are loyal to what I do because they are thankful that I do it. They know what it's like to walk in your place. They have felt the same misery, the same loneliness, and the same sting of betrayal. Leave your allegiance to your tribe behind on Delania. They do not want you so why should you want them?"

His question hung in the air. She looked away from him.

"I have no other choice but to return to Delania."

"You do have a choice. You can stay with me."

"What if that's not the choice I like?" She asked.

His eyes flared with annoyance. "Talking to you is like being on a constant merry go round."

She smiled. "You'll have to get used to it if you truly do want me to stay."

"I want you with every fiber of my being."

Heat crackled in the air between them. Her thoughts roamed, she wanted to do anything she could do to keep herself from sleeping with him. The Gods knew how much she wanted to--

"The nurse that tended to me, she was an android, wasn't she?" asked, hoping to get her mind off Garrett for a split second.

"Indeed. Most of our medical staff is comprised of androids, save for my chief doctor. He, however, is not onboard at the moment. He is dealing with issues on another planet, not quite so unlike your own."

"Issues?"

"Political unrest. There is a revolution going on right now, and it's become bloodier than anything I've ever seen. I'm on way to the planet as we speak. Once we get there, I will try to do damage control."

"Why is your chief doctor there?"

"He's trying to stop it from getting out of hand before my assistance is required. I just wish he wasn't so sympathetic. He also has..." Garrett coughed, "Let's just say he has a personal stake in this. The warring factions on this particular planet are both as bad as each other. There is no just side, in my personal opinion. If you consulted Bryce, he'd tell you it was the side of the ruling monarchy, I, however, disagree."

"But that's only your point of view."

"They are both like your barbarians on your planet. Perhaps, that will sway your decision in my favor."

She grimaced. He had her there.

How could she argue with logic like that?

The sensation of his hands on hers started to wear down her defenses.

"Could you please let go of me? I'm not going to try covering my ears again."

At her request, he released her hands. She could see by the glint in his eyes that he still wanted to hold her.

"You are most beautiful." He touched her lips gingerly, tracing an outline around them; he gripped her chin and lifted her mouth toward his. The kiss was short, and incredibly hot. When he drew away, she had to struggle to regain her breath, while at the same time keeping herself upright. He looked like a God. She had his constant attention, with a bed at their disposal and she was shirking away from making love to him. What was wrong with her?

"I think we should stop talking now, and you should go and do what you do on this ship."

"I have everything under control."

"Even me, right?"

Chapter Five

She pushed him away. Even though her powers would not affect him, she still had blunt force to fight him with. Unfortunately, he didn't go whirling backward like she'd tried to do with her hard push. Instead, he was only about a step back. Her eyes darted to the door.

"Don't even think about it. I've done this dance with you once already today. I'm not going to let you do it again. You should know by now that you have absolutely nothing to fear. I am not going to hurt you."

"You want to make me your sex slave!"

Horror struck his features. Finally, it faded away to mere amusement. He chuckled. "Sex slave?" His eyebrow arched. "Not that I don't find that appealing--but no, you are not at my mercy when it comes to sex. I wouldn't force you into doing anything you didn't want to do. I do not enjoy that particular sport. When a woman sleeps with me, she does so of her own free will--in fact, she's usually the one begging for me."

"You are mesmerizing me! I'd probably do just about anything right now, if you wanted me to! If I start begging for you to make sweet love to me, how do I know I'm really in control of my faculties? You wield a power I've never before seen or been up against. I can't affect you, and yet, I still have my abilities. How is this possible?"

He declined to give her an answer. The stone cold look on his face, nearly sent a shiver up her spine--had he not had such rioting emotion filling his eyes, she would be truly petrified.

"I am not a monster. You are not my slave. Do not compare me to a man such as that again. I will not be put into the same category as a man that willfully trades slaves. Do you know what hell slaves go through? I'd say you never really saw a slave's life up close and personal. For the most part, I'd warrant you lived a fairly insular life with your tribe. Is your kind nomadic like so many of the native peoples of North America were before they were put on reserves? In fact, come to think of it, your kind shares many similarities with the First Nations People."

"I went through hell in that infernal desert back on Delania. Don't bloody well tell me I'm some little Miss Sunshine without any knowledge of the real world. What I've seen would make your hair stand on end! The horrors are unspeakable." Nausea washed through her.

"And yet, here you stand. Ready and willing to live and fight for another day. You are a survivor, Alora. This is a characteristic that I greatly admire in you. It will do our progeny well. They will share in the same glowing traits as their parents."

She still couldn't believe him.

"I don't think you'll want me as your wife--there must have been some pretty slim pickings out there in the galaxy, if you came to my little backwater planet and chose me. Not that I'm complaining--" She slapped her hand over her mouth, suddenly realizing her mistake. She'd really screwed up this time.

He smiled.

Now she had sunk her ship.

She backed away and bounced onto the mattress. "I'm not cut out for this. I want to go back to my life."

"The life you knew no longer exists, I thought we'd gone through that already."

"I will continue to go through it with you until I get you to agree with me!" Her anger surged inside of her.

He, too, looked ready to explode. "I never thought you would be this disagreeable with me. Do you know how many women through the universe would beg me to take them to my bed?"

Her mouth continued to grow even drier.

"I think I'm just not of the same sort you usually associate yourself with. I am not the right woman for you."

"Yes, you are!" Before she could react again, he'd claimed her lips in a sizzling kiss. The thin fabric of the negligee rubbed against her nipples making them pucker hard. She gave a soft moan. His ministrations on her one breast made a frenzied desire erupt through her. His kiss was pure heaven. How could she ever come back from this? He was drowning her--he was taking her captive and she had no strength to fight him. She was lost in sheer heaven. She wanted him to touch her everywhere--flames of passion licked through her.

In the next instant, his hands seemed to be everywhere on her body, seeking out her most intimate spaces with a feathery caress that drove her mad. It was as if he was reading her mind, gleaning from them her innermost desires.

Her entire body tingled. It was as if his powers made her super sensitive. No matter how hard she tried, she would not be able to fight this.

"I will not be your concubine." Her whispered words turned him rigid. He drew a hairsbreadth away from her so he could look upon her in consternation and burgeoning anger.

"Concubine? I don't follow." He frowned, his eyes clouding with confusion and irritation.

"A man like you must have a harem full of sluttific prostitutes."

His eyes narrowed. Disbelief emanated off him. "I can't believe what you're saying. I thought I'd said enough to you to convince you that my intentions toward you were just and honorable. I do not wish for a sex slave--I wish for a mate."

The bell tolled hard in her head. She pursed her lips. He still looked beyond flabbergasted.

A bell chimed on his body. She gasped.

"That would be the bridge hailing me. I'll have to take this call." He released his hold on her and walked a few feet to put some distance between them.

She slowly sidled closer to him, hoping he wouldn't hear her approach.

"What are you talking about? I specifically told Bryce to remain hidden until we could get there to give him backup. He's going to get himself creamed into oblivion. Does he realize that? Never mind, disregard the question. I already know the answer. I've rescued Bryce battered beyond repair more times than I can count. He's lucky he's got more than just nine lives." Garret snorted. "Get us on a direct course for the planet now. Full speed. I'll be there to strategize a rescue mission in a minute."

Her heart thundered. Garrett sounded pissed and worried all at the same time.

Who was this Bryce and how did he hold a relationship to Garrett? They had to be connected in some way.

"I'm sorry, Alora, but I'm going to have to cut your seduction short. No worries though, I shall hasten to sort this mess out and return to your side."

"I could come with you," she offered.

"Out of the question. Absolutely not! I want you far away from what I'm about to dive into."

"It's that bad, huh?"

He gave her a perplexed gaze. "As bad as what you saw the Barbarians do to your people." Grave apprehension lined his forehead. He was beyond worried. He was frantic.

"This Bryce...what did you mean about him having more than nine lives?"

"We are immortal. We can't die. Even though we can be beaten...we shall heal, eventually. We do however feel pain--we feel the full gamut of human emotions. Maybe even more astutely than humans do." He cleared his throat.

"So this Bryce, he wouldn't happen to be your absentee chief medical officer?"

"He might." His clipped voice was making a muscle jerk in his cheek. "I really can't go into the details of this entire debacle with you at the moment. I do have to get to the bridge."

"Do you think we can win?"

His eyes softened. "Unfortunately, as of yet, you've given me no sign that there is a 'we' in reference to you and me. If you would like to reconsider your stance on this subject I will be more than happy to accommodate you."

"I still don't know what you want from me."

"I want you. I want you as my loving companion from here until forever."

A chill went up and down her spine. She struggled to remain calm.

"That offer, I might consider. I shall have to give it more reflection."

"You do that. You'll have plenty of time while I'm down on New Eros trying to clean up whatever Bryce started. I should have known he wouldn't have been able to keep a low profile. Lie low I said, wait until reinforcements arrive. I swear I'd be better off talking to my ass."

She smiled, watching him pivot on his heel to leave. He paused, as if something else of great importance had suddenly struck him. Striding toward her, he closed the gap between them in three quick strides.

His hands pulled her to him. She drank in his comforting essence. Now that her powers were almost at their optimal strength, they too, were becoming aroused. She clenched her teeth together, straining to keep them in check.

"I will return to you in no more than forty-eight hours. If I must, I will completely flatten New Eros to accomplish the task of retrieving Bryce that much sooner."

Her heart stopped. "You can't honestly tell me you'd risk killing innocents?"

"I already told you, on that cold unforgiving planet so misnamed there is no one worth saving, except for Bryce and the ones he loves."

"You are a vengeful creature."

His eyes snapped with anger. "I will choose to ignore that insult, Alora. I am no more vengeful than you. And the next time, you call me creature, I will do something wicked to you!"

She thrilled at his words. She knew he wasn't referring to some sort of painful

punishment and that made it even more scintillating.

"You're honestly going to leave me alone?"

"I am. I have no reason to think that you'd want to escape from me now. In less than twenty minutes, we will be in orbit around New Eros. I will then transport down to the surface."

"Transport?" She didn't think such things were possible...unless, he had greater technology than the rest of the known worlds, or he was using his magic. "Why not just take the ship into New Eros's atmosphere and land it like you did on Delania?"

"Because, New Eros's atmosphere is charged with highly unstable particles that can debilitate a ship like mine."

She nodded her head. "I see." When in actuality, she really didn't understand him at all. She wasn't a science-minded woman. She'd versed herself well in the mystic ways of her tribe, but she had left the science to the men that ruled the field.

"So, you stay here. Don't even think about following me like a faithful little puppy."

She bristled at his insinuation. She tried to wiggle out of his hold, but he held fast. "I must taste your lips once again before leaving you."

She froze. His mouth descended toward hers. At the last possible moment, she turned her face, so his lips found her cheek instead.

"I think you should get a move on. You've already wasted precious time."

His eyes glared at her. She shrugged her shoulders. "A kiss just might tempt you and make you reconsider your rescue mission. I think Bryce needs you a whole lot more than I need you."

"And when I find Bryce I'm going to thank him for dragging me away from you. He really needs to learn how to get in, retrieve what he came for, and get the hell out!"

She watched him struggle with his inner emotions. The air was charged with what she could only assume was his magic seeping into the air around them; either that or it was his pent up sexual energy, looking for an outlet.

"I'm off. You stay put. I'll have some food and other necessities brought to you in a short while. I will be leaving my crew with explicit orders on how to treat you."

"Shall I be getting a new set of chains?"

His eyes hardened. "Don't even jest about that, Alora. I told you already you are not my captive. You are the woman of my dreams. The only chains that shall shackle you now, are psychic ones. Do not underestimate the power of the psychic chain that has been forged between you and I. I shall be a part of you until the end of time itself."

Her chest caved. She couldn't breathe. "So many platitudes from you, I might just get heady from hearing them."

He gave her a rueful look. "You'll need to get some clothes that are more suitable for public wear. I'll tell Eunice what she needs to know."

"Eunice and Bernice?" She scrunched her nose up. "Who saddled them with those horrible names?"

"I did." He looked surly. She nodded her head.

"I'm not surprised. Go, get on your gallant steed and ride to the loyal Bryce's rescue."

"I will only be ever riding to your rescue. Bryce, on the other hand, just needs me to bail his ass out of the fire before he gets permanently burned. I am going to rip him a

new one for not following my orders." He tramped to the door and with no further word to her he left. She shakily exhaled.

The room was unsettlingly quiet. She studied her surroundings once more. It was far from being a cold room--and yet, it didn't exude much warmth either. It was a far cry from the sand dunes of the desert she'd been used to for the last five months. Her thoughts strayed to the lands that her tribe occupied. Lush and fertile, they were warm for most of the year, only falling prey to chilly temperatures for three months out of the year. And even, then, they couldn't exactly be called frigid.

She rubbed her arms. Goose pimples raged across her skin. She was about to crawl back beneath the covers, when the door chime sounded and a figure walked over the threshold. This person made a strange humming noise when they walked just as Bernice had done, and judging by her lack of a psychic imprint, she could safely assume that she was being faced with an android yet again.

"Eunice, I presume?"

The android made no indication that she'd even heard her. Instead, she moved into a protective stance in front of the door with her back turned to Alora.

"I see you've been ordered to give me the silent treatment, or you just aren't one predisposed to engaging in chitchat."

No reply.

A few more minutes passed in uncomfortable silence. She'd just given up on hearing anything from the android, when a cold mechanized voice filled the air.

"I told him to leave you on Delania. He didn't listen."

A chill ran up her spine. She couldn't read the android and yet, danger hung in the air as soon as she spoke.

"Hey, I asked him to return me to my people. So really, we're on the same piece of parchment."

"Alas, that is not the fate I'd hoped he'd return to you. You are below him. You are not genetically superior enough to carry his offspring. You are nothing."

Her succinct voice made Alora's nerves rattle.

"I'm getting the feeling that you are definitely not Eunice."

The android inclined her head. "Eunice is indisposed at the moment."

Her heart ticked another loud beat. She felt as if she was losing air.

"Indisposed as in being used for scrap metal?" She groaned, the android's body language was making her nervous. "What are you doing?"

"I am thinning the oxygen in this room just enough to make you sleepy, so you'll eventually pass out. Once you lose consciousness, I intend to put you down on the hellhole we currently orbit. From there, you can rot for all I care. He will never be able to find you."

"I'm not so easy to get rid of. You know better than I what sort of powers Garrett possesses. He will seek me out."

"Not if I take the appropriate counter measures. He will never find you, when I'm done with you. He will forget you in time, you think too much of yourself, you puny female. Biological women are overrated."

She swallowed. The android might not be human, and so therefore she was immune to a mind attack--but she wasn't immune to a telekinetic attack.

"You are thinking--probably deciding to attack me with your measly little powers."

I don't think you'll have enough strength. If my calculations are correct, your blood pressure is lowering--soon, you will not be able to remain awake. If you're asleep, you are not a threat to me."

"He will have you sent to a junk heap, for doing this to me!"

"In time, he will forget about you. In time, he will realize that no human can do for him, what I can do for him."

Sweat slithered across her forehead. She struggled to remain awake but it was a fruitless battle.

"Oh, damn." Her eyelids dropped shut, and she crumbled to the floor.

Chapter Six

Garrett stood watching a mob do its worst to each other. His mouth turned dry. Turning to his accompanying officer, he cleared his throat. "We find Bryce. If we have to clear a path to do that, then so be it."

He raised his hands. The swelling mob suddenly turned silent. "Ah, that's more like it. Music to my ears."

He stood on an elevated hilltop that surrounded this particular province's capitol city.

The mob stared at him in stunned disbelief. Their hands raised to attack each other, also froze.

"They are living statues. It is quite effective, isn't it?" he asked.

"Aye, sir. Will you unfreeze them once we make our way to the parliament buildings?" Lieutenant Mitchell asked.

"Perhaps. This world is wearing thin on me. I can feel the suffering, and the madness. No one here is quite well in the head."

"That's probably from their years of using Eros Ecstasy. I hear it really does mold the mind into something sinister."

"You are correct. It is a most foul substance. Earth has outlawed its usage; unfortunately, since it's indigenous to New Eros, they will never outlaw it as an illegal substance. That's probably why this planet will never see peace, no matter how many goodwill ambassadors attempt to bring it about. I just want to get Bryce back on the ship, preferably in one piece, and get the hell out of this solar system. I want to return to my home realm for a bit. I've had enough of the unforgiving and cruel world these humans live in."

"You will be taking a human back with you--how will she fit into your life?"

He looked to the Grecian styled Parliament buildings in the near distance. "There is more to Alora than you know. She is more like me than she suspects."

Mitchell looked at him in perplexed amazement. "She is mortal, is she not?"

He ignored his subordinate's question, and started to trudge past the people he'd frozen. They'd decided to make the ground on foot rather than using any other alternative form of transportation, though they did have magic as a final recourse.

"Do you think it wise that you left her alone on the ship? It would seem to be that she'd take her chance to escape and run with it."

He smiled. Alora could rail against him all she liked, but he could sense her growing attraction to him. He knew he aroused her and made her heart melt when he touched her. All he had to do was be patient; eventually, she would admit her true feelings for him. She'd fallen in love with him back on Delania when he'd saved her from Jim. She would not forget that now.

"All the more reason that we find Bryce and get him back to the ship so I can finish my seduction of the little minx."

"I didn't need to know that. Really. I'm missing my own family you know."

Perhaps, serving in this detachment of the forces wasn't a good choice for me."

The members of their landing party followed him closely. They expected an attack from the locales even though nothing more than the mob had blocked their path to the parliament buildings. There was a slim chance that Bryce had been able to make some sense of their mad world after all. Maybe he was mediating peace negotiations as they walked toward the government buildings...or not.

The sound of raging battle broke through the clearing. The grounds around the parliament buildings were beautiful. It looked like a fairyland here, but in the distance, he could make out what seemed to be one hell of a gunfight going down between two factions of government.

This was hell.

"It's time to finish what has been started here, let's move into offensive positions."

"Aye, sire. If we deal with it in this way, we should be back onboard in less than four hours."

"That's what I'd like to happen. Let's make it so." Garrett flexed his fingers, drawing his power and harnessing it for the task ahead.

Alora cautiously creaked open an eyelid. Small hands reached out to touch her face. Small dirty looking hands. She let out a brief startled scream.

"I'm not going to hurt you, miss." A flashlight beamed in her face. Dust particles rained down like snow around her.

"Where am I?"

"New Eros, miss. You look like you could do with some water. My mom is over there watching the exit. We were just about to sneak out when I stumbled over you."

"Lucky me." She fingered the lingering pain in her side; obviously the young girl had given her a good kick when she'd tripped over her.

"You can come with us. We're going to try to get on the next flying Caravan out of the city. It's rumored we can find a safe haven in the mountains."

She shook her head. Pain filtered through her mind. She knew nothing about New Eros, save for the fact that Garrett had unfinished business here. "Why does my life always seem to go from bad to worse?"

"Eh?" The little girl cocked her head curiously at her. "My name is Matilda. What's yours?"

"Alora."

"I like that name. It's pretty. My mom is over there, you can call her Ace."

"Ace?"

"Yeah, it's what everyone calls her. She's a very important person here on New Eros, or at least she was before the Revolution broke out. You don't look good at all. You should try to sit up. You can have one of my energy food bars, we're quite low, but you look like you need it more than I do." She offered it to Alora, gently pressing it into her hands. "Eat up."

Alora ripped open the packaging and obediently took a bite out of the bar just to appease the girl. She still didn't know where she was, and Matilda was right--she did feel abnormally weakened.

Light creaking through the cracks in the shuttered windows, finally illuminated Matilda. The girl was about thirteen; she had bright ginger colored hair and the most

startling shade of green eyes that she'd ever seen. Her skin was pale, and spotted with freckles.

She smiled. "I think I'll try to sit up." Pain rushed through her head again. The sound of gunfire zinged through the air.

"Get your friend on her feet, sweetheart. We're going to have to move. The enemy is closing in, looks like they breached the protective perimeter you erected."

"Okay, mom. Come on, you stand up, and you can lean on me if you need to. We're going to have to hoof it. If they catch us, they'll kill my mother and send me to the Mines."

"Then, let's get a move on," Alora said.

When she stood up, pain lanced through her left ankle. Shouldering a heavy sigh, she inhaled deeply and continued to place her weight on it. She couldn't dilly-dally. This was a life or death situation and she'd be damned if she was going to watch Matilda and Ace fall to the people that pursued them.

Could she call upon her powers to help out if the need presented itself?

Where in the world was Garrett and why couldn't he sense her presence on the planet surface?

She doubted that his ship would even still be waiting for them once that bitchy android got through with infecting the systems. Their proverbial goose was cooked.

"The scanner says they're bleeding through the building, Matilda. Come on, now! I hope your father made certain that he left the escape ship in the right spot. He's so scattered at times." Ace sighed.

"He wouldn't screw something like this up, mom. You know that."

"Am I hurting you?" Alora asked, using Matilda's shoulder as a form of support.

"Nope." Matilda's eyes glowed in the darkness. Alora gasped. "Neat trick, huh? Mom says it's freaky deaky."

"It is. But not in a bad way."

"Yep." They trudged through the large room toward the huge doors, which looked as if they led off to a balcony.

"If only the ship was space worthy. I don't think your father ever found the time to make those adjustments to it. If only he hadn't kept putting it off for another day." Ace sighed.

In the next instant, mass chaos rushed into the room.

"Matilda, you and your mother get the ship ready to fly. I can hold them off," Alora said. She barely knew Matilda and Ace and yet something was telling her she had to ally herself with them.

"I'll stay and help." Ace smiled at her. "Matilda, you've known how to pilot a ship since you were nine. You can handle it, plus you'll probably remember your father's access codes better than I will."

"On it, mom."

Matilda didn't panic. She didn't even seem frightened. She had guts. Alora admired that. In the face of extreme danger, Matilda acted as if she was going on a holiday.

Ace pulled out two large pistols. "Aces are wild tonight, I think."

In the hazy glow of moonlight, Alora finally came face to face with her. The woman was gorgeous. Not that she found her attractive, she was definitely heterosexual,

but this woman could have millions of adoring fans. She just oozed charisma.

The men and women that streamed into the ballroom-sized room wore armor that seemed strangely familiar to her.

"Do you think those pistols will pierce through the armor they wear?"

"Of course. They've been custom made to rip right through it." Ace gave her a cheeky smile. "These bastards have some payback coming to them."

A knot formed in her stomach. She had no idea what side she aided, though she couldn't just stand aside and feed Matilda and her mother to the wolves.

"Okay. Let's do this."

"You'll need one of these." Ace offered her one of the pistols. "I'd thought you'd produce one of your own weapons, but since not, I'm packing enough for the both of us." Alora looked to the two other pistols she had strapped to her thighs.

"More than enough, but don't worry, I have all that I need right here." She tapped her temple.

"Ah, a mind manipulator. I should have known. You seemingly appeared out of nowhere. One minute the rooms ahead of us were clear of human bodies and the next, pop, you were there."

"Yeah, I had a little outside help with that." Wryness leaked into her voice. "Let's just attend to the current issue at hand."

Shots started to arc toward them. Focusing her telekinetic abilities, she rerouted the shots so they wouldn't hit them. Ace was pretty proficient with her target practice. She hit every single person she aimed at.

Summoning her waning energy, she moved several of the attackers out of their way. They flew through the air, and pelted against the wall. The thuds cracked through the room, earning a raised eyebrow from Ace.

"Show no mercy, eh?"

"Not in this case. They just seem to want to kill you."

"That's because I'm the ousted leader they rebelled against."

"I see."

What had she gotten herself into?

Chapter Seven

"Status report, Lieutenant?"

"No headway on breaking through the blockade to the parliament buildings. We have however, received new Intel. The Queen has been moved from her private residence."

"Shit. We have to secure her if there will be any living with Bryce."

"As for the doctor..."

"What now?"

"They have detained him."

"Where?"

"We are trying to determine that right now, sir."

"Use your powers to find him, or I will. My cousin really needs to learn how to mind his own business."

"If I may, sir, he really couldn't ignore the woman and her children."

"Indeed, not. If only said woman would come round to her senses and join him where it is safe. Her family might have tamed this wild world, but they are only self-proclaimed monarchs. They have been dethroned, she should leave this planet and return to where her daughter and son truly belong." Garrett sighed. "He's really in it right up to his bloody neck this time."

"That's right. He is. In fact, his neck is the thing that's on the line."

"They can hang him until they are all blue in the face...that won't kill him."

"Aye. But how do our kind fare when our head is severed from our body in this realm?"

"That could be tricky, depending on what sort of steel they try to use to do it." He groaned. "Damn. Find him, now!"

"Aye, sire." He moved out of the way. They'd set up a makeshift magical tent. From what ground they had gained, they had made some great headway. He stiffened. The hair on the nape of his neck bristled. He couldn't sense Bryce, which was odd--but he could feel someone else.

Alora.

"Change of plans." He darted out of the tent. "I'll continue onward toward the Parliament Buildings alone. Lieutenant, you take the rest of the landing party and retrieve Bryce. Hopefully, he'll be intact." He sighed.

"Aye, sir. Why don't you take along someone with you? You might need a partner to watch your back."

"The way that I'm so pissed I should blaze a trail in no time at all. Don't worry about me. It's harder to kill me than it is to kill Bryce."

"Then, we'll work on freeing Bryce."

They nodded their heads and left.

He didn't know how Alora had orchestrated her escape but he'd find out soon enough.

"It doesn't look as if we're going to be able to defeat them." Alora groaned. "They just outnumber us ten to one. We need to make a strategic retreat."

"Honey, I knew that when we started this, we'd have to take the back way out. There is no way to get around this--the odds just aren't in our favor. Apparently, my forces have been well, otherwise detained."

"By otherwise detained you mean?"

"They're on a permanent vacation." Ace gave her a pained look. "All of them are gone."

"Oh."

"Yeah, well, those of them that didn't die scampered off when the going got way too rough. So they either died for me, or they stabbed me in the back...almost literally."

Horrific images of her tribes defeat at the hands of the Barbarians, flashed back to her. Her heart jumped. She could feel the walls closing in on her.

"Are you okay?" Ace inclined her head at her, still managing to shoot and hit her intended targets.

Incredible.

Even though grief was shaking her to her core, she still had to live in the moment, which meant that she had to fight to live for another moment. She doubted that they had a chance of winning, and she really didn't want to make this her last stand. She'd survived too much to be beaten now.

The whirring sound of a flying machine caught both of their interest. "That's my girl, she's got the ship in the air. Let's run and chat later. This is a time for a strategic retreat."

"I agree."

"You go first. I'll follow." Alora gestured toward the exit.

"Are you certain?" Ace looked conflicted.

"I can use my abilities to levitate through the air enough to get to the ship. How far can you jump? Tell Matilda to get ready to pull away from the building as soon as I'm in the air."

"I don't know where you've come from, Alora, but I like you, and I think Matilda and I have just made another very valuable ally in this monumental struggle for survival."

"Well, it's good that Matilda literally tripped over me."

"She's always tripping over something, this is the first time it was a living breathing human being. You should feel blessed."

"You have that right. I am lucky that she tends to be so klutzy."

"Indeed, you are. Are you quite certain that you can keep them at bay long enough to make the jump?"

"Aye. And, even if I can't, they have no grudge to bear against me."

"Keep telling yourself that. You don't know these sorts that are coming after me. They are high on New Eros Ecstasy. It's the worst drug in the known worlds...it bends your mind and your heart, altering your viewpoint on everything. It's also the only thing that keeps our worldwide economy afloat, since we have to import all of our food. The ground here is just no good for agriculture--no one knows why."

"On second thought, I'm a survivor, I'll be on the ship two minutes after you are."

Ace's eyes sparkled. With one last shot, she made a beeline for the exit at a

breakneck pace that made Alora's eyes goggle out of her head. The woman certainly could run faster than she.

She directed her gaze back at the mad crowd. Now that Ace mentioned it, she could sense and feel their lunacy. They'd lost it. Channeling all of her energy into her hands, she watched as a stream of power arced through the room and knocked all of them off their feet in one fell swoop. While they were incapacitated, she dashed for the door. The hanger bay on the ship was open, awaiting her arrival.

Screams of anger rent the air. The smoke billowing on the winds from half the city burning made her lungs ache. Misery reeked through the air. So many souls--most, if not all of them had lost their way through the damaging influence of addiction.

She felt weak. Could she summon enough stamina to make it to the ship?

She projected a bubble of telekinetic energy around her. She floated in mid-air. She just had to keep it together for a few more minutes. Lethargy pulled at her being. She had to go on. She couldn't give up now. If she did, she'd lose her life. She had to be hundreds of feet up from the ground, to lose control of her powers now would be just as good as signing her own death warrant. She hadn't survived her ordeal on Delania to die so easily now.

She had Garrett to return to.

The thought struck her like a lightening bolt. Who else would take her into their arms and give her comfort and safe haven?

No one.

Even though she could be the strongest woman in the universe, she still needed someone to lean on when times got rough. And Garrett was her someone.

Ace and Matilda had each other...and by the sounds of it, Matilda had a father that cared very deeply for Ace and his daughter. She didn't have that--and she wanted it, badly. She wanted that bond--that same sort of connection.

Her mother had died when she was ten. She'd never truly gotten over the loss. Losing her mother had torn an irreparable hole in her life, one that would never be filled. Even though she hadn't been the most attentive mother, she'd been the only one that hadn't looked at her like she was an enigma. Deep down, beneath her nobly distant exterior, she could feel her benevolent affection. She hadn't been overtly touchy feely like some of the other mothers in the tribe, but she had cared for her in her own way. Losing her had been like losing the only true friend she'd ever had.

Her father had died at the hands of the Barbarians shortly after. From there on in, she had been alone in the world with no one she could trust or confide in. With her father's passing as per the inheritance traditions among her tribe, she had been elevated to the position of Chieftain. From there on in, she'd lead with the same sort of gently guiding hand.

Now, her tribe didn't want to have anything to do with her, they looked upon her as a plague. Never had they known such grief at the hands of the Barbarians then during her father's and her leadership. Perhaps, she shouldn't have followed in his footsteps when it came to leading them. Maybe she should have been more warrior like, instead of waiting for the Barbarians to attack them--what if she'd gone out and hunted them? They could have fought without the use of the special abilities, but then, that fatal mistake might have led to even more bloodshed for her tribe. She couldn't keep second-guessing herself like this!

"Alora!"

Ace stood at the edge of the ship's landing platform. She had her hands equipped with something that looked like a rope.

"You look like you're turning grey. The air current is keeping us from getting any closer to you at this altitude. You'll need to give it one more oomph, and then grab onto this rope. I'll pull you in. Just hang tight!" She could hear Matilda calling to Ace, asking Ace if she needed her to do something.

She snapped out of her ill-timed reverie. Time to stop feeling sorry for herself and take action in saving herself and from there on in, hopefully, she could help to save some others.

Following Ace's instructions, she gave it one last long jump to the ship, and missed by mere centimeters. Her concentration wavered, and she would have started free falling had Ace not lowered the rope down on time. She caught it, and nearly slammed against the ship.

"I have you!" Ace grunted. "You're a lot heavier than you look." She laughed. "Just what every woman wants to hear, right?"

"At this moment in time, I don't care what you tell me I look or feel like." She groaned.

Slowly, inch-by-inch, Ace pulled her up. "Once I get Alora in the ship, Matilda, you burn like rubber! Head straight for the Elysian Mountains!"

"On it, mom. Just give me the word."

Her hands burned against the friction of the rope. She wouldn't be surprised if she had permanent indentations in her palms from gripping it. She'd take it though, if Ace proved herself to be an Amazon woman.

"I almost have you. One more pull should do it."

She slid upward again, and clambered over the side of the ship into the landing bay.

Ace shut the bay doors and then came back to her. "Burn it, Matilda." Alora fell back onto her ass when Matilda gunned the engines. Ace touched her gingerly. "How are you doing? You look a little like death warmed over."

"I have seen death warmed over--maybe it's catchy." She forced out a shaky laugh.

"Now is not the time to joke. This is certainly no laughing matter. Though if I hadn't been ready with the rope, you'd look a little flat right now."

"Ha, ha." Alora laughed, getting up to stand on shaky legs. "I just wish I'd have one day without crazy Barbarians, lunatic androids, and an even nuttier mass of drug addicts!"

"Lunatic androids?" Ace narrowed her eyes. "Where did you come from? I don't think the faeries dropped you in my midst."

"Faerie, angel, I don't know exactly what he is, but he's got magic in his touch."

"Does he?" Ace looked at her. "I recognize that look in your eyes. I had it in my eyes, oh, about fifteen years ago."

Alora looked sharply at Ace. "You wouldn't happen to be the reason why Garrett is so intent on helping out the doctor known as Bryce?"

"Aye. I would be." Ace rolled her eyes. "Without men, we wouldn't be able to have children the natural way, anyway, but with them, sometimes, I just feel like pulling

out my hair when it comes to them. He won't leave me alone. He's been a thorn in my side and a prick in my bed for years now. And yet, God help me I love him!"

She coughed, and gagged. "New Eros people really get right to the point."

Ace laughed. "Honey, my bluntness has known to get me into trouble. Let me clarify one thing, his prick is welcome in my bed, he's only a true prick when he's outside of our bed. He's always trying to drag me back to his realm. He tells me that because I am the mother of his children, I am his wife. Honestly. I never took any vows with him, I only fell in love with him and bore him two children."

"Two?"

"He has our son with him. I couldn't keep Merrick with me. Once the uprising got out of control he had to take off. He's at that difficult age, you know. Unfortunately, they can't stay small and cute forever. He told me he and his father would sort everything out. I told him as the Prince, he would be one of the first casualties. Do you think he listened?"

Alora shook her head.

"You'd be right. Matilda, though, she has the same courageous heart, but she looks before she leaps. I have full confidence in her. Merrick, on the other hand, my heart gets lodged in my throat whenever he leaves my sight. I always worry that his bravado and arrogance will get him killed. If there were any white hairs on this head, they'd be solely from him. He shall be the death of me--if his father doesn't put the nail in my coffin first with his shenanigans."

"He'll come back."

"He has to." Ace's eyes grew misty. "I told Bryce that. I told him if he got one of my children killed stupidly, I would take one of his balls. We have our understanding." She nodded her head adamantly.

Alora widened her eyes but kept silent.

"Come on, we should go and join Matilda in the cockpit. This ship isn't space worthy, and I'm afraid it's not that big either. There's room enough for the three of us, though, until Bryce can figure out a way to get Matilda and Merrick off the planet."

"What about you?" They quickly made their way through the small compartments of the ship. It was tiny, but larger than some of the caravans she'd been in back on Delania.

"I have no reason to think that Bryce would still want me to go back with him. I've denied him for fifteen years, even though he kept telling me I would end up on this road of destruction. I didn't want to listen to him, and, in a way, I didn't want to go with him because I didn't want to give up the power and independence I have here. How foolish I was. I won't ever tell him that, mind you...but I don't think you'll break my confidence, not when you owe me your life." Ace gave her a wicked grin. "I'll file that life debt you owe me away for further reference, Alora. I'm always one to call in my dues, when I really need them."

They emerged in the cramped cockpit. It had four seats. And little else.

"How's it coming, Matilda?"

"Our shields are holding for the most part, though I think I heard something get through them a few minutes ago. I felt it, too. My neck is still smarting from being thrown forward in my seat. I'm surprised the two of you didn't feel the impact."

"Man, and here I thought we were finally in the clear." Ace sighed. "I'm

beginning to see that it's never simple. Perhaps, your father was right when he told me I should give it all up only to gain everything. He kept telling me I had everything that most women would want...and all I continued to crave was power. I'm sorry, my actions put you into this peril, Matilda." Ace leaned forward and placed her hand affectionately on her daughter's shoulder.

Alora's eyes stung. She wanted what Ace had. She needed love. When she stopped deluding herself on that subject she'd be better off.

"Don't worry about it, Mom. I can't imagine being anywhere else. Merrick and I would never let you face this alone. Even with the distractions they keep firing at us, we should get there soon."

"Any word from your brother or dare I dream it, your father?"

"Not a single one. I haven't felt them trying to communicate telepathically with me, either. I think they just must be up to their ears in trouble."

"That's starting to worry me. It's been three hours since Bryce last checked in, and I told him to not go without checking in for more than two. He's never late. Not when it comes to me." Worry lined Ace's brows.

"Mom...there's something coming straight for us. I don't think our shields will hold if it hits us. According to the sensors, it's huge, and formidable!"

"What is it?"

"A ship. Piloted by one crazy looking dude. See for yourself!" Matilda pointed at the view screen. "This is so not good."

"He's doing a kamikaze run on us! Veer away from him. If he tails us, lose him. On second thought, shift out of your seat and let me do the flying. I've had more experience on losing men than you have, dearest."

Matilda moved out of the seat without a complaint. Her face was whiter than usual.

"Don't worry, your mother will get us out of this." Alora reached for Matilda's hand. Matilda gripped it with a smile.

"I know. I just feel like something is going on with Merrick."

"You can sense him?"

"Yeah. Through our twin bond. We usually don't activate it unless we need help, and right now, he's too far out of our path for me to help him. I've never felt so helpless."

"You should tell your mother, she'd want to know."

"If I did, my mother would lose it. She's barely holding it together as it is. She won't admit it, but she's worried sick about Merrick and Dad. I don't know why she just didn't leave with him when he first arrived. He told her what was finally going to happen, and she laughed at him."

"She didn't."

"Oh, she did. Mother didn't think that the unrest had gotten to this point. Let's face it; twenty-five percent of our population is sane. Those odds aren't winning ones." Matilda gave her a knowing look. "The odds have always been stacked against her, she just didn't want to face it. Revolution has never touched this planet, not in all of the years that it's been settled..." Matilda's voice trailed off when they went into a sudden nosedive. They each held onto the armrests on the seat. Alora could only be thankful that she'd strapped herself in.

"Hang on, we're going in!" Ace shouted over the keening wail of the broken

engines.

Chapter Eight

Garrett was almost there. Suddenly, Alora's scent moved. He whipped his head around. She was in the air now.

Shit.

How could she move so quickly from place to place? He didn't think she had the ability to teleport, but then, maybe he'd misjudged her. He looked to the smoke-filled heavens. The sooner he got her off the planet, the better.

He caught the slim outline of a ship veering away from the Parliament buildings. He recognized the ship. Bryce. Only problem was, Bryce wasn't on the ship.

He picked up his pace, so he could follow the ship. Whatever came to pass, he had to help out Alora. She'd obviously gotten in way over her head. She was out of her element in more ways than one. Now that she was no longer on her home planet, her powers wouldn't act the same. The rules of the game had changed. He could place a fairly good bet on the fact that Alora hadn't been her father and mother's blood child. Where had they found her? Had they known what she was?

He couldn't dwell on the unanswered questions right now. All he knew was that his meeting Alora had not been accidental. Some other great plan was in motion--now, he had to figure out why Alora had been placed in his path.

Who was she and why did he feel this undeniable attraction to her?

The sight of the ship streaking downward in the sky, made his breath hitch in his throat. Damn it. If they crashed, they could very well all be killed.

He took to the sky, immediately reacting on instinct, rather than subtlety. He flew alongside the quickly falling ship. Alora was the only one to notice him. Her eyes widened, and her hand flattened against the window glass. She mouthed something to him, but he didn't hear her.

If he didn't guide them down slowly, there was no telling what the impact would do to them.

He could feel her mind pressing against his, seeking answers where he had none to give at the moment. He easily blocked her.

The ground was meters away. He guided the ship into a smooth, albeit bumpy landing.

Seconds later, he heard the docking bay doors open.

"Garrett?" Alora's voice filled with awe. He watched as she ran down the gangplank. She looked as if she was about to crumple beneath the strain.

"Alora." He nodded his head to her, placing his hands inside of his warrior robes. He drew away from her on purpose. To connect with her again, when he still needed to find Bryce was tempting fate. He had no way of telling what any further physical contact between them would produce.

She pulled up just short of throwing herself in his arms. "What are you?" Her breath was hitched in her throat, her eyes wide with trepidation.

"You already know what I am, Alora." He forced out the words in a stilted tone,

robbing all of the emotion from it. He might have thought she was meant for him--but he had been mistaken. She'd escaped his ship only to land in purgatory, and now, she would use him until she could find another planet to run away from him to.

"I know that you are an Immortal from The Hidden Realms of Magick. What I don't know is what sort of mystical creature you are. Obviously, you have magic at your disposal, the strength of steel, and you are by far the most charismatic man I've ever met."

"Just get it off your chest, already, Garrett. She'll find out soon enough...especially if you plan to continue claiming her as your very own woman. She should go into this affair with her eyes wide open instead of half-veiled."

"I don't think that what I am is any concern of hers. I am a man."

"Most of the time, he is a man. But when the going gets tough, he can merge with his own inner magical soul. Tell her what that is, Garrett or you know I will." Ace gave him a stern look. "I will say one thing, his magical soul is very impressive. But if you think you'll ever be able to escape him once he's determined to have you, think again. There are not many forces in this universe that are a match for his magical might."

He balked. Alora could see him slowly losing his control. "This is no place for you to butt your nose into, Aislynn. You are going against the code of my people. Only after she and I have merged our bodies and soul shall my inner magical spirit be revealed to her."

"Well, she's going to get one hell of a scorching surprise. I hope you like it hot, Alora."

"I don't understand. And right now, with the sounds of the rioting mob that's coming toward us, I don't think we have time to argue." Matilda stepped out of the shadows the moonlight created as it draped across the landscape. "I do realize that your secret magical soul is important to you, as I have one as well, that I will not fully merge with until I am sixteen; until then, I just have plain old-fashioned magic at my disposal. But, you need to give Alora more credit, Uncle Garrett. She does have a true heart of gold. She deserves to know...it is her right."

"She ran from me, when I told her to stay, her rights are up in the air right now. If I returned her to where I found her, she would lose all of the rights she has at the present time."

"Ah, yes. And you above all others from your realm are always used to getting your own way. You always have a temper tantrum when a monkey wrench is thrown in your path," Ace spat out.

"Mom...Uncle Garrett, enough! I don't think you're really treating Alora the way she deserves. I can hardly believe that she ran from you, especially the way she looks at you with sparks crackling in her eyes."

"Matilda, as ever, is the voice of reason. We should get back to the camp," Garrett announced, his voice returning to the dead calm tone he utilized when he was in control.

"Camp?" Alora asked.

"Aye, my landing party has gained a great amount of ground. Aislynn, if you're lucky, I'll be giving this planet back to you in the palm of your hands."

"I don't want you to take it to that extreme, Garrett. On second thought, just leave the planet once we've secured my son and Bryce. Where are they, Garrett? I know you always have your ear to the ground so to speak when it comes to the goings on of my

family."

"Then, you admit, you think of Bryce as your husband."

Ace's eyes flashed. "I don't have time to go through the third degree with you on this again. We have to get somewhere that's not so out in the open. I'd forgotten how cold the night air on New Eros could be at this time of the year. Look at your ladylove. She's shivering frightfully. Her lips are looking a little blue. Maybe you should give her a great big hug and put some warmth into that cold little body."

He reached inside of his robes and pulled out three fur-lined cloaks. He handed her the red one, Ace the green one and Matilda got the white one.

"This really isn't necessary." Despite her bravado, her teeth started to chatter. "I apologize. I'm not used to the cold. My planet is much warmer than this one." White flakes started to fall from the sky. "What is this?" Her teeth slammed against each other, she felt colder than she'd ever felt in her entire life.

"Those my dear, are snowflakes, its just a dusting right now, but I have a feeling we'll be getting hit with some heavy snowfall soon. For some weird reason, winter has come early to New Eros. You aren't used to these extreme weather conditions. Heat, yes, cold, no. Just put it on, before you catch your death!" At his shouted words, snowflakes the size of dragonfly berries started to drop from the sky.

"This is very unusual weather for us." Ace pulled the hood up to cover her head as they trudged through the woods near their landing site. "We don't usually get any snow for at least another month or so. No worries, we would have needed these cloaks anyway. I should have thought ahead. I really haven't planned out for all possible scenarios. But then, when the angry mob broke through our defenses I really didn't have much time to think ahead. We should reach the mountain path soon, as we get close, the temperature is bound to drop. Get ready to get even colder."

"We aren't going to the mountains, Ace. We are going to save your Hus...Bryce."

"Bryce? Why would you need to save him? He's always so proficient when it comes to taking care of things." Her face turned ashen against the evergreen colored cloak. "What about my son?"

"I didn't get a status report on him. There is no reason to believe that Merrick was even taken into custody. If he was able to elude their captors, he might be waiting for us, in which case it should be fairly easy to retrieve Bryce. I've already sent a rescue party to bring him to safety."

"Where is your ship?" Ace asked.

"In orbit."

"About the ship. I wouldn't be putting too much faith in that. Here's a little story for you, Garrett. It involves me and a certain anal retentive android," Alora said, sighing.

"I'm not following you."

"Well, if I had the resources at my disposal, I'd paint a bloody picture for you! I don't know who she was, but she vented the oxygen out of your quarters until I passed out. The next thing I knew, I woke up and Matilda was tripping over me."

"Damn her! Gertrude always has been a wildcard. I will have her sent to the junk heap. She will not even be able to find work on a garbage ship! She'll be good for nothing!"

"Your threats mean little. We're all stranded here. Ace informs me that all of the space-worthy vehicles were destroyed during the first wave of the revolution. So it seems

we're stuck here for the foreseeable future."

"Don't lay all of your bets in that pool, Alora. There is more to me than meets the eyes."

"I'm beginning to learn that. So, mighty magician, what sort of trick are you going to pull out of your sleeve this time?"

"Never you mind. You don't need to know until the moment is right. Come with me, this way." He veered off onto another path, leading them through the bush. Lights twinkled in the distance. "That's the camp. I'll leave Matilda and Alora there, while Ace and I set out for Bryce and Merrick."

"No. We all go." Matilda's voice was firm. "I'm not leaving my brother or father in your capable hands."

"I see you've inherited your smart ass attitude from your dear old mother, so I'll forgive you that sleight."

"Dear and old shouldn't be used in the same sentence when talking about me. I'll take dear, just not old." Ace shuddered.

"You always were one to get your goat up when it comes to the issue of age. Why don't you just accompany Bryce back to our realm? You'll never have to worry again about gaining wrinkles on your face, or growing stiff in your joints. You'll be as vibrantly young as you are now--forever."

"That might be the natural way of things for your sort--but for my kind--that is humankind, we are created, we are born, we live and we die. It's the natural circle. I won't disrupt that even if it means I will one day have to say goodbye to those I love. To change my destiny would be to rock the natural order of balance in the universe."

"The two of you are getting off the tangent again. Remember? My brother? My Father? Get to it or so help me, I'll leave the sanctuary of this camp."

"No, Matilda. You remain here with Alora. She's not well enough to continue on the journey. You'll have to stay and take care of her."

"Why does everyone always talk about me like I'm not in the same campsite? I'm here, and I'm a grown woman. If anyone will be taking care of anyone I will be taking care of Matilda. And, as to not being well--I feel fine."

"If that's the way you want it, Alora." Matilda sighed. "Just heave ho, and get my brother back here. I can feel his fear. It's so tangible, I can almost taste it."

One of Garrett's men walked up to them. "Lieutenant Mitchell just checked in. They have located the doctor and his son."

"Where?"

"About twenty kilometers west of here."

"Can they handle the situation?"

"They are requesting backup."

"Then, we shall give it to them." Ace stepped forward, literally breathing danger. "Merrick must be so frightened."

"Actually, Lieutenant Mitchell says your son took out quite a few of the ones holding Bryce until he himself was detained."

Horror creased Ace's features. "This was never supposed to touch my family. So many things I didn't do...Garrett, you have to stop this!"

"You have my full assistance. I will be using the full influence of my station and powers to rescue Bryce. You forget, Bryce is my cousin--I'm not about to leave him out

to rot."

"Sir, Mitchell did say that time was of the essence."

"Come on, Ace, we will journey there my way. It will cut back on the time."

"I'm ready, Garrett." Ace walked to Matilda. "Whatever happens, Matilda, you let Garrett take you off this planet. Your destiny is changing...I don't know if you'll ever become queen, but you must live. No matter what, if all is lost here, you return to your father's realm and you live the rest of your unnaturally long life." She pulled Matilda into a firm hug, kissing the top of her head. Maternal love flowed off of Ace, briefly melting the icy armor she usually wore. Releasing her daughter, Ace nodded silently at Alora.

They walked out of sight, without even a by your leave to Alora.

Matilda and she stood arm in arm watching as Garrett and Ace set off into the darkness.

"You'll have to get used to their hot and cold relationship. One minute they are at each other's throats, the next minute, they're bosom chums. My father doesn't understand, and neither do I. Don't worry, they've never been anything else but bitter enemies and heartfelt friends, my mother only has one man in her bed at a time. She's quite unusual for her family you know. My grandmother had three husbands, and several paramours. At the same time. She was always a rebel at heart."

"She was the Queen of New Eros as well?"

"Yes. The line of inheritance runs through the female line. That means that one day, God forbid, I will be the new ruler of New Eros."

"If there's anything left of New Eros for you to rule over. At this rate, it will be burned to the ground in ten days."

"We'll get over this. My great-grandmother was almost burned at the stake. She survived the uprising as well, none the worse for wear. She lived on to take two more husbands, who happened to be the ringleaders of the uprising."

"I'm getting a headache." Alora doubled over, breathing deeply.

"We can't help that virile sexual appetites runs through our family. I guess my father was finally man enough for my mother."

"Really. Getting a pounding headache."

"You aren't embarrassed are you? My mother says that being open about your sexuality is the most liberating thing. She says it's the only way to be. I take it you haven't become intimate with Uncle Garrett, yet? Obviously not, if you don't know what his inner magical soul is."

"On my planet, we only take one mate for life. The Barbarians on our planet, however, rut with anything they can get their hands on. They aren't too particular."

"Delania sounds horrible. Why did you want to return?"

"I never said anything about wanting to return."

"I might have read your thoughts, briefly, before Uncle Garrett told me it was impolite. He gave me quite the mental chastisement."

"I find that hard to believe."

"Uncle Garrett is falling in love with you. I don't know why that's so hard to believe. In fact, I'd say he's already in love with you."

"I wouldn't take that to the bank, Matilda. Why does everyone seem so panicked all of a sudden?"

"I don't know. Unless--" Matilda pointed to the smoke billowing in the distance. "I think that's a wildfire, and it's coming straight toward this location. Oh, boy. We're going to have to hightail it out of here."

They both started to back up. One of Garrett's men came out of the tents. "We should get you into the vehicles Master Garrett conjured up before he left. He said we might have use for them."

"Might? We're going to definitely need some other way of transportation out of here. The question is, where can we run to?"

"The Mountains. They're probably the only safe spot right now. With wildfires racing across this part of the province, almost every lowland area will be at risk. I say we take to the high ground." Matilda looked up at her. "What do you think, Alora?"

"I say that in matters of geography, you are certainly light years ahead of me. I don't know diddlysquat about New Eros. You will have to take the lead, Matilda."

"Not an issue. Oh, crap. Our luck just ran out. Get those vehicles going, we're in for an air strike in no time at all!" Matilda commanded, pointing to the sky. "Look!"

Alora looked to where Matilda pointed. Her stomach sunk.

"Oh, no. This isn't going to go well for our side." She turned to one of Garrett's officers. "Do these vehicles have any weapons?"

"Most certainly."

The vehicles whirled over them. In a few swift moments, light radiated down from them, and they were instantly transported into them. The vehicles were in the shape of what looked like some sort of bird.

"I've never been in anything like this before."

The traveling compartment was small, but not claustrophobic. In fact, it was probably larger than the one Ace and Matilda had owned.

"Wow. These are works of art." Matilda figured the leather upholstery. "You have to hand it to Uncle Garrett, he's at the top of his magical game."

"Will that help him in rescuing your father and brother?"

Matilda gave her a quizzical stare. "Of course, I have full faith in his abilities. Plus, my mother is a raving hellcat when it comes to me and my brother, she will certainly be spreading her fury far and wide."

"And yet, why do I continue to have a sinking feeling in the bottom of my stomach?"

"It's called nervousness. Don't worry, it will pass. Besides, the ship my uncle commands could literally even the fighting ground...if that crazy android you described hadn't taken over. You shouldn't go back to Delania. I have a deep foreboding about that place, when it comes to your destiny. It's the end of your road so to speak, when Uncle Garrett found you your destiny was at a crossroads--and by rescuing you, he put you on your right course."

"I was born and bred there, Matilda. It is my home."

"No. Your home is where your heart is. Frankly, my heart has never been with New Eros, and yet, I'm destined to be its leader. I'd rather find myself on another life path, but I can't break my mother's heart."

"Couldn't your brother just take over the reins of leadership?"

"My brother doesn't have a head for politics. He's more mystical minded than me. He might come across as a little distant when you first meet him. Pay that no mind, he's a

real softie at heart; he's just got his heart planted in my father's home realm. I can count on my fingers how many times mom let dad take us back to his lands. And, yet, I want to go back there, I have the strongest urge to return, and I know that the last time we left, Merrick left a little bit of himself behind there. He didn't want to come back, but like me, he loves mother dearly. He'd do whatever it took to make her happy, even if it meant sacrificing his own happiness. He wants to follow in Uncle Garrett's footsteps, though I think that might have to happen over mom's dead body."

"I don't think she'd take it that far. She looks like a reasonably minded person."

"You don't know mom, then." Matilda laughed. "She's wild. Unpredictable to the extreme, but she told dad that we would follow his ways over her dead body--so take it from me, she's serious."

"I'm sorry."

"Thanks. I don't mind...I just wish she'd see the light that's all. She's been fighting giving herself to dad for so many years. I mean, I admire that she's a powerful independent woman, but she's only punishing herself. It doesn't take a psychic to realize that she loves my dad more than any other man. She's not like her mother, she's a one woman man, and I just wish that she'd tell my dad that."

"So your parents aren't married?"

"Marriage has a totally new meaning here on New Eros than it does in your part of the galaxy, Alora. It's sort of frowned upon. To be married isn't the accepted way--it's an oddity that most New Erosians avoid like the Tenasion plague. Free love is the given norm here."

"Free love?" her voice came out choked.

"Yeah. Something I'm not into, nor was my mother. We're weird that way. It could be why our subjects have lost faith in the royal house. Mom just doesn't fit the predefined mold. She's wild--but not that wild." Matilda heaved a shaky laugh.

At that exact moment, they were both thrown forward in their chairs.

"We're being attacked." Their pilot gave them a quick warning gaze. "Get ready, I'm going to have to go in defensive mode, you might get shaken up some more."

"Why don't you just use your magic, Steele?" Matilda asked, confusion wrinkling her brow.

"Because..." The pilot sighed. "I am under strict orders from your uncle to keep the magic to a very low profile."

"I think he'd understand considering the extenuating circumstances."

The ship was rocked by another blast. "How are the shields on this vehicle?" Alora asked, her heart still doing a jig in her chest.

"I'm not sure. It's the first time I've flown this particular model. As I said, it's something that your mate conjured out of thin air," Steele explained, sighing heavily.

"Mate? I don't think you quite understand the true nature of the relationship between Garrett and I," Alora said, shaking her head.

"Alora...." Matilda frowned at her. "Don't mind her, Steele, she's really shaken up right now. She doesn't know what she's talking about. Of course, she and my uncle are two peas in a pod. She is under his protection just as I am."

Alora sighed. Getting her life back to normal seemed elusive. She was a far cry from being a slave, so why did she feel as if she still had shackles around her wrists and legs?

Chapter Nine

"There he is," Garrett whispered, groaning.

"Trust Bryce to find the boiling pot of water. I told him to stay with me and Matilda...I begged Merrick to not follow his father, but does anyone ever listen to me?"

"Quite frequently, I'd imagine. Aren't they afraid of what will happen to them if they don't?" Garret asked.

Ace narrowed her eyes at him. "I didn't like you calling me Aislynn in front of your woman...and I don't appreciate you doing it ever! Call me Ace. That's the name I prefer."

"Well, your given name is Aislynn and I don't see you telling Bryce to call you Ace all of the time."

"That's the point. You aren't Bryce. You never have been. You just don't have anything on him."

"And to think that I once considered you as a potential mate."

"Lucky me I didn't fall for your tricks...I don't know where I'd be right now."

"Well, it certainly wouldn't be here. I will have my wife follow me wherever I go. No doubt about it."

"Well, at least Bryce has more enlightened views when it comes to the all important relationship between a woman and a man."

"Yes...you've pretty much managed him, haven't you? You've taken almost everything that you could think of from him."

"Don't even weigh in on what we share. You couldn't aspire to have the sort of bond that the two of us share."

"What bond? The only thing the two of you share in way of a bond is that you both like to fuck each other quite frequently. You have a comfortable relationship, I'll give you that, but you have no true commitment to each other."

"I'm here, aren't I?" Ace challenged.

"Only to save your son, which, I don't blame you for. The only redeeming thing about you, Aislynn is your unwavering love for your children. If it weren't for that, you'd just be a little slut with a really big throne."

"I revile you."

"I share the same sentiment about you, Ace." He grinned at her.

"You haven't learned anything in the last fifteen or so years. You're still bound and determined to find the one woman that you can shape into the perfect little mate or wife, I've lost track of how you'd view your life partner. Maybe, she'd be your little love slave."

"Shut the hell up, Aislynn. I've had enough of you. We're gaining ground, if we don't go silent, we'll tip them off that we are approaching."

"Well, then, in that case, I'll be a good little girl and shut my mouth. But when we get out of this mess, I don't want to see or hear from you ever again. You can take your little woman and blow right out of New Eros."

"My little woman seems to be well liked by your daughter."

"She'll forget about her in no time flat. Matilda likes to take in stray animals. It's in her nature, she's a real sweetheart."

"Good to know she doesn't take after her mother's side of the family."

"Bastard."

"Bitch."

They walked out of the clearing, and stopped in their tracks. He heard Aislynn draw in her breath sharply. He could feel her horror and surprise.

"We can't let them kill him!" she whispered, her voice strained.

"You leave everything to me," he calmly instructed.

"I don't think--"

"You'll only exacerbate the situation, Aislynn. Just sit here and hold tight. I'll be right back with your lover and your son."

He watched her bite her lip. Nervousness rolled off her. "If you pull this off without losing either one of them, then, maybe there will be hope for a truce between us."

"Perhaps. I wouldn't be too sure of that, though." Stepping away from her, he called upon his powers.

"Do you see that thing that looks like a fireball in the distance?" She leaned toward the window. They'd managed to shake their pursuers. Now, they were flying toward the mountains, and at their altitude she had a good view of the outlying countryside.

"I see it." Matilda leaned in close to her.

Steele coughed. "I think we should get into the safety of the mountains. It could be another wildfire coming toward us."

"Isn't that the direction that Garrett and Ace were headed?"

"Yeah." Matilda narrowed her eyes, and paled considerably.

"You know what it is, don't you, Matilda?"

"No. And even if I did...I couldn't tell you. It's not my place."

"Why?"

"Just drop it, Alora. I like you; I don't want to have a squabble with you. Right now, my entire family is in trouble. I really don't feel like getting into a debate with you."

"I understand. My entire family is dead."

"Oh. I'm sorry." Matilda blanched even more. "I didn't know."

"When Garrett saved me, I was ready to die. I wish I'd gone with them...I could have saved you the worry, by letting Ace remain behind. I'm not afraid of dying."

"You should be. You should be...you have a great life ahead of you, if only you will embrace it. And besides, don't even think that you could have done anything to convince my mother to stay behind. She's too stubborn for her own good sometimes."

"I hate to interrupt your cozy conversation, Princess, but we have a problem. Our engines were damaged during the last firefight."

"Then, fix them. You should be able to use your magic for that job."

"You think too highly of my abilities, Princess. I'm out of my league when it comes to conjuring anything mechanical. Your uncle's talents far surpass mine."

"Then, you can't fix us?" Matilda asked, her eyes widening.

"Not at all. Unless, of course, you can."

"I haven't been through that sort of training yet. My mother forbids it."

"Great." Alora spoke before she thought. "The two of you can't do anything to slow our descent? I don't feel like crashing twice in one night!"

"I can use my abilities to guarantee us a soft landing but beyond that, nothing," Steele said.

"Well, then, Steele hop to it," Matilda ordered.

Their ship jolted again, as the engine heaved out a screeching whine.

"That doesn't sound good. Shouldn't Garrett have enchanted the vehicle to withstand any harm? I mean, he's nearly invulnerable...why can't the things he conjures be just as formidable?" Alora asked.

"He's using his powers right now. If he weren't, he'd probably have already sensed that we were in peril. You can't look upon him as a God. He's not that all seeing. He's just an immortal with really extraordinary abilities."

"I have some abilities myself."

"I know...I saw them in all of their beautiful glory. Nonetheless, my uncle's powers far surpass yours. Don't rub him the wrong way, Alora. You want him on your side, you want him behind you all the way...the alternative is unthinkable."

"One minute you make him sound like an angel, the next, you make him sound like a monster from hell."

"He's no monster. His heart is true to the side of good. He's done battle with creatures of darkness that would curdle your blood."

"So have I."

"These creatures weren't mad barbarians with red blood and human skin. They were of the unthinkable kind of creature. My brother wants to be trained as a hunter...he wants to be just like Garrett in every single way. My father had hoped that Merrick would get interested in the healing arts, but he has the lust for adventure and danger."

"You really aren't singing Garrett's praises to me."

Alora gasped. The ship did a deep nosedive. She gripped the edge of the seat for support.

"I'm having a hard time controlling the ship. I guess I'm not cracked out to be on the front lines," Steele said, his voice filled with uncertainty.

"I will try to slow down our descent," Matilda said. "Steele, you just concentrate on keeping this ship together until Alora and I can slow us down so we have a softer landing."

Matilda looked at her. "If we combine our abilities, maybe we can make this work." Matilda winked at her, her eyes glowing in the semi-darkness.

Alora's heartbeat quickened. Suddenly, her mind filled with an image of Garrett in his human form, followed by something that made her scream out loud. He was a creature made of fire. He was a monstrosity of nature.

Garrett looked behind him at the sound of Alora's scream. It pierced his heart. He groaned.

She had sensed his magical soul. She had called upon the bond between them and used it against him. Since he'd been embroiled in battle, he hadn't been guarding against her. Her powers grew, while she remained with him. The intelligent thing would be to leave her on the nearest planet. If she continued to stay with him, she'd learn all of his

secrets; there would be no turning back. Even now, she'd caught a glimpse of his magical soul and she'd been overwhelmed with terror. She just wasn't equipped to deal with what he was, and who he was. Saving her had been the only choice, taking her, as his lover had been a stupid choice. He never should have allowed her to touch his heart. He was a complicated man, and when it came right down to it, she was accustomed to living a normal life.

She was used to living with real people. Her abilities weren't considered mystical ones on her planet. He was different, he was a creature born of magic, he couldn't deny his true self, and if she couldn't live with that, he couldn't live with her.

Her panic continued to grow. Looking at Merrick and Bryce in their current state of peril made him think twice. He couldn't leave them and run to her aid...and yet, not only would he sacrifice her, he would sacrifice Matilda as well. The prices on both ends were lethal.

"Shield your eyes, Ace. Don't question me, just put the hood up over your head, turn away, and do not turn back around until you feel Bryce's and Merrick's hands on your arms. Their touch will signify that it is all clear."

Eyes wide with trepidation, Ace pinned her gaze on him. "What are you going to do?"

"I said, no questions. I have a dilemma. I can work in my current form and save your son and lover, or I can work in my magical soul form and save not only your son and lover, but your daughter as well. Which do you choose?"

Her eyes filled with steely determination. "Finish this. Save them all. Spare no one that gets in your way. Thank you, Garrett."

Without a further word or hesitation, she turned her back, fell to her knees, and pulled her green hood up to completely cover and shield her face.

"Your wish is my command." He called deep within his psyche to his magical soul. In one burning flash, he transformed.

Frantic shouts that quickly morphed into terrified screams filled his ears. He swallowed.

"Do it. Slit their throats before the abomination can stop us! It is steel from the Demonic Lands. Do it! Now! It will end them!"

His battle song ripped around the small group of New Erosions. They moved inward on Bryce and Merrick.

By the looks of it, Merrick and Bryce had been poisoned by something. The extreme pallor of their skins was a dead giveaway.

Hesitating in mid-song, he turned his wrath to the men surrounding his family. Bryce might be his cousin, but they had been raised like brothers. He considered himself Merrick's uncle, and his heart panged at the pitiful sight of him.

Attacking their minds, he gleaned from them the knowledge he needed.

"Now," his voice boomed through the landscape. "Your time of reckoning has come. Pray for forgiveness so that when I send you to the Afterlife, you might be put into Purgatory rather than going straight to Hell."

"You can go straight to Hell, you vile creature."

"Vile is not what I am. Vile is what all of you are. Murder and torture, isn't the work of the just. I am, Judge, Jury and Executioner. You will be punished according to my laws."

His magical fire encased the camp. He shielded Merrick and Bryce. Keening out the last verse in his song, he meted out his justice. While remaining with them, he reached out with his powers and slowed down Matilda and Alora's ship. Freezing it in time, he blinked it to the ground in one magical swoop. Smiling, he returned his attention to Merrick and Bryce.

"Uncle Garrett?" Merrick's voice was weak. Transforming back into his human form, he ran toward them.

"What did they give you?"

"Dad called it Tyrant Bane. What is that?"

"It's something that in a large enough dose can kill our kind. That's why you're still conscious. Your mother's mortal blood saved you."

"What about dad?"

"He's barely alive."

He untied them both. Merrick stood up, wobbled, and then fell back onto his ass. "I'm really not feeling so hot." He moaned. Sweat slithered across his brow.

"Ace!" he called.

"I'm waiting until I feel Bryce and Merrick's touch."

"They can't get that far. They're badly hurt."

The anguished moan he heard from her was guttural. "Can I move, without becoming tonight's BBQ?"

"You can."

He heard her jump into action and cross the ground between them.

"What's wrong with them?" She sat between them, touching each of them. "They look like their drifting away."

"If I don't do something right now, they will drift away, for good."

"For good?" her voice strangled. "No. Not possible. They are immortal. Your kind deduced that Merrick and Matilda had inherited Bryce's immortality. They will live forever!"

"You know as well as I that there are certain rare ways to kill us. Especially, when we are outside of our enchanted lands."

"No. They can't die. What about Bryce? He's a healer and he should know how to fix this. Maybe we can rouse him long enough to find out if he's got anything in that special medical bag of his that he carries everywhere. There has to be a way. We haven't come this far only to be defeated now." Tears streamed down her face.

Snowflakes dropped on her nose and in her dark brown hair.

"Do you see his medical bag? I didn't before I laid waste to this area."

"Those bloody buggers. They stole it and it's no doubt being auctioned off on the black market as we speak, as they sit here dying."

"I can help them."

"Can you?" Her sky blue eyes sparkled when she looked at him. "I don't understand...I thought you were only a creature of destruction. You are a hunter."

"I am more of a healer than Bryce. If I channel my magical soul, and if we are very very lucky."

"What are you, really? Whenever I've had time to glance at you in your magical soul form, all I see is fire. What mythological creature do you represent?"

"A Phoenix."

Her voice turned terse as her face completely lost any trace of color. "A firebird. I thought you had to be a female in order to be one of those."

"A false misconception that the humans of Earth have widely propagated. No, I am all male. I assure you there is nothing womanly about me."

"I know that. You don't have a heart."

He inclined his head toward her. "We have always had a certain amount of animosity toward each other, Ace. I would rather set aside our differences for the time being until I can bring your loved ones back from the brink of death. Unless, of course you would rather continue squabbling whilst wasting precious time."

"No. Do what you have to. I'll just take your word for it. I only drew upon the tales my nannies and governesses told me as a child."

"Nannies and governesses?"

"Don't look so surprised. Do you honestly think my mother would find time to raise me? She had spent too much of her time governing the state, and using any of her extra time to spend with her many lovers. My mother only thought of two things. Sex and power. Anything else seemed minuscule in comparison."

"Now I understand."

"I don't follow."

"You don't need to."

He drew away from her. "If you're going to transform again, I'll have to leave. I can see what your inner magical soul does to us mere humans, and I can't say I like the effect."

"I will pose no danger to you, Ace. I will not be calling on my aggressive side. The lamb will be making an appearance."

"The lamb? I'm hoping I'll like it a lot more than the lion. I guess you'll have to cry over them?"

"No. Not this time. A Phoenix's tears are meant to heal, but I don't always have to use my tears. My hands can work just as well."

Ace sat between them, while he knelt in front of them and took each of their hands into one of his. With his palms pressing against theirs, he let his head fall forward drawing on the healing magic wrestling to get out.

A bright reddish white light started to encase them in a protective cocoon.

"Astonishing," Ace's voice softened.

He glanced quickly at her. Her color had returned a little and instead of her mouth fixed in a pout like it usually was, it now dropped open in silent awe.

He felt the poison ebb out of Merrick's body first. His groggy voice filtered around them. "What's going on?"

"All will be well in a few minutes, Merrick. Your uncle is attempting to heal your father now that he has healed you."

"He's using his passive magic outside of our hidden lands. What sort of an impact will that have on his status as a hunter?"

"Do be quiet, Merrick. He must concentrate. I trust you want your father brought back from the edge of death just as much as I do?"

Merrick fell into a contrite silence.

Bryce obviously had wandered too far toward the point of no return. He could feel his human and magical soul fighting to free themselves of his physical body. Opening a

telepathic link, he shouted at his cousin.

"What in the name of all that is Magical do you think you're doing?"

Bryce's mind touched his. "I'm so weary. I yearn for the release that crossing The Veil will give me."

"Don't even think about it, cousin mine. You are staying here! I won't let you cross that threshold. There will be no putting up with Ace."

"Ace." Bryce smiled softly. Love filtered into his eyes. "She doesn't want to be mine. She only wants to live as an independent woman. She will be no man's wife. She's told me that over and over again. Perhaps, I'm just ready to believe it now."

"You have your children to think of!"

"The children no longer need me. They have Ace, and they are growing into their own. Soon, they will be able to fend for themselves. Our world awaits them, and there they will find their true greatness. Once they become adults, Ace will discard me like an old pair of shoes. I will be better off in the light."

"No! Ace wants you! She told me. She said she'd been a fool. You know yourself that when our kind finds love we never miss the mark. You know you've found your true soul mate in Ace. Do her the service of returning to her and giving her the second chance to prove to you just how much she loves you."

"She won't do it. She's only turning hot right now because she doesn't want to lose me. She'll only turn me away when she's ready."

"You've been together for all of these years, and she's always come back to you! What makes you think this time will be any different?"

Bryce hesitated.

"What's taking so long, Garrett? Is there a complication? You promised you'd save Bryce! I'm holding you to that! Bryce? If you can hear me, fixate on my voice. Come back to me!" Her voice broke with emotion. "I've been such a bitch. I've denied my heart for far too long. When you asked me to marry you all of those years ago and I laughed in your face and kept laughing, you should have left then. You never should have given me so many second chances. But if you give me just one more chance, I will stick by your side for the rest of my days! This I vow!"

"Did you hear that, Bryce? She wants you back for good this time. Don't give it up."

"Only for her life? Not acceptable. If she's going to be my wife, she'll agree to be my wife for the rest of my unnaturally long life."

"Well, you've won the first battle. Let me heal you, so you can win the upcoming ones. Don't let Ace get the last word in. You know how much the two of you enjoy fighting so you can make up...give her what she wants, and what you know you need to have."

Bryce walked toward him, eagerly accepting his healing magic. He felt the poison disperse and then vanish from Bryce's system.

Bryce's body jolted back to life as his soul slammed back into it.

"Merrick?" Bryce asked anxiously.

"I'm okay, dad. A bit freaked out, but okay."

Garrett looked at Ace, suddenly feeling as if four was a crowd. His thoughts immediately went to Alora.

Stepping backward, he started to leave.

"Things are going to be different now." Ace's resolute voice seemed firm.

"Our first order of business once we get off this God forsaken planet is to be married by one of our priests."

"Agreed." Ace caressed the side of Bryce's face. "I'm with you on that one. I've been a rebel for long enough. I now know that I can keep true to myself even if I am attached to you for the rest of the eternity."

"Eternity? I thought I'd still have to fight you on that one."

Merrick stood up and slowly crossed the distance to where Garrett stood. "I think my parents need to sort out a few things between themselves. Why don't we go and find my sister and your future wife?"

"Why do you think I'm about to get married?"

"Because you have that same look on your face just now that dad always gets whenever he thinks about mom. And I know you're not thinking about mom." Merrick winked at him.

"It won't be so bad living as long as you live--at least, I don't think it will be. But if this dangerous vocation of yours ever gets you canned for good, do I get to follow? If you ever go to the big wide yonder, I'm not getting left behind, am I?" Ace asked Bryce.

Smiling, Garrett started to walk toward where Alora and Matilda's ship was.

"Where do you think you're going, Merrick?"

Merrick stopped dead in his tracks. "I swear she has eyes in the back of her head. It's unnatural for a mortal to be so uncanny." Merrick flinched.

"He's coming with me to get your daughter," Garrett said tersely, not taking the time to look back at her.

"I see. Well, take care of yourselves. Bryce seems too weak to make the journey but we'll rendezvous back here in thirty minutes. Thirty minutes, Garrett. I'm holding you to that time span. I don't want to have another heart attack concerning my loved ones."

"For once, Ace, I'm not about to fight with you. You got it. When we return, we're blowing this pop stand."

Chapter Ten

"Are you okay, Matilda?"

Alora fixed her gaze on Matilda. Her head swam. Her heart still beat furiously, and her fingers had probably left a permanent imprint on the chair armrests.

"I'm good." Matilda's voice shook. "That's two close calls in one night. I can't keep doing this! We just have to get off New Eros. It's become a bloody deathtrap!"

"I'm beginning to see the logic in that statement." Alora's mouth was dry, and her stomach thundered with hunger.

"Alora? What about our pilot?" Matilda asked, her voice still wobbly.

Alora touched the back of his head. He moaned. "I think he's fine, just hurt. When the sensor array fried it must have given him one hell of a good jolt."

"Do you have any idea how we can get out of here?" Matilda released the restraints that kept her in the chair. "Whoa. My head is just whizzing. I can actually hear a buzzing in my ears. I think I see little pixies flying around my head."

"Sit back down until you right yourself."

Grimacing, Alora unhitched herself from the chair restraints, and leaned forward to look over the pilot's shoulder. The controls looked toasted.

"Not that I'd have an idea on how to make the controls work, it doesn't seem to matter. They have been fried. It looks as if we're stuck in here until someone can find us, Matilda."

"Mom and Uncle Garrett will double back for us. Uncle Garrett is bound to feel our distress. He was the one that stopped our freefalling; I just can't imagine what's keeping him. I could try to use my magic, but with the way I'm so frazzled at the moment, I might inadvertently blow us up."

"He's probably still trying to get your father and brother to safety."

Matilda's eyes widened. She swallowed. "It must have been more complicated than he thought it would be. Why else would he save us from afar? He usually likes to do things in person."

"I am beyond trying to figure out Garrett. I can't wait until we can get off New Eros and I can get away from him."

"Running from him now would be a really bad idea. He's never going to let you leave him--just give in. Spending the rest of your life with someone like him isn't the worst thing that could happen to you."

Alora thought back to her last days spent on Delania. Unfortunately, she'd already had a glimpse of what the worst thing to happen to her could be. But how could she deny her heart? She didn't know if she loved Garrett enough to spend the rest of her life with him. He was a man of many mysteries. She'd never be able to break through the shields he'd erected around himself.

She moved to touch the inside wall of the ship. "Holy crap! That's hot!" Pulling her hand back quickly, she gritted her teeth together.

"I could have told you touching that was a really bad idea. When Uncle uses his

powers, he usually leaves a hot imprint. I wouldn't touch it again until he can get here and cool it off, or until the cold night air does it naturally."

"He can manipulate the temperature?"

"Of course. His magic knows almost no bounds, Alora. That's why you can't possibly think of running from him. If he's decided to possess both your body and soul, you have no choice in the matter. He will never hurt you as his mate and his wife, you will be his equal. In some rare cases, the mate of a man like Garrett can even learn how to share and harness his abilities. With your powers, I should think it would be fairly easy for you to master that task."

"Alora?" Garrett ran toward the ship, Merrick keeping a close second behind him.

"Are they in that ship? Why is it glowing red?" Merrick demanded.

"I used my powers, and since I was still in a fairly aggressive state I might have miscalculated the intensity of the magic I used."

"You think? Get them out of there! You could be slowly microwaving my twin! Do something! Now!"

He nodded his head. He didn't need Merrick to tell him twice. Alora's burgeoning fear coiled around his heart. She was beginning to suspect that something was wrong. He had to get them all out of there before they started to panic.

Harnessing his powers, he extended his arms. In one bright burst of energy they were transported out of the burning ship.

They fell to their knees in front of them. The pilot collapsed beside them.

Alora looked up at him, distaste creasing her features. "I should have known. You did that, didn't you? We could have been burned alive in there!"

"You weren't. I got here in time."

"This time you did. Don't even think about trying to help me the next time around. I'd rather take my chances. If I become one with the ground then, so be it. At least I'll have a death on my own terms."

"Falling to the ground in a ship that's losing power is what you call a dignified death? Oh, spare me," Garrett grumbled.

Merrick and Matilda embraced and then quietly left them alone in the clearing. They were returning to their parents.

Garrett had to get them off the planet. The sooner they all made a rendezvous the better. His ship wouldn't be coming to help them anytime soon as long as Gertrude was in control. But other ships were on their way. He could take to space in his magical form and reclaim the ship. New Eros was about to go right down the drain. As terror and mass chaos spread, it would only get worse. Soon, there would be no safe haven on New Eros. It would be a little planet out in the middle of nowhere that had gone straight to hell.

"You can go back with Matilda and Merrick, Garrett. I'll stay here and take my chances with the drug addicts," Alora declared.

"I don't think so. You're coming with me." He took a step toward her. She took a step back.

"What about the pilot? You'll have to take care of him," Alora pointed out.

He pointed his hand at the pilot. In one glimmering sheen of light, Steele disappeared. Her gasp made his blood chill. "What did you do to him?" she demanded.

"I transported him to safety. He's with the rest of my men and women that are still

on the planet. I don't have all night to go through the bloody third degree with you, Alora. We have to get back to Ace, Bryce, Merrick and Matilda. After that, I intend to put my ship back to rights, and then, I'd like to leave this solar system."

"I'm not going with you." She crossed her arms over her chest. He watched a shiver race through her.

"You are not used to this harsh climate. It will only get colder as the winter draws on. Spring will not come for four months. That's a long time to freeze your pretty little ass off."

"I will survive."

"You might. But I don't think your body was made to bear this kind of cold. You just aren't cut out for life on New Eros."

"There you go again trying to tell me what to do! Just lay off it, and let me get a breather from you!"

He shook his head. "You deny your heart. Even now, I can feel how aroused you are just by seeing me. Don't lie to yourself, Alora. I am going to have you, whether you think so right now or not, you will be mine."

She let out a shattering sigh. Pulling the cloak closer around her, she looked behind him. "If I go with you, will you at least take me back to Delania?"

"You never give up," he groaned.

"Not when my life is on the line. I will not give in--no matter what."

"You truly can't believe that maybe just maybe you and I could make sweet music together."

"I don't," she stated, though hesitation flared through her voice.

"That is your loss, then. Our meeting on Delania was not an accident. It was predestined. You will have to face the demons rolling around inside of you someday, Alora. You will have to eventually follow your heart."

"I will follow my heart, all the way back to Delania."

"Where you will only find heartache and grief. Your people don't want you--they never did. The Barbarians weren't there by accident. They'd been sent for. Problem was, your dear tribe didn't think they'd attack them. They'd only hired them to come and take you away from them. They thought you were an abomination. They thought you were evil. They believed you to be a monster. They didn't want you as their leader. They wanted you dead. Would you like me to continue?"

Her eyes filled with tears. He could see he'd definitely gotten to her. Now, why did he feel so damn shitty?

"How did you find this out?" Alora forced the words out of her mouth, her mouth tasted gritty inside. Her heart fell down into the pit of her stomach. Her knees wobbled. Now, it all made sense. He'd just connected the dots for her.

"I always knew." He shrugged his shoulders simply.

"You always knew?" she mimicked. "You knew all this time, and you just felt like telling me now?" her voice rose an octave. She felt like shrieking at him--she felt like going off at him like a freaking firecracker!

"You weren't ready to listen before."

She stopped. He walked on ahead of her, before turning around to stare at her in silent expectation. Resignation coiled in her belly. He knew she had no other choice but

to remain by his side. She had nowhere else to go.

"You want me to know just how futile my situation in life is. I once had everything--and now, it's all been stripped away from me. They took my entire life from me! How many of my people plotted against me? Do you know who started the mess that ultimately devastated half of my tribe?"

"From near as I can tell, it was the woman called Nadine. She started the firestorm of doubt that eventually saw the complete and utter ruination of your people. Your tribe will never be the same. After you were taken prisoner, the ones left didn't know how to rise from the ashes. I'm fairly certain that all of their bad deeds are coming back to haunt them now. You know the old saying, what comes around goes around. Karma has a nifty way of meeting out divine justice."

"I was a good leader—" Her voice hitched in her throat. She pointed at him.

"That's not good manners to point," he said sighing. "I can understand why you have such haughty ways. You were after all a once lauded leader, just like Ace was. But know this, Alora, you have fallen off your high perch. It's toppled to the ground, and with it you almost lost your dignity and your life. Do not cling to your pride--pride goeth before the fall, and you have fallen. Now you must pick yourself up. Let it all tumble behind you. Start anew. You have been reborn. Act like it." He gave her a look mingled between pity and anger.

"You knew all along. You've been stringing me along, as a matter of entertainment, is that it? You wanted to break me down until I no longer knew who I was anymore!" Her voice rose to a fevered pitch. "You wanted me to forget who I was!"

"That was done to you before I found and saved you from the horrendous conditions you were in. You obviously are having pipe dreams when it comes to your sainted planet of Delania. I found you in chains! You were covered in your own blood and that of your so-called friends. You were the most pitiful sight I'd ever seen! My heart broke for you. I knew why I had been attracted to your planet. I knew it was because your heart had somehow linked with mine! I had to save you!"

"You have me now. Do with me what you will. As you say, I have no place to call home anymore. I am a lost soul."

"No one is ever lost when they are loved!"

His shattering shout raked her ears. She stumbled backward. "Not possible. You can't possibly love me. We've known each other for a very short amount of time. To think that you could care for me..." She inhaled deeply. Her lungs burned.

"Love at first sight...at first feel is not uncommon for my kind. We are known to feel our soul mates when we are light years apart."

"That far, huh?" Her heart still raced, while her blood continued to warm in her veins. Maybe he was right. Fighting him seemed futile. She'd always believed that everything happened for a reason. One wrong turn, could be set onto the right course. Holding fast to that belief was the only way to emerge the victor out of the insanity that ruled her life. If he were her one constant, then, she would accept that, and move on. As he said, she had been reborn. As far as her tribe was concerned, she was dead.

Her head still raced. She couldn't seem to gather her thoughts. Right now, her brain felt like mush. Everything had been turned upside down on her, and she had no idea how she could possibly set it to rights. At least she now knew why help had never come for her. She knew why she'd been left to her doom with her captors. Her friends that had

died with her, had they only shared her fate because the rest of her tribe wanted to see her dead? Or had they genuinely been her friends? Licking her lips, she forced herself to move forward.

"I have no choice. I'm stuck with you," she whispered.

"I professed my love for you, and you retort by saying you're stuck with me. How romantic."

"It's true. You might think you're in love with me, but I know better."

"You do?" He raised an eyebrow at her.

"Of course. Someone of your power and majesty would never want someone like me. You probably just want to finagle your way into bed with me, and then, you'll drop me lickety split. That's as good as it gets between you and me."

"You are spouting shit out of your mouth, Alora. You have no idea what you're saying, and in a way, I can understand why. You're exhausted, frustrated to the end of your rope, and you want to eat. I can hear your stomach rumbling across the short distance you've put between us. Speaking of which...." In a blink, he was at her elbow.

He gripped it tightly, steering her onward. "Squeeze me a little tighter, and you'll leave a bloody mark," she grumbled.

"I don't leave marks on such pretty women as you. Perhaps, you're right, you do have a few things on your body that I'd like to give a few friendly squeezes, but until we get back to the ship, I'll have to curtail my passions."

"You don't think about anything but getting me into the sack, do you?"

"I'm a man, with a very sensual side. You could say I almost burn up with passion sometimes."

"Do you? Well, I can safely say that I don't want to be anywhere near you when you do that."

"Oh, I beg to differ. I don't think you'd mind at all."

Looking away from him, she tried to drag her heels to slow down their reunion with Bryce and his family.

"Why are you deliberately trying to slow us down?" he asked wearily.

"You should leave me. Here. Alone. I'll be fine. Just cut your losses and go. I'm bad luck. You don't need me bringing you undue grief. Not in the line of work you're involved in."

"I never pegged you for a woman with no self-worth. Whatever happened to that headstrong yet, sad woman I found on Delania? You were ready to fight Jim and the barbarian butchers with your last dying breath...why is now any different?"

"I am not in danger of being raped and killed by you. I am only in danger of losing my heart and soul to you--it's much different. I have more to lose."

"More? I'd say you had more to lose before. You really don't know how to tally up the most important things in your life. You think too little of yourself. Being with me for the rest of your life certainly wouldn't be as bad as what Jim would have done to you had he been given the chance."

"I still don't understand why he didn't try to--"

"There you go again. It had to do with your powers...he suspected he would catch his death if he raped you. Say what you will about his backward race, they are war mongers, but there is one thing that they hold more sacred than anything else...it's the power of superstition and Jim had that in scads."

"Catch his death?"

"From what I could gather during my short stay there, one of his friends had raped a woman like you, and while he was doing the heinous act, she cursed him. It worked. He died from her curse in a very short time after she had lost her life to his violence."

"A woman like me. That's just it. I'm not unlike my tribe. We all had powers."

"They didn't possess the sort of powers that you do. They couldn't merge with a power so strong that it could literally rob other people of breath."

"I can't do what you can do."

"Yes, you can. You just choose not to. You dampen your powers, you squelch them when you should be spreading your wings, and letting them fly out. You are being untrue to yourself."

"Oh, do shut up, you're making my headache worse."

"Make me." He smiled at her, giving her a cheeky wink, he turned his back on her. Her mouth gaped open.

"There are only two ways to shut you up."

Her voice broke the brief stillness of the night.

"I'd love to hear what you think are two ways of shutting me up."

"I can kiss you, or hit you."

"You might be able to hit me, but it would do very little in the way of damage. I'm invulnerable to physical harm."

"You are not. I knocked you out."

"Indeed. But I was never truly unconscious." He gave her a cheeky grin, his eyes glinting with his joke.

"Are you seriously telling me that you faked it?"

"A vase like the one you smashed over my head is not nearly enough force to render someone like me unconscious. I keep telling you that the formidable talents I wield are enough to bring worlds to their knees. A measly little crystal vase is definitely not enough to leave a lasting imprint on me. Actually, come to think of it, it rather tickled."

"Tickled?" She pursed her lips. "You are unbelievable. I smashed a vase over your head into a million unrecognizable pieces--and it tickled. I give up. You are so exasperating. You've had your good little set of jollies with me. You asinine idiot! So what is enough force?"

"That's for me to know, and you to hopefully not find out."

He tossed her another amused look over his shoulder. She started to pursue him. She didn't think he'd leave her alone in the dark--but then, she couldn't be sure. With him around she didn't need a torch, he gave off enough of a glow to light their way.

"Why do you glow in the dark?"

"I am a beacon of light. An angel if you will."

"If you're an angel, then I'm a bloody saint."

His snort made her bristle. "You are far from a saint, so I shall have to concede to you, I am definitely no angel. My halo is always there, but it slips out of place every so often."

He chuckled. The hairs on the nape of her neck stood on end. He stopped. Putting up his hand, he beckoned her forth.

Without hesitation or questioning him, she moved forward.

"What is it? I don't feel any people around us. My powers are slowly coming back up to full strength from when I used them last," she whispered.

"Silence." He spoke his command in a terse voice.

He glanced down at her. His eyes were filled with an intensity she recognized.

"Oh, crap," she muttered beneath her breath.

"Be quiet," he hissed. He reached for her, moving her, he shoved her behind him.

"What the hell are you..." Before she could finish her thought, he'd covered her mouth with his hand.

"So help me if you speak again, I will not be responsible for my actions. We are being spied on. You'd do well to remain quiet until I can deal with the threat that beckons at our door."

"We don't have a door. We're out in the middle of nowhere!"

In the next instant, he robbed her of breath, by locking his lips with hers. She struggled against him, finally giving into the scorching kiss.

Pushing him away, she broke their contact.

He grinned at her. She stared at him, trying to think of something coherent to say.

"Don't even think about it." He put his fingers to his lips. His eyes rolled back into his head, and flames sparked in his eyes. She tripped as she stumbled backward away from him. Terror enveloped her soul.

"Hello, Gertrude," he said calmly, almost as if he'd been expecting her.

"I was waiting to see how long it would take you to notice that I was monitoring you and your little slut," Gertrude spat.

"Slut?" she shouted into the darkness. "Come and say that to my face you bloody piece of tin shit!"

"Tin shit?" Gertrude laughed. "I am comprised of far more superior materials. I even have a few biological materials blended into my makeup. But then, I expect no less from a specimen of your rather sloppy intelligence."

"Good for you. I don't really care one way or the other. Why don't you be a brave little tin soldier and show yourself?" she challenged.

"I don't think so. I like to remain in stealth mode," Gertrude answered.

His voice touched her mind.

'She's hiding in her ship directly above us. You must remain behind me so that I can protect you should she decide to fire upon us.'

'Protect me from an attack from above? Even I don't think you're that proficient. She's in a ship for God's sake.'

'She's never seen me in my magical form. I'd warrant that the shock will be enough to throw her off track.'

'Then, be my guest. Summon your magical side. I'll just slink away into the bush over here and wait until you've finished off the crazy assed android from hell!'

'What? You are in no mood to fight?'

'Not against her. She's nuts! Which is weird since she's not human!'

'You'll have to stay with me. To leave you would be to play with fire. I have no idea if she might decide to take her chances by eliminating you before I can eliminate her.'

'I can't get that close to you when you're using your abilities. In case you've forgotten what you did to the outside of the ship you helped to land, I didn't! You made

us so bloody hot, we nearly burned up!"

"You didn't. You're still here. Don't sweat the small stuff, Alora. If you do, you certainly will drive yourself to madness."

"Small stuff? You're gambling with my life here!"

"In my hands, your life will always be safe. I will do nothing to ever place you in the line of danger. Just trust me."

"I have no reason to..." She trailed off.

She could hear Gertrude approaching. The ship she was on had humming engines. Swallowing thickly, she placed her hand in his offered one. She reactivated the psychic link. The psychic chain between them was unlike anything else she'd ever experienced. Communicating with him via telepathy seemed as natural as walking.

"Oh, what the hell. There's no turning back, there's no going forward, there's only you. I'll have to swallow my pride and suck it up. I do trust you, Garrett."

He gripped her hand in his, circling his long fingers around her hand.

"Don't fear what is about to happen. If you accept it, if you trust me, all will be well."

"Are you going to blow Gertrude all to hell?"

"I am."

"Then, I'm with you to the end, Garrett."

His features lit up. "I love the sound of you calling me by my name."

"Let's leave the sentimentality for later. Right now, I just want you to get us out of this jam, and off this planet."

"I couldn't agree more." He brought her closer to his body. She closed her eyes against the glaring light that started to halo them. His powers were being activated. She thrilled at the prospect of it, while at the same time shaking with trepidation.

Garrett looked like an angel. She opened her eyes squinting against the brilliant glare. They flew up into the air. Her heartbeat quickened when they came face to face with Gertrude's ship.

"What are you going to do, now?" Her voice was lost on the howling wind. She listened closer to the noise, and changed her mind. That wasn't the wind. That was he. He was singing. It sounded like a declaration of battle.

Her heart froze.

Gertrude stared at them through the view screen of the ship. Terror dawned across her artificial features.

Alora reveled in the feelings of Garrett's arms around her. She never wanted to forget this moment. She had an idea of what Garrett was...now; all she had to do was get him to confirm it.

The song he sang was in an ancient language that she didn't recognize. Though it sounded threatening, she wasn't scared in the slightest. She had fought Garrett for far too long.

After many battles between them, she had finally stepped away from the edge of the cliff. She knew she'd been living on the edge since her last days on Delania. Coming to terms with what had happened to her--the betrayal, the hurt, and the loathing was the only way for her to heal. Garrett had ensured that her body had healed from her injuries, but he hadn't been able to heal her soul.

Tonight, he'd put her on that path. Flames whipped around them, but they couldn't

touch her. Garrett was a being of beauty, honor and awe-inspiring power. She had never thought she of all people would be blessed to meet someone like him. He'd said she too was like him, though she couldn't quite believe that.

Gertrude powered up her weapons. Gripping tighter to Garrett, she turned to look at the android. Pure hatred burned across Gertrude's face. Here was irony, staring her right in the face. Her own people had despised her, and now, an artificial life form hated her as well. She just couldn't seem to cut a break.

The only person that didn't seem to hate her was Garrett.

She knew that Matilda was inclined to like her, but that didn't quite match what Garrett professed to feel for her.

Could he really love her as much as he claimed to?

Garrett's prelude to battle song broke off. "I am going to give you fair warning, Gertrude. Take your little ship, and hightail it away from this planet, never to threaten the ones I love again. If you persist, and you do try to fire on me, I will be forced to destroy you. And, now that I reflect upon it, rendering your parts useless and unsalvageable will give me intense pleasure."

"Magic is no match for the advanced science that built this ship."

Gertrude's voice continued booming forth from the ship. "I will destroy you and your slut pot once and for all."

"Why does she keep calling me a slut? I'm getting pretty sick and tired of it."

"Do not even think about it a moment longer. I don't think she's going to take me up on my generous offer. It looks as if we're going to have a hell of a fight on our hands," Garrett stated.

"Great. Am I going to get really hot?" Alora asked.

"I told you. I'm in full control of my powers. In my current state of concentration and control, I would be comfortable carrying a shipload of children. They wouldn't feel hot at all."

"That puts me at ease, somewhat."

She clung to him, looking below them. Her eyes widened taking in how high up they'd flown. They were farther up than she'd thought.

"Why am I still able to breath? Shouldn't the atmosphere be growing thin?"

"Hush."

She stopped her rambling, to fix her eyes once again on Gertrude's ship. In a heartbeat, Gertrude fired on them.

Chapter Eleven

Alora expected to feel pain. After a few seconds of feeling nothing but the same way she'd felt before Gertrude fired, she opened her eyes. Gertrude's ship was gone.

Blood red flames still licked around her...yet, not a single one touched her.

"Garrett?" she asked softly.

"Yes?"

"What just happened?"

"I got rid of Gertrude. I'm sorry, alas; we won't be sending her to the junk heap. There's just nothing left of her to send."

"Garrett?" she whispered.

"Aye?" He flew them through the air toward Matilda, and her family.

"What are you?"

"You already know what I am--I am an Immortal of the Hidden Magickal Realms."

"Indeed, I know all of that. What I want to know is what your magical soul is...you are a creature made of fire...yet, I don't think you are evil."

Dead silence stretched between them.

"Even though I keep telling you I work for the side of good, you keep contradicting me. I am a good man, and my magical soul also works for the side of good. Do you honestly not suspect what I am?"

"I have an idea...though it's too fanciful. You are a man."

"I am a man."

"The creature I am thinking of...is a..."

His mind gently brushed against hers, as he took the information from her.

"Phoenix." He smiled at her. "You would be correct. I am a firebird."

"But they can only be female," she said.

He groaned loudly. "Don't tell that to the many men in my family that have followed the same path as I."

"It is mystifying. You just don't follow any creed, do you?"

"My kind have always walked our own path, never conforming to the ideals of most humans. The thing with mythological creatures is that when humans encounter the real deal, they fight believing what we're really made of. They can't handle suspending their code of beliefs for the time it takes to understand us."

"I guess you've had experience with revealing your alter ego before."

Garrett's eyes grew distant. He relaxed his hold on her, despite still holding her closely. They flew over the thick forests that blanketed New Eros.

"I have only told one other woman. Ace understands what I am, but she wasn't told by me. The only other woman I ever told betrayed me, and attempted to take me into custody for the Emperor Xian. She wanted to sell me, and make herself one of the richest women in the known galaxies."

He glanced down at her. "Betrayal cuts like the sharpest knife. To feel and taste it

is to never forget it. I will carry that emotion for the rest of my life. It served as a learning experience for me. In those days, I was too impulsive, too carefree. I was inclined to think the best of humans, rather than expecting the worst. I was humbled and changed from my awful experience." Memories floated between them. Both hers and his, mingling together.

"How did you get away?" she asked, her voice shaking with emotion.

"Nothing can hold me. No amount of dark sorcery they threw at me could keep me shackled. They did not know my secret vulnerabilities, and the dark magic they wielded was not formidable enough to keep me down. I fought against my captors, and I won. But not until, I lost much of my innocence. That was when my kind enlisted me as hunter. They knew I craved vengeance, and they knew they could not keep me from taking it. The Emperor kept me in a cage protected by dark magic for years, I had a long time to think of the many ways I could and would exact my revenge."

"And, since you're telling me this story now, I suspect you got exactly what you wanted."

"I did. Justice was served to each and every person who had harmed me. I saw the life drain from the spiteful woman's eyes. I saw her dark magic fail her when she needed it most. I drove the demon in her to distraction. I defeated her."

"And the Emperor? I take it you were the one responsible for the fall of that particular dynasty."

"I was."

"They called it the Red Dawn that destroyed Emperor Xian."

"Indeed, they did."

"They saw you, in your magical form, and that's what gave that battle such an infamous name."

"Most likely."

His face lined with the sadness of many years. She wanted to stroke his cheek just to reassure herself that he was indeed real.

Her heart quickened. "Garrett...that happened over five hundred years ago."

"I know," he said simply.

Shocked, she slackened her hold on him. "I always knew you were immortal, but right now, it's hitting me full on. I won't live that long. I will die. The oldest living recorded person among my tribe was over one hundred and eighty when she died. I don't think I'll make it to that ripe old age, though."

"Join with me, and you will. Even better, embrace the magic thrumming inside of you, and you will activate your own latent immortality."

"I don't understand." She shook her head.

He sighed. "In time, you will. I must return us to my ship, first. Once there, we will have all the time we need to share what information the both of us require."

"If I am truly of your kind, why was I abandoned on Delania?"

"You aren't full-blooded. There was a time when such a thing was a shameful disgrace. It was detested to be a half-blood."

"So, your kind left me in Hell's half acre. How generous and gracious of them to do me that service."

"Now, you admit that Delania is a horrible planet. My, my, how you've changed your outlook." He pinned her with a penetrating gaze.

"You've enlightened me. I still don't understand why you think I'd look fondly upon your kind, if they were the ones that turned me away because of my unclean blood."

"Not my kind. No. The person who abandoned you on that Godforsaken rock was your human mother."

Her stomach clenched.

"Not possible."

"Very possible. She was like Ace. She desired the handsome Immortal that had chosen her as his mate. However, in that regard, she deviates away from Ace's path. At least when Ace fell pregnant she didn't panic and decide that her child was an abomination fit only for getting rid of. Be grateful that all she did was abandon you, and leave you with her sister and her husband."

"My father."

"Indeed."

"And my birth mother?"

"She still lives."

"I don't believe you."

"It's true. By now, she's become a victim of her own malicious nature. She is the Madame of a Brothel out in the Drear System."

"How do you know that my birth mother dropped me off on Delania?"

"Well, it only takes common sense to realize that."

"I have to gather my thoughts." Her head whirled. Gasping for air, she closed her eyes, and fell into a trancelike state.

Lies.

Everything she knew, everything that had defined her had been an illusion. Now she knew why her tribe had hated her so much....she hadn't been exactly like them, and the differences between she and them had created such an immense chasm that she could never hope to return to Delania. Her path was clear. She had to follow her destiny by becoming Garrett's life partner. There was no alternative. She had no other skills with which to make a living, and if she ran from Garrett, she too would probably find herself stuck in some slum somewhere...

Her destiny was being defined by need. Necessity was an awful obstacle. It molded her into a different person. In ten years time, would she like the woman staring at her in the mirror?

If she stayed the course with Garrett at least she would have the chance to like herself. If she deviated from the path--would destruction meet her at every turn? Her heart said yes, her mind said run, as soon as he released her.

Her thoughts trailed off.

Garrett lowered them to the ground.

"You can emerge from your daydream now. My ship is in orbit ready to transport us all up."

Her feet found the ground a bit unsteadily when he placed her down.

"Garrett. I have one question for you before we proceed."

His intense gaze leveled on her, making her cheeks burn.

"Aye."

She could feel that he almost knew what was she was going to ask. Was he reading her mind?

"Your thoughts are your own, for now."

He smiled.

"I...if I remain with you--if you choose to share your bed, and your life, will you let me leave whenever I want?"

His eyes went hard. The calm turned to a tumultuous storm. A red glow encased his body. Instinctively, she stepped back from him. Placing as much distance as was possible between them.

"Even now, you shrink from me. I am not the predator in your life, Alora. You must stop trying to run from life. Only then, will you not be a slave to the dark things it offers. Embrace the light."

"I walk in the light all the time. I am not an evil person."

"I didn't say you were. You just want to punish yourself all the time. You must begin to like yourself in order for you to love me."

"I asked you a question--I didn't expect to get a flipping riddle hurtled back at me."

Before she could react, he'd swept her into his arms once again. His hand gently found her breast. She squirmed. She could feel her heartbeat quickening as his touch sent warmth flowing through her. His hand wasn't trying to cop a feel. He was regulating her heartbeat. A strange almost out of this world sensation flowed through her from the tip of her scalp to the tip of her toes.

His hand trailed up her neck, and gently caressed her cheek. "Your heartbeat has the same rhythm as mine. It is preordained that we find each other. You are my soul mate. You are most definitely my magical soul mate."

Gently, he placed her on her feet. She wobbled from side to side before she found the ground beneath her legs.

"Why don't you just fly us there?"

"Because we're due to meet with Bryce and the rest of his family in exactly, thirty seconds."

Distant voices carried to them on the wind. Out of the forest, emerged Bryce, Ace, Matilda and Merrick.

"It's getting bloody cold! We should get up to the ship, before we all freeze our asses off!" Ace's lips looked as if they were turning blue. In Garrett's arms, she hadn't noticed the extreme drop in temperature. The snow stopped falling from the sky.

"The ships have arrived." Garrett's officers crowded around them.

"Ships?" She glanced at Garrett.

"I called for reinforcements before I took the landing party off my ship. I had a feeling we'd need help."

"But you have it all in hand. Everything is fine."

"Everything isn't fine." Lieutenant Mitchell glanced up at them from the weird objects he held in his hands.

"We have a problem. Ace's fleet is massing on the other side of the planet."

"My fleet was destroyed."

"Not so, apparently." Garret flexed his jaw. "I was hoping we'd get out before they figured out how to band together and strike against us."

"I guess you missed the boat on that one," Alora muttered.

"Cheeky wit will get you absolutely nowhere, Alora."

"Why don't you just take your big bad magical soul and go and annihilate all of the ships over on the other side of the New Eros?" Alora asked.

"I only use my powers that way when there is positively no other choice."

"I see. Great. I guess we're in for one hell of a battle." Alora sighed. "Can't we just have a nice quiet little night?"

"You are talking like a spoiled little brat!" Ace sidled closer to her. "You need to get some backbone, little bird. If you don't, you will not survive the role of Garrett's mate. You will drown in your own misery." Ace gave her a disgusted snort.

"For once, I can actually agree with Ace. You left your spirit back on Delania, Alora. It's high time you dig down deep and find it or else you will lose yourself. Besides, we don't have time to think of what could have been right now. Bryce, unless you'd like to do the honors, I think it's time for us to teleport back up to the ships."

"I'm still feeling too queasy to be of any use to you, Garrett. You'd best handle any of the magical matters. I'll just sit by and quietly observe."

"If that's what you want."

"It is. You're the commander of this mission, if you recall."

"Indeed, I am. I just thought I'd be hospitable."

"Thank you." Their politeness was wearing thin on her.

During Bryce and Garrett's exchange, she had time to reflect on what Ace had said about her. She could understand Ace's point of view, she'd just lost everything, too.

The heartbeat information was something she didn't need to know. It did explain the indefinable feelings she had when he was around. It also explained the tightening in her chest, the quickening of her breath--

"Alora?" Matilda whispered.

Matilda walked over to her. "You look like you've seen a ghost."

"Not a ghost. Just an avenging angel."

"He showed you what he really is, didn't he?" Matilda's eyes filled with keen interest. "I've always suspected what he is in when he joins with his magical side, but I have never had it confirmed. What is he, really?"

"I don't think I'm at liberty to divulge your uncle's secret. If it is for you to know, he will tell you."

"I always believed him to be a firebird. That runs in his side of the family. My father favors his mother's side, and he is related to Uncle Garrett through his father...so...."

"You should stop, now, Matilda."

"I should stop now because I've made the right guess?"

Alora remained silent. "I'll take your silence as an affirmation. It's obvious, really, when I think of it. He has that glorious red hair, and those cognac brown eyes..."

"Alora, Matilda. Come, it is time for us to teleport up to the ship," Garrett commanded.

Matilda touched her hand softly, leaning forward to whisper in her ear.

"He's got a frightful temper, but his heart is as good as gold. As good as yours, in fact. Please, don't keep denying him. It's really not worth it. You will be miserable for the rest of your life, if you keep pushing him away. I'm only telling you what history of my father's kind has already proven. I've been well schooled in the art of love when it comes to how it impacts my father's side of the family. It will eat you alive if you don't join with

him. He, in turn, will continue to falter in his path, if you deny him. He will be half of what he is meant to be."

"Matilda. I am starting to think you are right in your sage advice. I'd already come to that conclusion before you gave me your counsel."

"Well, it's about time," Matilda sighed.

Alora shouldered her way through the landing party that was about to beam back up. Finding Garrett, she stood in front of him.

"This is it. I'm finally going to embrace my destiny."

He smiled at her, for one brief second, she basked in the glow of his loving glance. And, then, in the next instant the fragile crystal bridge building between them shattered.

"I think you should keep your destiny to yourself, Alora. I've decided that you're happier when you're alone. I'm not going to beg for your hand anymore. This is done. We are completely and utterly through. There's no going back, and indeed, now, there is no going forward. End of story."

The finality of his words rang like a gong in her head.

"Come again?" Blood drained from her face.

"I won't take you if you're just settling. That's not very romantic. It's definitely not something to base the rest of our lives together on. That's too heavy of a gambit. You will only ever be half-mine. Your heart and mind will always wonder if you had chosen correctly. That's not a chance or a burden I want weighing on me night and day. Eternity, my dear Alora is a freakish long time."

She wet her lips, swallowing thickly. Her hands turned cold, and clammy. All of the warmth ebbed from her body. Desperation filtered into her psyche.

"That's that, then." The desperation in her voice made her shiver.

"That's that." He turned away from her. How easily he literally gave her the cold shoulder. "We will drop you off on the next habitable planet."

"Not Delania."

"That planet really isn't a stop on my way home. I'm sorry. Once I take care of the fleet that's massing to attack my ships, I can't very well go out of my way to take you back home, can I? You're just a traveler onboard my ship. Unless, you have anything that I want, I suggest you return to the ship, mind your own business and wait until I tell you we've gotten there. You have nothing to trade with; you have no money of your own. You are nothing better than a user and a beggar."

The cruelty of his words hit her in the gut. She couldn't believe how he could go from hot to cold so quickly and seemingly effortlessly.

"You're a bastard of the foulest sort, Garrett." Her broken whisper sounded raw to her ears.

"No. I'm merely facing the fact that you can't. You don't love me. Even though I fell in love with you the day I first set eyes on you, you didn't. I understand why. I mean I only saved you from a fate worse than death, but really, what does that matter in the grand scheme of things? For you, in Alora's world, nothing is meant to be. You won't or you can't believe in the same faith that I hold."

"Then your decision is written in stone," she said, her voice faltering.

"If you like. That sums it up for me." He grinned, flourished his hand and in a crack of light a small piece of flat stone appeared in her hand. It read,

Alora Bishop is no longer the intended mate of the Immortal, Garrett Firestorm.

"Thank you, you son of a bitch." She didn't know what to say. It looked and felt like stone but it weighed nothing at all.

"Really, Alora. You shouldn't bring my mother into the equation. She's not a bitch at all, though, she could blow you away--you are definitely not the sort of woman she would approve of." He winked at her, delighting in the hurt he was causing her. She wanted to hit him, what good would it do? He was invulnerable to all harm. Sourness lined her mouth.

She slipped it into a pocket that just appeared on the cloak she wore.

"I would like to go back to the ship," she muttered.

Her heart dulled. Her breath felt as if she'd been holding it forever. His cruel words were meant to punish her. With every word, she felt as if she'd been slapped. The pain was almost worse than real physical damage.

"If this is the last time we see each other. I would just like to say, farewell, Alora Bishop. May you live a long and light-filled life. I hope you find the love that will enrich your days and warm your nights." Bitterness crept out of his voice. For one scant moment, his loving tone colored his words.

"I thank you." She drew in a sharp shuddering breath. "I, too, wish you great joy and that you'll find the love that will bring you an eternity of happiness."

"Not bloody likely," he snorted. "Either way, we leave now. We must go back to my flagship." The same cockiness and pugnacious attitude returned. Her stomach twisted.

The crowd moved away from her. Feeling isolated and alone, she waited for the familiar touch of Garrett's magic to wash over her. When it did, she finally let the tears she'd been holding in spill freely down her cheeks.

Garrett and she were officially done. And, she had it written in stone.

Chapter Twelve

"Why did you do that to her?"

They'd arrived safely back on the ship. Garret had sent Alora back to a room made just for her.

He gave Bryce a look of annoyance.

"I asked you a question, Garrett, dearest cousin mine."

"And I'm choosing not to answer you."

"You crushed her. You've dashed all of her dreams against the rocks. I hope you are proud of yourself. You know as well as I do that once our kind finds love we can't ever find love again. We are joined by a psychic chain to the woman we fall in love with. It's out of our control. You not only sealed her own fate into that of a miserable one, but you also sealed your own. You even had to be so cruel as to give her the statement written in stone! Of all the prickish things to do! Sometimes, you just act like a fuckwit."

"You should be back in your chambers with the love of your life, Ace."

"Ace is stewing for the battle ahead of us. Get ready for her to come storming out onto the bridge like an avenging Fury ready to mete out justice when she finds out from Matilda what you've done. Shame on you, Garrett. You have disgraced our kind."

As Bryce finished his sentence his prediction concerning Ace came true.

"How dare you stick me back in that room! Garret Firestorm, you have gone too far!" Ace shouted, storming onto the bridge.

"It was a well furnished, well decorated set of rooms with all of the amenities you could possibly dream of." His voice was colder and terser than he'd wanted it to be.

"Well, you've just showed me how much of an ass you are, why don't you just continue to prove your point? I don't care that you threw away your future, Garrett, but my daughter is up in arms right now about what you did to her new friend, and I honestly can't say I blame her."

"You don't have a right to talk. You yourself treated Bryce unfairly."

"No, she didn't, actually. She shared my bed with me, she gave me two beautiful children, and though she kept trying to push me away, we always managed to find our way back into each other's arms. The two of you couldn't even get that far."

"Thank you, my love," Ace murmured.

"You're welcome, my love."

"I'm going to gag," Garrett muttered beneath his breath.

"Garrett, the fact of the matter is that you've behaved like an absolute ass!" Bryce nearly shouted looking at him in distaste.

"Sire, the fleet approaches. Shall we move into defensive positions?" Mitchell asked.

"I should think so. Aislynn, if you don't remove yourself from the bridge right now; I shall be forced to use magic on you. And this time around, I will make sure you can't leave your room."

"You might be the master of this ship, Garrett, but there will come a time when

you won't be able to order me around. Mark my words. When that day comes, I shall have the supreme satisfaction of telling you to fuck off!" Ace yelled.

Bryce winced. "Go now, Ace. Or he will make sure that you aren't just a guest here, he'll make you a prisoner."

"And you'd let him?" Ace demanded.

"I'd let him lock you in our chambers, then, you wouldn't be able to get away from me!" Bryce gave her a wicked smile.

Garrett's stomach churned again.

Ace smiled. Her eyes lit up. "Just make sure that you try to salvage some of my ships. I'd like my armada of ships to emerge somewhat unscathed from the battle ahead."

"I fight my battles the way I see fit for my crew and my ships. Get out, now!" Garrett ordered.

"I'd heed his second warning, Ace, darling."

Ace gave him a glare that should have struck him dead. Instead, he gave her a cheeky smile to further annoy the shit out of her.

Pivoting abruptly on her heel, she stormed off the bridge, as quickly as she'd blown onto the bridge.

"I see I'm going to get my ears full when I retire to our chambers. As it is, they are already burning!" Bryce sighed.

"That's nothing new to you, though is it, Bryce?"

Bryce gave him a shrug. "Do you think I'm dumb enough to give you the answer you're fishing for? Trust me, living with you pissed off at me, is a hell of a lot easier than living with her pissed off at me."

"You're probably right. I pity you."

"You shouldn't."

"No. I do. I threw off my shackles, and you're in it for the rest of well, eternity." He laughed.

"I'm in it for the long haul because I love Ace just as much as you love Alora. You just can't seem to face it. The sooner you ask for her forgiveness, the sooner you'll be out of the living hell you've just jumped into. This fight ahead of us is nothing compared to the way you're going to feel tortured. If you think you feel miserable now, just wait until you've gone a few years without having her as your mate. The feeling of hopelessness will only increase."

"Stop it," Garrett instructed.

"Stop what? I'm not doing anything."

"You are rubbing it in."

"Well, you'll thank me for it, later. Go to her tonight, after the battle, and see if she'll have you back."

"I gave her the stone. All she has to do is break it and everything will be as it should be."

"Did you tell her that?"

"She only needs to turn it over to find out."

"And you really think she'll do that? She looked like she'd been hit by a ton of bricks when you gave that to her. Don't think for one minute that she'll be thinking clear headed enough to flip it over to see the other side."

"That's her loss, then."

Their conversation was thrown off course when the first shot was fired. It hit their shields making the ship rock from side to side.

"Here we go," Bryce muttered.

"Let's finish this before it barely has time to start," Garrett said, giving the official command to his crew.

"Mother!" Matilda exclaimed.

Alora sighed, staring up at the family portrait of Bryce, Aislynn and their children. Unbelievably, Aislynn looked as regal as the position she'd formally held on New Eros. Alora envied her for her beauty--and now, she envied her for the family she would never have. The sinking sensation in the pit of her stomach told her that she'd find no other man like Garrett. She had no one to blame except for herself. It was all of her own making.

"Well, he's a certified jackass!" Ace sputtered, still fuming.

"Father?" Matilda asked unbelievably.

"No, Matilda." Ace sighed. "Your father isn't that bad. He'd never obtain certifiable position. I am referring to your man, Alora."

"He isn't mine anymore—in fact, I'm not sure that he ever was mine." She sighed.

"We're all doing an awful lot of sighing, when we should be strategizing," Ace said.

"I don't think I follow you, mom."

"Of course you don't, dearest. Why don't you go and see where your brother has escaped to? If he's on the bridge, you drag his butt back to the gaming room. The two of you can play a good old game of magical poker."

"But you forbade us to play that two years ago."

"I've reconsidered. I think I should become a bit more liberal with you now that the two of you are getting older. Besides, for once, I'd like to see someone best your father." She winked at Matilda.

"You are just trying to get rid of me. There's something you want to talk about with Alora that you think I shouldn't hear. Well, fine. I'll get to find out when you're done, right? You always relent." Matilda scrunched her nose playfully at her mother.

"Go and find your brother, Matilda."

"Yes, mother." She bowed playfully to her mother and dashed out of the room.

"What could you possibly want to talk about with me?"

Alora got up off the sofa she'd been sitting on, and made for the doorway. Now that Matilda was gone, there was no reason for her to stay in their living chambers. She had to return to her own small quarters.

"You won't leave until we've said our piece. I didn't know if you were made of the stuff that you have to be made of in order to live with an Immortal, but now, I'm reconsidering. Garrett and I always rub each other the wrong way. However, that doesn't mean I hate him, and wish to see him suffering. He will suffer unless the two of you become mates. Mark my words. If there's one thing I know, I know about how love works between the males and females of their kind."

"But you aren't of their kind."

She smiled. "My great-great-grandmother was. Her blood was enough to linger in my veins and call to Bryce. He answered the homing beacon I'd put out for him, just as

Garrett answered the one you'd put out in your time of need."

"No."

"Yes." Aislynn reached for her hand, gently pulling her back to the sofa. She motioned for her to sit down. Obliging, she sat.

"There. Now, you stay here while I get us something to nibble on from the kitchen. I have big plans for you, my dear. Tonight, you are going to rock Garrett's world, and with a little coaching from me, he won't ever let you out of his sight, again!"

She scurried away, giving Alora the time to check out the rest of the room. Matilda had been chattering away so much that she'd only really been able to look at the portrait. Now, she could investigate every last piece of furniture in the room. It looked as if the room had been furnished to match the décor of Aislynn's palace. Had Garrett or Bryce's magic been responsible for this?

"I see you're admiring Bryce's handiwork. He's equipped the entire suite to work for the inhabitants. In short, it's been enchanted. The kitchen is a marvel in itself! I never allowed him to do this to my palace, and I see I was gravely mistaken in that. I just went out there for something to eat and asked the kitchen to make it! It did!"

Aislynn placed a food-filled tray on the table in front of them. "There's coffee and tea there, whatever suits your palette, and a veggie tray, a roast beef sandwich for each of us, and for pudding, we have a cherry cheesecake."

She smiled at her. "What is that?" Alora pointed to the sachet that sat near the tea and coffee pot.

"That, my dear, is how you shall be conquering Garrett tonight."

"I don't understand."

She smiled at her. "My great-great-grandmother was a Cupid."

"What?"

Aislynn heaved another pregnant sigh. "Darling, do follow what I'm saying. When you were back on New Delania did the heat get to you?"

"No. But it got to several of my friends. I was dragged across the desert in chains...hitched to the back of a wagon."

"A harsh ordeal by the sound of it, and yet you survived. I would think that's probably what attracted your Garrett. Do you think there was a time when you stopped breathing?"

"I don't know. I've never felt so dreadful in all of my days. I thought I was dying."

"Then, you probably did. That explains it now." She nodded knowingly.

"Excuse me?"

"That is one way to call out to our predestined mates. When our heart stops beating, it instinctively calls out for the psychic chain that exists between us. When it does that, you feed off your mate's immortality, latently activating your own immortality."

"Then, I did die. How many times did I die?"

"Who knows? Only Garrett might be able to tell you that. We have nine lives before our mate can come to claim us. Nine lives outside of his home realm that is. Let's hope that if you're going for your tenth time, you don't get killed until Garrett can take you back to his realm."

"It is your realm as well."

"Not really. I'm not a full-blood. I am quite certain however, that I will be able to

peacefully live out my days there. If I must. You are leading me away from our course, Alora. You must heed the words I have for you. Eat up, you'll need your strength tonight."

"What do you mean?"

"Our blood is diluted. Mine more than yours; hopefully, you should have just enough human blood to stave off the effects of the love dust for a little while."

"Love dust?"

"How do you think my great-great-grandmother settled New Eros? She had a plan. She was a bit rogue from her kind, and she didn't want to keep helping others fall in love. She craved power, she craved excitement, and so she knew that this planet would give her what she wanted. She ruled for many, many, years until she could no longer find any interest in New Eros anymore. When that time came, she left, and to my knowledge she's been wandering the stars ever since. I might meet up with her someday. I might not. Matilda, I think would get quite the kick out of it. Meeting up with your great-great-grandmother is something only humans can dream of." Her eyes glistened. "Now then, you must learn all about the love dust, and how it can serve you. You need to reclaim the love that is rightfully yours to have until the end of time. You can't go down without a fight. You will win this battle. I always knew that Bryce would never test me the way Garrett has tested you. And in doing so, he has served you a grievous blow. You must know that he was forced into that corner. And though he is misled in his judgment, he thinks it's the best thing for you. Skewed though his judgment might be, he still thinks he's doing the right thing--the only thing."

"How do I use that?"

"You put it into a drink of his, and if you can't get him to drink something, you simply sprinkle him with it."

"But it was from a Cupid. It won't work on him if it's from his own realm."

"A cupid's magic works on everyone, their own kind, especially. It works as a devious aphrodisiac between true soul mates. For humans, Cupids manufactured special arrows that would place a shot of the love dust right into the human they targeted, leaving no injury other than the feeling like they'd been pricked by something. That sensation quickly faded leaving the glow of new love in their hearts and in their souls."

"This is a lot to take in."

"I know. Albeit, you must digest it all. If you use that love dust correctly, you will never have to worry about being separated from Garrett again."

"I will not entrap him."

"I shouldn't go that far. It's a love trap, not something so devious as a murder plot."

"I know, yet, it's still a trick, isn't it?"

"Listen, Alora. Garrett has not played fairly with your emotions for the last few days. I say, you even the score with him. I can see the spark of love still in his eyes. Besides, as my mother used to say, all's fair in love and war."

"What if he gets wind of my intentions?"

"He won't even suspect a thing. If there's one thing I know about the males like Bryce and Garrett, when aroused, they have a sexual appetite like no other. And, with this pinch of love dust you can't go wrong."

"I'm not up to it."

"Yes, you are. Get some backbone, and get to the task at hand. He's serious about dropping you off on the nearest habitable planet, and before you both know it; he will have ruined both of your lives. You've put the nail in the coffin, and now, he's damn well making sure that he drives it in."

"He's being spiteful."

"And you were being a downright ninny when you kept pushing him away and turning him off. Hot and cold isn't the way to go when you are in the midst of a courtship."

"He wasn't courting me."

"Yes, he was. In his own way, he was trying to get under your skin."

"He rescued me and then..." her voice trailed off. The recollection of her rescue at his hands brought back a wealth of emotions that made her misty eyed. "He was so tender with me."

"Indeed. And, he's also revealed to you his magical soul and told you his somewhat spotted history, I take?"

"Yes."

"He's bared his soul to you, and you reciprocated by giving him a swift kick in the arse. I say, you make up for all of your spoiled little bratty behavior. He appreciates that you've had a hard time of it, but all of us have not sailed through life. Even me, with my royal title and my royal bank account. I have suffered losses that would make even you soften your heart toward me. No matter. In comparison, your trials seem to outweigh my own. Yet, here you still sit ready to foray into another day. Don't waste your time, and let him get away from you. Do what I'm telling you to, and secure yourself a lifetime of immeasurable happiness."

The ship swayed again. Their tea sloshed around in the cups. "I wish they'd get the battle over with already. Space battles can be so tedious." Ace rolled her eyes, daintily taking another sip of her tea.

"What happened to the other things that your great-great-grandmother had when she came to settle New Eros?"

"She took it all with her. Every last bit of her magical supplies, leaving me only with a few kegs of this love dust. Do you think she could have left me with her magic wand and bow and arrows? I think not. I have a spell book in my possession, but the only ones that can make any sense of the gibberish in it, are my children. Unfortunately, Matilda says that spell casting really isn't something she cares to dabble in at the present time. Children." She sighed.

"What if something goes wrong?"

"Nothing will go wrong. You worry too much, Alora. Honestly, take it in your stride. You smack him up with this love dust, and you seduce him. Simple as one, two, three."

"And, here's the kicker. What if I'm a little out of my element?"

"Well, if you think he'll burn you when he's in the throes of passion...Ah. I see. I get what you are saying...you are a little naive when it comes to the sport of love. I understand. Most fortunate, this will only make him want you more. Garrett has a thing for the virginal type. No worries. The love dust will lead the way, when you take it, it will help you to know just what to do. Call it a little voice of suggestion--this voice will guide you and tell you what you need to do. Listen to it, and you'll have one satisfied

lover."

"I just don't know."

"Do you want him to ditch you on the nearest planet? Which, by my calculation is a planet that has a horrid winter. Of course, they all live inside in environmentally controlled domes, but really, I just don't think you'll like living in an icy atmosphere for eight months of the year. They really don't get a summer, and their spring, doesn't even get warm enough to bloom flowers!"

"No. I can't go there." Alora shuddered.

"I was thinking you'd have that reaction. Heed my words, my little butterfly, and you shall soar to new great heights."

"What if I just apologized?"

"Apologize? I don't think so. He'll only think you're doing it because you want to stay in the lap of luxury. He'll never think you're being genuine."

Draining the last drop of tea, and swallowing her final bite of food, she reached for the sachet filled with the love dust. Opening it up, she looked inside. It was a dark purple color. It looked like a bag full of crushed amethysts.

"Do be careful. If you sprinkle us with that, I'll be going to drag Bryce off the bridge, and you'll be beside yourself, because until the battle is over, nothing will remove Garrett from the bridge."

Standing up, she stretched her legs. "Thank you, Ace. I just hope this doesn't make it even worse for me and Garrett."

"Use it just as I've instructed and he won't know what's hit him."

"The question, is, when I use it on me, will I know what's hit me?"

"Just feel the love, and all will be well."

"I just need to be a lover not a fighter."

"Hey, better you than me. Every single word exchanged between Garrett and I somehow turns into an argument."

Holding the sachet delicately in her hand, Alora walked to the door, exited Ace's family suite, and headed toward her own quarters. Suddenly, she thought better of it, and headed to Garrett's quarters. She could only hope he'd left the door unlocked.

Chapter Thirteen

Alora had gotten in, and now all she had to do was wait for him to come back. By the way the battle seemed to be faring, she might just be waiting all night.

His personal chambers were stuffed full of antiques. She recalled the bedroom area when she'd last been here. She hadn't thought that there had been room for a sitting room, and kitchen. She'd been mistaken. He had to have used his magic to conceal the other rooms from her.

Now, she could get a glimpse into his real life. Even though antiques crowded his sitting room, she couldn't find any personal mementos. No holo photos or still photographs. Nothing to say that he owned this room. Nothing to say that he had family connections or that he had people who cared about him. Nothing to say that he was a normal man.

But that was just it. Garrett wasn't a normal man, and the more she kept deluding herself that he was, the worse off she would ultimately be. He wasn't human. He never would be the kind of man that she'd always dreamt of. He was better. Her heart thrummed in her chest as the stars aligned in her heart. Had she fallen hard for him?

She swallowed.

She could sense his psychic presence edging toward the chambers. Clutching the sachet of love dust even tighter, she debated running into the kitchen. Should she try to serve it to him in a drink, or would he grow suspicious?

She was acting like a bloody fool! Ace's plan just wasn't for her. She wasn't the type to seduce a man.

All bets were off when the door to his chambers opened. His tired visage transformed immediately when he caught sight of her. Oh, yeah, he looked pissed.

"What are you doing in my chambers?" He stormed into the room, literally filling the space with his presence.

She stood up straighter, holding her hand down so that he hopefully wouldn't notice the sachet she held.

"I think we need to straighten out some unfinished business between us."

"I disagree. It's all been settled. We've just jumped to hyperspace. We'll be arriving at the nearest habitable planet in less than fourteen hours. I suggest you get some sleep. You'll need it. You have an exciting time ahead of you. You'll need to get yourself settled on the planet I'm dropping you off on, finding a new place to live will be tiring."

"I'm not leaving."

"That's a bad idea." He continued to bear down upon her, almost making her lose her resolve.

Almost.

His presence might be formidable but she doubted that he would actually hurt her. Her breathing quickened.

"You're trying to hide something from me." His consciousness brushed lightly against hers. A pain behind her temple erupted as she attempted to hold him at bay.

"You have no right to press into my mind anymore."

He drew back almost as if she'd slapped him soundly on the face.

"I apologize. You're quite right." His hands went to her balled up fists. "You are full of tension." He looked like he wanted to reach out to her. Instead, she surprised him by reaching out to him with her free hand.

Her touch made him jolt.

"Why are you being so hard with me?"

As her tongue rolled over the word hard, he looked like he was going to lose it. A muscle in his jaw twitched.

"Why are you here? You don't seem as if you are in the mood to talk, and if that's all that you wanted in the first place, you should save yourself a world of grief by returning to your own chambers. I've taken the liberty of making sure that some monetary funds are transmitted into a banking account for you on the planet that you now know as your new home."

"I don't want to leave you."

His eyes flamed with pent up desire. When he next spoke, his voice turned hoarse.

"That is no longer your choice to make. I gave you time to make your choice, and you kept throwing it back into my face time and again. I'm not a stupid man, Alora. I know when I'm bested."

"I want you."

In one whirling moment, she'd opened the sachet and grabbed a handful of love dust. When she threw it in his face, some of backfired on her. It went up her nose, tickling her eyes. She sneezed, and sneezed again, going into a sneezing jag that didn't let up until she'd sneezed at least eight times.

He coughed once, twice, three times.

"What the hell was that?" Outrage gradually faded away, and when she finally got to straighten out of her sneezing jag, she was met with the look of passionate fire gleaming in his eyes.

She drew back. He looked like he was ready to eat her up. Closing her eyes, she swayed from side to side, while she was hit with a dizzying sensation. It lasted for about two minutes and then disappeared.

"Are you okay? You look as if you're going to fall down."

His hands reached out to grip her beneath her armpits. She sagged into his embrace, willing him to pull her close. "Hold me." Her words were spoken as a command, and under the effects of the love dust he was unable to deny her.

He brought her solidly against his rock hard chest. The sensation of his muscles rubbing and straining against her tightly aroused breasts made her want to scream. The love dust was making her see little tiny pink, red and white hearts dancing around the room. "Oh, damn."

"Are you feeling better?"

"Oh, yeah," she murmured. Her eyes shut for the briefest of moments, she could remain like this folded within his comforting embrace for the rest of time. Shaking her head, she tried to rattle some sense back into her befuddled brain. "You smell like the cinnamon buns that were brought through to my tribe on traveling caravans every spring."

"Is that a good thing?"

"It is. Why do you always smell like cinnamon? It's a scent I always notice whenever we're alone together."

"I guess it's just my scent. I don't think any other person really picks up for it save for you. I've never had anyone else remark on it before."

"Really?" She looked up at him. His eyes seemed a little cloudy. Could that be from the love dust she'd slammed him with? Not only had she doused him, but she'd given herself more than a generous dose as well.

"It is intoxicating for you?"

"It does make me feel a little aroused," she admitted.

"That's probably why. Since you're the only woman meant for me." He stopped short, suddenly realizing the gravity of what he'd just said.

"You don't want me to leave you in fourteen hours, do you? You want me to stay here and be your mate for the rest of our lives." Her voice sounded hypnotic. She believed what she was saying, her voice made her believe it, she could only hope it was lulling him into a state of submission as well.

"Stop it, Alora. You're making me feel things I've been trying to suppress."

"Don't suppress those feelings. Let them all out. Seduce me, Garrett. Claim me as your own. Relent to the driving impulse that makes you want to relieve me of all my clothes. Let us bend each other to our wills--to our wants!"

"No." His control was slowly slipping. All she had to do was encourage him a bit more. She ran her hand over his face. He shuddered beneath her light touch.

"You smell like cinnamon, will you taste like cinnamon as well? When we kissed before, I never really paid any attention. Now, I will savor you...and I will savor you slowly. Don't you want to reacquaint yourself with how I taste?"

"I already know. You smell and taste like sweet honey."

"I've already asked you to seduce me, why aren't you making love to me already?"

"I won't be the one to make the first move. I made the mistake of acting like that before...once bitten, twice shy is all I'm going to say on that particular subject."

She rubbed her body against him again. She could feel that he was aroused. Provocative images of his naked body filtered into her mind's eye almost as if she were having a sort of a vision.

"The Psychic Chain between us is going to make this very interesting, should we continue. I've never seduced a woman bonded to me the way you are. In all of the other instances, I was just having sex. Pleasure was given and pleasure was taken. Our joining will be different. We will connect on various different levels, emotionally, being the greatest one. If you don't truly love me now, you will have no choice after we have made love."

"I know...I think I've always known, but right now, right at this moment, I can feel something starting to ignite between us. The spark will only continue to foster a connection between us. I've fought that from happening up until now, Garrett. I was wrong--I'm admitting that I was at fault. Please, don't punish both of us for my folly."

"I would never punish you. I thought I was saving you from me. You must understand, Alora. Being with me will not be easy. It will have great rewards, but being my mate is an all-consuming role to play. You will also be exposed to my magical soul. I won't be able to hold it back when we are in the throes of passion...and there is one other thing you must be warned about. If you possess a magical soul, it will emerge while you

are in the brink of ecstasy."

"What could I be?"

"I have no idea."

A short little thrill went through her. "I've never belonged anywhere before... Finding you was a miracle, or in fact, you finding me. You are my hero, Garrett, and though I've tried to throw you away like something unwanted, you aren't. I want you. I've been besotted with you since we first met. I never wanted to admit it, thinking like everything else good in my life it would eventually slip away. But you aren't going to leave me, are you?"

He twined his fingers through hers. The sachet dropped to the floor. He stared at it, frowned and then looked back up at her. "Did you honestly slam me with love dust?"

"Yes."

His mouth crooked into a dangerously sexy smile.

"Is that why I feel like I'm going to burn up with an insatiable sexual hunger right now? I will have you know that it's taking all of my bloody willpower to hold myself back from ravishing you silly!"

Her body thrilled at his whispered promise.

"Is that a promise or just a suggestion?"

"It's a promise, if you'll have me with open arms." She took a few steps back from him flinging her arms wide open.

"Here I am, ready and willing."

He came toward her, lifted her into his arms, and raised her high above his head. A reddish glow shot around the room. The glow of his love, and her love combined. He pressed his mouth to the valley between her breasts.

A guttural moan eased from her. She threw back her head, twining her hands in his thick red hair. Power emanated from him in waves, and in return her own power mingled and danced with his own. She'd never felt so liberated.

"Take and accept all that I am." His voice filled with husky passion, making her skin tingle with expectation.

He held her in his arms and walked her into his bedchamber. His mouth sought and found hers again, and then he placed her gently down upon the soft mattress.

"You quite literally take my breath away," he murmured.

She reached out for him, helping to ease him out of the shirt he wore.

"The battle," her breath grew ragged. "You did finish it, didn't you?"

"You bet your beautiful ass I did. Ace is now surveying her salvaged ships. We'll go back and wrestle control of the planet away from the revolutionaries as well, once more reinforcements arrive."

"Good. Let's not talk about your work anymore, I want to spend the rest of the night enjoying the love between us, not thinking about the battles that lie ahead of us."

When he kissed her again the strong taste of cinnamon filled her mouth. She sighed, giving into the glorious feelings bombarding her in unrelenting waves.

"In this light, your hair looks like it has an amethyst sheen to it." He smiled at her, releasing her long black tresses from the tight braid. It flowed out across her shoulders, haloing part of her face.

"I've had people tell me that before. I think that's part of the reason why my tribe wanted to disown me. I wasn't normal enough for them, and now that you've explained

my entire lineage to me, I understand."

"There are those of my kind that have purple hair. Pink hair, blue hair, and all the colors of the magical rainbow. Aye, these were all hair colors given to them naturally. How remarkable that you would get the purple hair."

"Black."

"I have a sneaky suspicion that by the time the night is through, it just might turn completely amethyst-colored. You'll be a beauty for the eyes, Alora."

She pulled away from him, as another jolting sensation hit her out of the blue. "I feel so strange." Her pupils dilated. Images swam before her eyes. She sank back onto the bed, trying to gain her bearings. His touch brought her back, allowing the memories that nearly overwhelmed her to gradually fade away.

She felt the ground beneath her swaying. "Is the bed moving?"

"Aye. It's our magic, quite mystifying since we haven't even moved past foreplay yet, perhaps we haven't even gotten that far."

A delicious scene of him chained to the bed entered her mind's eye, and purple magic ripped through the air.

"How the hell?" He was laid out spread-eagled on the bed. She looked at him, perplexed.

"What did I do? Not that I'm complaining, mind you."

"What did you do? You used some of your Immortal magic on me, that is what you did! As long as you were only calling upon the powers of your mother's family--since evidently, you have human witch in you somewhere, you couldn't affect me, but now, well, now you're doing one bloody good job of it! Let me go, Alora!"

"I don't think so." She crawled toward him on the bed. "You look mightily attractive that way." She touched his bare chest, watching with delight as his muscles rippled, with his sharp intake of breath.

"Release me, Alora." He looked ready to do some damage.

"Why? You're just right where I want you!"

"That's the damnable love dust talking! You are going too far...."

"They aren't real chains, Garrett. They're only magic mist. You could probably break them if you tried..."

"I--" He smiled. "Your magic is trying to manifest itself. Perhaps, I am wrong--I should let you have your way with me, however you see fit. I'll just sit back and enjoy the ride, shall I? We should see just what sort of magical soul you've been gifted with."

"I feel so liberated," she mused.

"Again, that's your magic fusing with the love dust. It will cause you to feel a myriad of emotions, least of which will be the sensation of being unstoppable. Conquer me, if you must. I'll not stop you. I like a strong woman, as long as she can put up with an equally strong man."

"I think I can take all of you--your powers, and your body."

She kissed him, gently touching his face once more. She studied his eyes, the flicker of his magic sparked inside of the cognac brown depths. She could even see the silhouette of a phoenix rising from the ashes in his pupil.

Drawing in her breath sharply at the awe-inspiring sight, she molded her lips to his once again, taking his magic into her body, and in return, allowing him to taste her own.

Now she knew what she was--she finally had a place to call home.

The love dust was indeed affecting her mind, and giving her the inspiration to carry forth with her seduction of Garrett. Where she normally would have been clueless, the magic of the dust was providing her with all of the answers she needed. A force beyond her was in the drivers seat, and it was shocking Garrett to the extreme. Now, he would know that she wanted him--he would not be able to deny her any longer. Come what may, he could never question why she'd decided to spend the rest of eternity with him.

"Garrett, I love you." The simply spoken testament sounded so right coming out of her mouth. Sparkles of light shot out around them, exploding around the room. Her magic and his mingled in a blinding array that made her almost close her eyes. Before Garrett could react again, she'd straddled his large body.

"I can't believe that any force in the galaxy once kept you imprisoned."

"I exacted my revenge, do not fret." He leaned forward on the bed, straining against her magical bonds.

Their lips met once more. The fire in the pit of her belly, started to snake upwards. She wanted to feel his naked body pressed against the length of her own bare body. Her breathing became ragged, as was his.

Their sexual scents collided creating an enticingly erotic perfume that flooded their senses, making them reel with desire.

She could see the craving in his eyes, and she knew hers probably mirrored his. She couldn't stop the strong sensations rocking her to her very core, the love dust was affecting her greatly, and yet, it wasn't the only driving factor. Not only was she drugged with magic aphrodisiac, but she was also high on the effect of true love.

Her heart quickened whenever Garrett was near, her body trembled in anticipation of his touch--and her soul was awakening to the love he professed for her--if only she hadn't thrown it back in his face, like a handful of dirt.

"I'm sorry."

Her sincere confession stunned them both. Leaning forward, she pressed her lips longingly against his. His tongue met hers--she reveled in the feeling of power swirling around her. Her magic was being called forth. She knew it would rush out of the dam as she continued to make love to Garrett.

"I'm a little afraid of what I might become. What if it's hideous? That will definitely spoil the mood." She forced out a shaky laugh.

"You will not transform into your magical soul. We always retain our human bodies while in the middle of mating. If I were to transform into a Phoenix or even cocoon my human body inside the protective shell of my magical soul, while making love to a woman it would, I imagine, distress them greatly."

She laughed, his laughter followed. Looking at the magical chains, she closed her eyes and strained to release him from his bonds.

"The chains will not budge."

"That's probably because I'm holding you back from letting me go. Explore the newfound surge of power you're feeling. I'm okay with it. Really."

His smile made her press her mouth to his again. She edged her hand down to rub it against the muscled hardness of his abdomen.

"You must really work out to keep this shape. I'm afraid I will be put to shame by

you."

"Never." The throatiness of his vow made her toes curl.

"I'm an amateur at this...I'm trying to get you all hot and bothered--"

"Not try...succeeding."

She pressed a light and gentle kiss to his chest. The taste of cinnamon lingered on her lips. Sweetly intoxicating yet, just spicy enough to counteract the fire. This man was full of fire--literally.

She looked to his trousers. "I'd like to see if the lower half of your body matches your torso." She gripped his waistband wishing with all of her might that his trousers would disappear. With her thought, they vanished.

"Oh, I'm beginning to like the wild side of me." She leaned in toward him to kiss him quickly, before continuing her exploration. He still wore his boxer shorts.

She was reaching for the waistband to those when he bucked upwards on the bed, immediately being pulled back down by the magical chains.

"Naughty, naughty, Garrett. You should know that those chains are nearly unbreakable...you can only break them if you really want to, remember?"

"Alora," he groaned. "I'm about to lose the last vestiges of my control." His voice went hoarse.

"You look like you're in excruciating pain."

He let out another moan.

"You could say that." His voice dropped to a mere strangled whisper.

"I think I've gotten us off to a good start. Perhaps, I should let you take the reigns now..."

She could feel the evidence of his arousal. Her breathing hitched in her throat.

"I'm really out of my league here." She rolled off him. "Your turn, try to make me cry out with pleasure."

The enchanted chains keeping him tied to the bed, instantly disappeared. His body pressed closely against hers, his eyes went to her heavy breasts.

"I think you should be bare-chested just like me." His eyes twinkled. With his magic, he made the blouse she wore disappear. He eyed the scarlet red bra she wore with interest. "I don't think you had that piece of clothing in your wardrobe when I left you last."

"Call it a gift from Ace. She seems to think I needed a little extra help along with the love dust."

"Honey, right now, I just want you naked. Though, I will admit the red lace is getting my attention." Her breasts swelled, she could feel them hardening and getting even tighter as he spoke in that loving tone to her.

"After tonight, you won't ever be able to leave me." His triumphant smile made her heart warm.

"I know--I'm holding you to it."

The front clasps on the brassiere made it easy for him unhitch it while her back remained flat on the mattress.

He caressed her body with his hands making her shiver with delight. Ripples of pleasure continued to arc through her, and when he touched her breasts with his hands, she nearly screamed aloud.

A cloud of calmness danced with the strong sense of arousal working its way

through her. Anticipation for what he'd do next propelled her onwards. Her mind felt hazy and yet, she knew if he would continue on his quest to fulfill her erotic desires that her head would clear. With her release, she knew would come clarity. Ace hadn't warned her about this side effect of the love dust--unless it wasn't a side effect that Ace knew about.

Had she ever even used the stuff on herself?

When she stared up in his eyes, they glowed back at her. He lowered his lips to her breasts, kissing the swell, making the nipples harden even more. Pressure was slowly building inside of her. She felt as if she was going to pop!

His magic twisted around them, making startling images filter into the room. She would have been shocked by the scenes had she not been so engrossed in him. She wanted to feel his hands touching every spot on her body, more importantly, she wanted the only thing he could give her--him.

"I want to feel all of your skin pressed against mine."

"Ditto." She moaned, feeling him lightly caressing the entire length of her body. His eyes dropped to her waist.

"So, so beautiful. I'm only going to finish this if you really want me to, Alora."

"I want you."

She could feel herself growing slick with her want--no, her need for him.

"I need you."

The next instant, their naked bodies were entangled on the bed. She whimpered when his hand went down to gently caress the damp curls between her legs. He moved down her length to kiss her belly button, and then he kissed her mound quickly flicking his tongue against her opening. She nearly shot up off the bed when he touched her wet and slick folds rubbing his fingers against her opening. He eased one finger inside her tight opening and then edged in a second. She pushed against his fingers, straining for her release. But she needed more.

Whimpers and moans mingled together. She felt as if she was about to take flight on the wings of the pleasure he was giving her.

His erection pressed against her...she needed him to fill her, and fast.

The room radiated with their heat. Her heart belonged to Garrett for the rest of her life.

He entered her so swiftly it made her breath catch in her throat. This felt right. He stilled inside of her, waiting for her to adjust to his formidable size. His cock was magnificent. But what else could she possibly expect? He was pure magic. Perfect in every way.

It was as if their bodies had been made to mold perfectly together. She moved against him, causing him to move inside of her.

She'd had enough of being under him--she wanted to feel his body underneath her. While they were still joined, she used her magic to flip their positions so she now rode him.

She moved against him wanting to take everything that he offered. Ripples of pleasure shuddered through her; yet, she knew she hadn't found her release. Sweat beaded across his brow, and the scent of cinnamon hanging in the air grew stronger.

He changed their positions once more, pumping into her, he set a heightened rhythm. She wrapped her legs around him, both of them were nearly breathless, they still

hadn't reached that peak of passion--and then, as her toes curled, she felt it, it splintered inside of her and reverberated through her body. Her body quaked with the release; she wanted to give him the same sort of pleasure.

Something inside of her told her to touch him--it had to be the love dust reawakening her inhibitions, once more.

She stroked him, and then, knew she'd hit the right spot. Driving into her once more, he too found his release spilling his seed into her.

They both sighed with pleasure. He wrapped her into the protective cocoon of his arms and kissed the top of her head, then, lowered his mouth to hers once again. The air crackled with their magic.

"I think we might have just touched paradise," he murmured, still running his hands over her arms. She felt sated, she felt satisfied, and most importantly of all, she felt safe.

Garrett was the man meant for her--and she would cleave to him for the rest of her natural life.

Chapter Fourteen

Alora awoke while he still slept soundly.

An eerie sensation prickled at the back of her mind. Another force propelled her upwards; she slipped out of his tight grasp. He muttered something in his sleep only to fall back into the deep slumber she'd almost woken him from.

She walked to the door, and suddenly felt the draft. She'd been so warm within Garrett's arms that she had forgotten her nakedness, though Garrett had reminded her of it a few more times before they'd both collapsed utterly exhausted.

But something felt like it needed her attention. She considered waking up Garrett, looked at his peaceful expression and thought better of it.

She slipped into some of the clothes that Garrett had in his wardrobe. It looked as if he'd prepared for her homecoming, not knowing that she was going to reject him down on New Eros.

But all of that was in the past, and the two of them had cleansed the air between them repairing any and all rift that she might have caused. She loved him dearly, and she didn't have to question his love. She could feel it in his touch, taste it in his kiss, and see in his eyes. He burned with love for her.

She pulled on some sturdy leather boots that had been in the wardrobe and then crept toward the door. His magic never ceased to amaze her. The leather boots molded to her feet like they instinctively knew how to form around her feet.

He let out another sigh, ruffling the pillows and bedding as he twisted in the bed.

Silently, she left the room--surprised and bewildered to find that though it had been locked from the outside, he hadn't programmed it to keep her inside. Smiling, she watched the door slide shut behind her.

"Let me go! You release me at once. You're going to pay for this injustice!"

Her ears perked. Matilda sounded anxious and afraid.

She dashed toward her voice at a breakneck speed, realizing too late that she should have gone back to enlist Garrett's help.

The scene before her made her blood freeze.

"Matilda?"

"They've shot my mom and disabled dad, and they hit Merrick with something that put him down for the count." Tears streamed down Matilda's face, her eyes were swollen and bloodshot and her cheeks were puffy and tearstained.

Matilda strained against her captors. She was shackled, and the shackles glowed with a bluish tinge.

"Run!" Matilda screamed.

Her captors came toward her, as if they stalked prey.

Alora turned to run, though she hated to leave Matilda. She could fight...she could use her newfound abilities--but what if something went wrong and she in her inexperience unintentionally hurt Matilda?

No matter, she could fall back on the abilities of her mother's kin.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you, sweetheart."

Drowsiness seeped into her bloodstream. Someone with the ability to suppress her witch powers stood behind her. Someone that was far stronger than Jim and Dirk had been. The sudden rushing in her ears nearly made her knees collapse under her.

'Garrett!' Her mind screamed out to him.

The man that called her sweetheart reached out for her, locking the same shackles around her wrist that he'd locked around Matilda. When she tried to use the newfound magic that Garrett had summoned by joining with her, she found that, too, was being blocked.

"No."

"Yes, actually. We've got to boot it out of here, gents, before their leader awakens. He might not be so easy to take down with these black magic gizmos the Old Crone gave us."

"Matilda? Are you okay?" Alora asked, her head swimming.

"I would be better without these around my wrists and if I knew if my family was still alive! Mom looked bad--really bad!"

Alora was pushed into Matilda.

"Sorry about this Mistress Bishop, but we don't have any other kind of handcuffs, and since the little witch requires these special restraints we thought we could use them on you, too, no harm done."

"Go fuck yourself!" Alora spat.

He pulled back, his eyes sparked. "You should watch that nasty little tongue of yours, Mistress Bishop, where I'm taking you they might just cut it out for saying something like that."

He laughed. Matilda and she shared a terrified glance. They couldn't allow him to take them off this ship.

"Who are you?"

"We're intergalactic bounty hunters. We specialize in cases like yours and Miss Matilda's. You two are unique, though both different. I've been hired to retrieve you for a man who has unique tastes in women. He wanted two women just like you to add to his collection, and now, he has both of you--he'll be absolutely delighted."

"Collection? We aren't china dolls."

"You will be just as dead inside as a china figurine once he's done with you."

Her head whipped back at the intimation in his voice. She couldn't let Matilda be taken...she had to find a way to free her even if they succeeded in taking her.

"Alora, don't do anything stupid. Just bide our time until they come to get us."

Matilda fervently whispered to her, as they were herded down the corridor of the ship.

"How did they disable the ships defenses?"

"Uncle Garrett's ship is half science, half magic. They nullified it with something that affected the magical side of the ship, and its systems were thrown out of whack. It all happened so quickly. My mom was bleeding so badly--do you think she's still alive?"

"Ace will live--I don't think her time to stop shining has come."

"My mom was always a hellcat when it came to us...she shouldn't have fought so valiantly, she should have seen we were outnumbered and outmatched."

"Your mother has a strong maternal instinct. She would die for you and Merrick."

"She might have." Matilda's eyes watered.

"What about Bryce?"

"Dad was hit by one of those dark arts weapons right off the bat, he never saw it coming, and after that, he was as useless as snot."

"Enough chitchat, ladies. We're almost there." The ringleader jabbed Alora in the back with some sort of weapon.

"You never told us your name," Alora pointed out.

"Didn't I? My mistake, I assure you. My name is Trey."

"Just Trey?"

"You don't need to know my last name, you won't have much use of it where you're going."

"You should know that you're definitely in the wrong line of work," Alora said, sighing.

"I work for the highest bidder--this is my profession."

"Why don't you go after the bounties of wanted criminals?"

"You are a wanted criminal, Mistress Bishop. You are accused of heinous crimes against the citizens of Delania. Your wanted bulletin is splashed across every media outlet between here and Earth. You are famous. A celebrity with your press coverage hasn't existed in twenty years. So, you see, I am going after a criminal--Matilda is just collateral damage. I didn't want to take her, but when you have the sort of thing hanging over your head that I do, you'll find that you'll do just about anything, to keep the ceiling from falling on you."

At his words, her stomach did a nosedive.

"Nonetheless, I know for sure that Matilda has done nothing to earn a criminal record, collateral damage or not, you can't subjugate her to the sort of treatment that's awaiting me," she said plaintively.

"She's not such a little kid. On many planets, girls Matilda's age are married with a couple of kids."

"What planets are those?" Matilda snorted. "Can we say sickos?"

"She's a princess and the people of New Eros would like their princess back," Alora countered, wincing at the lie that flowed effortlessly from her lips.

"Why? So they can string her up with a custom made noose?" Trey laughed.

"I hear they want her head...it doesn't matter to me. Another bidder got to you two first...someone that doesn't want to kill or maim you in fact. He just wants to satisfy his gluttonous sexual appetite."

"You aren't from Delania...and yet..."

"No. I'm not from Delania. But I'm from another planet...people from my planet have certain abilities that help a man in my trade."

"Bounty hunting isn't a trade, it's a joke," Alora scoffed.

He rammed her between the shoulder blades again, harder so she almost fell to her knees. They'd turned to face a wall of the ship.

He jabbed her again, and then jabbed Matilda with the same thing he'd jabbed her with.

"Keep walking," Trey ordered.

"I'm not going to walk into a wall and break my nose, please and thank you," Alora said firmly.

"You won't hit it, you'll glide right through it."

She could hear the frenzied shouts of men and women in the distance. Obviously, the crew was trying to do something about the security breach.

"Now, or I swear I will kill Matilda. The Old Crone I went to see gave me some handy dandy poison that will kill her kind instantly. There's no coming back from it...it's permanent." His face turned grey. She could sense his bluff but with her abilities being suppressed she couldn't take the risk. She couldn't gamble with Matilda's life hanging in the balance.

Darting a furtive glance at Matilda, they exchanged a quick frightened look. Matilda nodded her head at her. Together, they walked through the wall of the ship and found themselves on another ship. This one wasn't mystical looking at all. It was all man made.

"Cloak us and get us the hell out of here. You might want to raise shields as well, just in case they can get a lucky shot off," Trey instructed.

"Luck has nothing to do with what my Uncle does. He's going to be your downfall. He's out for your hide now." Matilda lifted her chin proudly. "You might think that Hell hath no fury, but you haven't seen an Avenging Angel on the warpath!"

"If I wasn't such a gentleman, I'd smack that pretty little face of yours, princess." Matilda glared up at him.

While Matilda and Trey duked it out by way of verbal jousting, she assessed their situation.

Trey didn't seem like he was evil--he was just a misguided malcontent. If she could somehow get him to see the light of reason, they just might have a chance.

"I'm quite sure that Matilda's mother has more money than you do."

"She might not even be alive. I told my men to only disarm anyone that got in our way...and one of them filled her full of holes. I couldn't take that sort of stuff so I had to kill him. Now, I've got to find another one to fill his place. Do you know how hard it is to find loyal men these days? Everyone is motivated by greed, lust and larceny. It's enough to drive a grown man mad!"

"And you're a grown man? You don't look like you're over twenty. You shouldn't be in the line of work you're in...you seem far too honorable. Especially with that baby face of yours, Trey, and your eyes, they have soul. I'll give them that. I don't understand how a soul like yours could condemn Matilda to a life of misery," Alora murmured, hoping to persuade him to change his mind before it was too late.

His face worked up at the sound of her saying his name.

"Listen to me, sweetheart. There's no such thing as an honorable bounty hunter in this region of space. We're all crooked, to various degrees."

His jaw flexed. She watched him look over at Matilda again.

"They said she was a beauty...they were right." He sighed, scrubbing his hand furiously over his face.

"Hello? I'm right here. If you want a beauty you should look no further than my mother." Matilda snorted, her face and eyes paining at the thought of Ace. "I wouldn't exactly call this hair of mine breathtakingly beautiful."

"She's far too young to be sold to the man that's paying you, Trey. How can you live with yourself if you do? You're sealing her fate."

"No, he's not. My mom and dad will root me out like bloodhounds. We all share a bond that can't be broken. I could never seek to run away from my parents. It's our kind,

you know." Matilda nodded her head solemnly.

"Your powers are being repressed. They won't be able to track you," Trey countered.

"That's what you might think, but trust me, nothing will stop them...nothing can stand in their way. Plus, Garrett will be able to track Alora. You've really put your foot into it this time. You were so stupid for even taking on the job in the first place." Matilda snorted, looking at Trey with seething contempt.

"Shut the hell up! Man, you are one mouthy little bitch!" Trey leaned down toward Matilda. For one brief moment, Alora feared he was going to punch her.

He stood back up. "Shit. She isn't that old, is she? You're just a kid, for God's sake! I have a sister your age!"

"And I warrant you're not too much older. How long have you been doing this out of necessity?" Alora prodded.

"Shut up." He sighed. "How did you figure that?"

"You have a gleam in your eyes. I've seen it before--I've seen it when I used to look in the mirror. It's the look of desperation. You don't enjoy killing, you gave away that much when you exhibited remorse for what happened to Matilda's mother. You have a conscious, Trey. Don't burn all of your bridges. You still have a chance to come out of this situation alive. I'm sure I could reason with Garrett. Everyone deserves the chance to redeem themselves and right the wrongs of their actions."

Matilda nodded her head. "If you turn us back right now, I know I could talk my mother out of causing you irrevocable harm." Her voice nearly broke. Alora could see that Matilda was getting choked up at the very thought of Ace. She prayed with all of her might that Ace still lived. The woman had a big mouth sometimes, but her heart was tried and true. She didn't deserve to die so suddenly and so cruelly.

"Please, Trey," Alora pleaded.

He shouldn't have told them his name. She could see that every time she called him by his name, it worked on him. A skittish glint entered his eyes. He was caught between two crossroads, and he didn't know which way to turn. She had to make sure he turned the right way.

"I've already taken the money. If I don't deliver you two, my ass is grass. The man that hired me will send out his assassins, my family...everyone will be in jeopardy. This is what this asshole does to his enemy." He made the motion across his neck of someone slitting his throat, accompanied by sound effects.

"That's what happens when you play nice with the bad guys." Alora nodded her head. "I can tell you that Garrett will secure your family's safety."

"I got into Garrett's ship--someone else could get to me--"

"How did you get into Garrett's ship?"

"By using something I invented a few years ago...." He coughed. "Damn, you do have a way of getting all of the information out, don't you? You should be a bloody interrogator."

"I think that Garrett could use someone like you on his team. He does have mortals on his ship, you know. He'd give you a second chance with Matilda and I vouching for you. Don't go any further into the mess you're already in. I think you've got enough shit on your boots to last you a lifetime."

"Are you actually hearing yourself? I'm the bad guy in this scenario. You

shouldn't be trying to help me!"

They were all thrown forward in their seats. Something had struck them from behind.

"Holy Shit." Trey stared at the sensors. "They are here. Quick little bastards. How did they get a lock on me to track me so quickly?"

"It's the psychic chain linking me to my mate, and Matilda is also linked through a familial psychic chain to her parents and twin."

"Twin? That boy was your twin? Damn. No wonder he acted like an enraged boar before we felled him."

"He's alive." Matilda nodded her head.

The ship rocked again as Garrett fired on them once more. He wasn't trying to destroy the ship. She knew he only wanted to disable it.

Once he boarded the ship, she'd have very little leeway to save Trey.

She knew evil. She'd stared into the eyes of evil men everyday while she'd been in the clutches of Jim and his cronies. Trey wasn't evil. Misguided, but not evil. He could be redeemed. She had to save him.

"Release me, now. Take these shackles off of Matilda and me. We can save you."

"He won't blow up my ship while you're still on it," Trey muttered, sweat beading across his brow.

"He's going to be boarding your ship soon--he will grant you no mercy," Alora said loudly.

"She's right. You've spilled innocent blood--while it wasn't you that did it, one of your hired men did. And my uncle won't differentiate between the two. When it comes to meting out justice, he is single-minded. Let me and Alora help you. We'll put ourselves in front of you so Uncle Garrett can't make you just a memory. Trust me, you do not want to become ashes on the wind, and when Garrett gets mad that's basically what you'll be reduced to." Trey winced.

Fear blanketed his features. "The rumors are true. He is a fire beast," Trey whispered paling visibly.

"He's magical, he's strong, and he is invulnerable. You won't be able to hurt him, now that he knows you have these." Alora held her hands up brandishing the shackles that had been touched by black magic. "If you don't, he will most likely wipe you from the face of the galaxy. He is a hunter, just like you, except he punishes the evildoers for their crimes against humanity."

Trey's eyes widened, his Adam's apple bobbed, and his jaw flexed nervously.

"How do I know you'll keep your word?"

"You don't--but then, I see you have very little options open to you. You could try to run...that wouldn't be the wisest course of action, since it's only a matter of time before Garrett uses his magic on you. When he does that, you will be pushed into a corner that you will never come out of! I'm asking you to trust me, let me help you!"

"I kidnapped you by force, I don't deserve your help."

Trey looked away from her, anguish plastered across his features. "Sometimes, those that think they don't deserve help--really do deserve a second chance. We all have regrets. Do you want to continue the bloodshed? Who will take care of your family when you are dead and gone?" Alora demanded.

His eyes went wild. "Do it. Please, I'm begging you to help me. I know that I've

walked down a path in life that's swallowing me up in its darkness...I need to see the light again."

Matilda shrieked.

"He's coming, Alora, and he's in his magical soul form. Quickly, release her from her shackles--and me, too! He's going to kill you all, only sparing us!"

"Do it, Trey!"

Shakily, Trey unlatched her from her constraints. Alora fought the urge to panic. Looking at the view screen made her heart standstill for a one long moment. He was magnificent. The Phoenix rushed toward them engulfing black space between the two ships. If Trey wanted to see the light, Garrett was filling the expanse of it with his glorious light.

She stepped in front of Trey. "Order your men to stand down on all systems."

"You heard her!" Trey shouted. "Now what?"

"He's not going to stop is he, Alora?" Sheer panic broke through Matilda's voice.

Alora shook her head. "I don't think so. Matilda, do you think you could use your magic to protect Trey and his men?"

"I don't know--I have no way of knowing if my magic will even affect Uncle Garrett's magic. He is my blood relation."

She had to do something. Now was the time for her to stand up and take control. Ever since Jim and his gang had taken her, she had run from danger...she had been a coward--she'd been selfish, ungrateful, only wanting to wallow in her own self-pity. That was going to end. Finally.

"Matilda, I'm going to try to use my own magic."

"I..." Matilda was at a loss for words.

Reaching deeply inside of herself, she concentrated on the psychic bond that she and Garrett shared. She touched his rage. She felt his grief--and she felt his love. He believed he was doing the right thing--he thought he was killing evil. If his judgment weren't so clouded, he'd be able to sense that Trey wasn't evil.

Her heart danced. Purple magic started to swirl around her, enveloping the entire ship's bridge with its brilliance.

"Amazing! You are a Phoenix, too! A Purple Phoenix!" Matilda gasped.

Spreading forth, her magic stretched beyond the confines of the spaceship. She felt her body transported out of the ship, she was elevated within the cocoon of her own magical soul. Her wings reached out to the side, and a loud song carried on the wind, mixing and connecting with Garrett's own battle song.

For a brief second, Garrett hesitated. She could feel his awe--no, she could taste it.

Their magic danced together, as she opened a telepathic link between them.

"You must stand down. Return to your ship, Garrett, Trey and his men are under my protection."

"The Purple Phoenix is a sign of Protection. To Protect the Weak and Uplift the Downtrodden. You are a rarity. You are the only Purple Phoenix born into our kind's ranks for over three thousand years."

"I insist you stand down. I know you are intent upon killing Trey and his men."

"They nearly murdered Ace. Even now, she is close to the veil of death. The only thing keeping her anchored to this world is love. She actually did die, and we were able

to resuscitate her...you can't allow their crimes against her to go unpunished!"

"Trey didn't do it. In fact, he's already punished Ace's attacker."

"Ah, so that's the body we found in their quarters."

"Yes. Please, Garrett, you are a reasonable man...you must believe me."

"I have full faith in you--I pray I shall never regret this day. I will give you your wish--does Matilda wish me to spare Trey as well?"

"She does."

She felt something shift inside of him. He was backing down. "I will be back on the ship. Why don't you go and pick up Matilda and meet us there?"

"Actually, I've promised Trey our protection, he will be hunted for not turning me and Matilda over to the person who put the bounty on our heads."

"I will take care of that person."

"I already told him that, but he has a family to consider--he is only a young man...he has so much to live for..."

"I see that you want to help him. I will indulge you. As my mate and future wife, we must learn to work together. Don't ever, ever give me that kind of a scare again--I think it almost killed me."

"You are immortal, my love."

"Aye, but if I was a lesser man, I would have died from the shock!"

She chuckled. Drifting back to Trey's ship. She rematerialized in her human form.

Trey's mouth still gaped.

"They're hailing us, sir."

Trey glanced over at her.

"I wouldn't keep Garrett waiting, Trey."

He shook his head, "Of course not. Open the com channel."

"At the request of my mate, I am giving you my mercy." Garret wasn't pulling any punches. His vibrant voice boomed over the com channel.

"I thank you." Trey looked uncomfortable. Fortunately, he knew when he was outmatched.

"I will open our docking bay doors, you may take your ship and land it in one of our docking bays. After that, you will report straight to me. That goes for you too, Alora." His voice turned tender when he spoke her name. "Matilda, you should report straight to Med Bay when you come aboard."

Matilda nodded her head, tears running down her cheeks.

Alora gripped Matilda's hand tightly, and together, they waited.

Chapter Fifteen

"Why did you leave me?" Garrett asked.

She stood alone with Garrett in his quarters.

It was now the morning. Hours had passed since Ace's attack, and Garret had only just returned to their quarters. She had been in Med Bay to check on Ace, but seeing Merrick, Matilda and Bryce clustered around her bed had only made her feel like an outsider. Feeling foolish, she had retreated to Garrett's quarters to wait for the one man that she always felt accepted by, and now, he was asking her this ridiculous question.

"I never left you...I simply felt something pulling me out of our quarters. I just thought I was going to have a nice walk round the ship then, I was going to come back to you. I wanted to stretch my legs."

"Instead, you got to stretch your wings." He snorted.

"If you have a problem with what I am..."

He swooped toward her, and gripped her wrist bringing it up; he pressed her hand to his face. Leaning into her touch, he pulled away briefly and kissed her palm. "We are meant to be, my dearest. I would not hate you for what you are--you are like me--only different. Our vocations in life will take us down different paths, but always we will come back together. We are one. You look beautiful with amethyst colored hair, and matching eyes. I wonder if they will remain this shade as our time together evolves...."

She shook her head, "In that case, why would you accuse me of leaving you? I was the one that sprinkled you with that love dust! I was the one that repaired what was broken between us!"

"You did. But then, you were the one to break it."

"Your sanctimonious attitude can be quite tiring. I know I'm not perfect, and I know I've acted like a total and complete wretch since we met. I know that! But I was broken--my soul had been broken, and when you found me I was a shell! That's why I didn't know how to react when you told me you wanted me. I felt unworthy. I've come to terms with what happened to me, and I know I can't keep wallowing in my self-pity. It isn't healthy--as long as I mourn what happened to me, I will never be able to heal and live a full life. I want a full life, I want you, and I want to have children. I don't ever want to go back to the dark places that nearly destroyed me. I want you to keep me in the light...I want you to be my guiding light!"

"I am." He reached to pull her close to him. For just a moment, she drank in his delightful scent, and listened to the sound of his heartbeat.

"You were the one that wrote it in stone." Her voice was muffled since her face was still pressed against his chest.

"What?" he laughed. "I never thought you'd take it seriously, in fact, I thought you'd try to clonk me over the head with it just like you whacked me with the flower vase."

She couldn't help but giggle at that memory. "I was stunned. I couldn't believe you were in my grasp, and I'd lost you--I was shocked beyond belief."

He drew slowly away from her. Flourishing his hand, the stone tablet appeared in her hands.

"Are you trying to wound me again?"

"Turn it over." His voice was patient and encouraging.

It read,

To reclaim the love Garrett Firestorm has given you, break this stone slab into a million unrecognizable pieces.

She looked up at him with her eyes wide open. "How could you? Of all the asinine, fool things...I should smack you with this right now!"

"You could. It would probably break, Ace is always telling me what a hardheaded bugger I am. Thank God, she'll be able to do that for a very long time to come."

"You were worried about her."

"Ace has a way of worming herself into your heart. Even though I wouldn't want you to tell her, I now love her like a sister...she's a fine woman--and an even better wife and mother."

"I could never live up to Ace's notoriety."

"I think you could. Start by breaking that stone into a million tiny pieces."

Smiling up at him, she threw it to the floor. With satisfaction, she watched it splinter into a million pieces. After which, the pieces started to sparkle. They were turning into something different. Rising up from the floor, she watched as two wedding bands twinkled into existence.

"We're taking Ace back to the Hidden Magickal Realms. She needs the healers there to get her back to the woman she was. I want you to come with us so we can have a proper wedding. If her magical soul would awaken, we wouldn't have to worry about racing against the clock, but as it is, unless her healing is being delayed for some reason...."

"She will survive. I can feel it." Silence reigned between them for a few seconds.

"Garrett, in your definition, what is a proper wedding?"

"A magical one."

His eyes sparkled.

"And Trey?"

"I don't know why you have a fascination or concern for that young man. If I didn't know better I'd be bloody jealous!"

"There's nothing to be jealous of." She kissed him again, twining her hands around his neck, she leaned up on her tiptoes, and watched mesmerized as the wedding bands continued to hover in mid-air. It was pure magic.

"Sure there is, you still haven't given me your answer."

"Answer?" She shook her head.

"You need to say 'yes'."

She laughed, drawing away from him. "If you're trying to figure out whether or not I would agree to marry you--I don't know why you'd even think I'd say 'no'."

"You've rejected me before."

"I told you I loved you and I wanted to spend the rest of eternity with you--I think I'd rather be your wife than just your live-in love."

"Yes, then?"

"Garrett, you must really stop double questioning me. I've professed my love and

fidelity to you...why can't you just believe me?"

"I believe you." He captured her in his arms again, his kiss turning hungry. Before she knew it, he'd magically relieved her of her clothes.

"Garrett..." her voice trailed off, as he made her breathless. He was cupping one breast with his hand, while he ran the other hand down to rest on her belly. "We shouldn't be doing this--"

"Too late, you're already wet, and I'm already hard." She dropped her hand, touching his cock gingerly. He drew in a sharp breath, and nearly broke his contact with her.

"That's definitely not ladylike."

She gave him a feline grin. "I know ladylike...and this might not be ladylike, but it's what this lady wants."

She touched him again, thrilling as his body jolted at the contact.

The scent of cinnamon wafted into the air, mingling with her sexual scent.

"God, that's the best perfume in the world." He kissed her hungrily again, backing her toward the bed in the next room. She felt the back of her legs hit the mattress. She pushed him forward, switching their positions.

"I think you should sit on the bed." She shoved him so he was forced to lie out on the bed in all of his glory.

"You know, we're both Phoenixes and as such, we are accustomed to getting our own way."

"Give and take, then. This time, I'm taking. I want to taste you, all of you." He raised his eyebrow.

"Alora..."

"Garrett," she chided, winking at him, she ran her hands over his muscled torso. She looked again deeply into his dark eyes, connecting with him on a soul altering level, and then, she roamed her hands down his body to touch his swollen member.

He pulled her back up, taking control of the situation. "We're on a time constraint, Alora."

"How romantic."

"Let me get you ready for our joining...I'm already ready." He touched her cheek softly. Her nipples tingled as he spoke. His voice could make her melt--it could drive her mad! She was about ready to come just by listening to his voice and staring into the glorious depths of his eyes.

He circled his finger on her lower abdomen, and then went lower. She arched her back when he touched her wet and achy pussy. She wanted him to enter her, now...she couldn't wait much longer. When he drove his fingers into her opening, she nearly lost it.

"I want you, now, Garrett, please. Don't make me wait much longer...you said yourself we are on a time constraint, if the bridge calls you now, I will scream."

"Ditto." He kissed her long, hard and fast, pulling her back to straddle his legs.

"Ride me." The tip of his cock briefly touched her opening, she moved to meet him, savoring the feeling of him entering her tightness, her muscles contracting as he did so. She obeyed his command, riding him until they were both gasping for breath. She could see he was close to shattering into a million pieces, and she could feel herself reaching that pinnacle. She came down upon him, feeling herself coming. Her climax shook her entire body, and then like a ripple effect he followed, murmuring love endearments to her

as he did.

Exhausted, she collapsed on top of him. They drank in each other's presence, relaxing and enjoying what they each offered. He rubbed her back, while she traced circles on his chest. Only five minutes had passed when their peaceful silence was interrupted.

The familiar bell of Garrett's communication device filled the room.

"Sire, we have a problem," Mitchell's voice filled the room.

"What now?" He let out a long prolonged sigh.

"I don't even want to know where you have your communication device shoved," she whispered.

He rolled his eyes at her, placing his fingers over his lips. She stuck her tongue out at him.

"We have picked up a few ships on long range sensors. They shouldn't be a threat to us because we have Ace's armada traveling with us, not to mention our fleet, but still...I thought you'd like to know."

"I'll be up to the bridge, momentarily."

"I think I know whom those ships belong to," she whispered.

"I think I know, too." His facial features hardened. "We'll be rendezvousing with Trey's home planet in three hours. It looks as if they aren't after us. They're probably heading for Trey's planet for retribution."

Her heart sank.

"I was afraid of this happening."

"Trey told you it would. After questioning him I found out who the man was that had hired him. He's a man well known for liking to collect magical and uniquely talented individuals. He's also a man that my superiors have wanted for a long time. I have had other assignments taking up my time, and the other Immortals sent to retrieve him never came back. I've wanted to kill him, I've wanted to stop him, but do you think my superiors would give me the seal of approval? He's a bastard of the foulest sort, Alora. We can't allow him to get anyone on this ship, nor will I allow him to destroy everyone and everything that Trey loves. I have given him my word and I will stick to it no matter what."

Her blood chilled.

"What is his name?"

"Lord Tann. He's a hard man, one that was pushed out of our ranks long ago, for turning to the other side. Now, he hunts what we hold most dear. He's getting old and weak though, so he has to send out young pups like Trey to get what he wants. To stray too far from his powerbase is to tempt fate. He has a source of great power that he draws from on his planet. If you thought Delania was hell, then this is the very bowels of hell--his planet is filled with people just like him. There is no light. Only cold consuming darkness."

She shivered.

"So, now what? I honestly don't think I like the sounds of this Lord Tann. If he can take down someone from your kind--" She heaved a shuddering sigh.

"We fight. I'm going to give Lord Tann a bit of his own medicine shoved down his throat. I will make him pay for what happened to Ace, and for what almost happened to you."

"I should go to see Ace, but I don't know if I want to abandon your side. If he's really as powerful as you say he is..."

"Don't worry about me, Alora. I can take care of the ships and myself under my command. Lord Tann is in for a rude awakening. All bets are off now. You'll need to wear this ring...on your right ring finger." He used his magic to float the rings over to the bed. "Once we officially take our vows, you can move it closer to your heart." He kissed her once again. "I think I'm going to require clothing for this." He groaned. She rolled off him, and he stood up. "You'll need to be dressed too!" Smiling, he pointed his hand at her. She gasped. She stood in a ruby red gown. "That's my kind of color. Now for the rings, let me put it on you."

He gently reached for her hand, held it up toward him, and slipped the cool precious metal onto her finger. It continued to sparkle.

"This ring shall tell you when danger comes--it will glow purple in your case, red in mine."

"I'll keep that in mind. I'm just hoping we don't encounter any other danger until we get to the borders of your lands."

"You'll love my home realm." His eyes shined with his love.

His communicator chimed again.

"Sire, we do require your immediate presence."

"I'm on my way."

"I'm off to, I'm going to go and pay a quick visit to Ace. I'm sure I'll see Matilda, Merrick and Bryce as well. Anything you'd like me to tell them?"

"Ask for Bryce to report to the bridge as soon as possible."

"I will do that."

As she turned to leave, he pulled her back. She hit his chest, hard. The force of the contact knocked the wind out of her.

"You forgot my goodbye kiss."

"Garrett, we're going to see each other again, probably in less than an hour."

"Nonetheless..."

His lips swooped down toward hers, locking with hers in a tight and highly passionate kiss.

She felt heat invade her body. She pushed away from him.

"If we don't get going you're going to be in dereliction of your duty as Captain of the ship."

He chuckled. It was a husky throaty chuckle that made a grin break across her face. She'd been grinning like a stupid fool ever since they'd first made love.

"Come, you can walk with me as far as the Med Bay."

"Garrett, tell me straight. Do you think Ace will be able to be the same woman she was?"

"It would help her if she could connect with her magical soul. I don't know why she hasn't yet, but that would help." He nodded his head.

"Could she be repressing it?"

"Her bloodline connection is watered down more than yours. That could be the reason. Bryce is at the end of his rope--he's going crazy seeing her so pale and drawn. He thinks she's going to die--that's why he wants us to get to our home realm. Once there, she will be able to be healed properly. At this point, even if she would accept it, I'm not

even certain I could heal her with my tears or my hands."

"Then, you need to make very short work of Lord Tann. We can't let Ace die."

"I agree. We'll be home before you know it."

They stopped when they reached the Med Bay doors.

"Be careful." She tapped him on the chest. "Don't do anything stupid."

"Like you're apt to do?" He smiled.

She gave him a flustered look and then walked into the Med Bay.

It was a well-equipped facility. Magical items and science worked in harmony.

Bryce stood over in a corner wearing the healing robes of his kind.

Quietly, she padded over to him.

"Bryce."

He started. He held a vial in his hand. Placing it carefully down on the workstation, he turned to grant her his attention.

"Greetings, Alora. I'm sorry, I'm a jumble of nerves lately."

"I can understand that. I'm sure being your wife's doctor is hard to do."

"Not my wife--yet." His eyes softened. "Ace thought we'd have a double wedding." His voice cracked. Weariness lined his brow. "We've come so far--only to be handed this challenge."

"She'll be okay."

"I'm not so sure. I've done all that I can do. My magic can't seem to heal her completely...I guess I'm just out of my field, I've given her everything I have to help her. Even the Unicorn's Ambrosia didn't help--much. She needs the Elvin and Unicorn healers in my realm. They've been in the healing business for thousands of years. I only took up doctoring four hundred years ago. I brought her back from the brink of death--that's all I can do until she gets to my home realm."

"I have faith that she'll be back to her old self soon."

"I'm glad you have faith. Right now, I'm not so certain." He scrubbed a hand over his face, sighing heavily. He hadn't shaved in days, and his eyes were bloodshot.

"Garrett requires your presence on the bridge."

"I'll go now. Matilda and Merrick are in Ace's private room--it's right through there."

He pointed in the direction of Ace's room.

She reached out and touched his arm gently. "Don't worry--Ace will live."

He smiled again. "I'm sure you're right, in fact, I pray you are." Nodding his head to her in acknowledgment and thanks, he strode out of the Med Bay.

Walking in the direction of Ace's room, she immediately felt the permeating sense of doom whip out to meet her. It was as if they expected death to touch this area.

"Ace?"

"Alora!" Matilda greeted her enthusiastically, even though weariness blanketed her suddenly frail-like voice.

Pain haunted her eyes. She sat as close to Ace's bedside as possible, while Merrick sat on the other side of the bed, furiously searching the pages of an ancient looking book that hovered in front of him.

"Alora," he mumbled, never taking his eyes off the text.

"Alora, I'm so glad you came." Ace's voice was a low whisper. She sounded weak, and the spunk that usually invaded her voice was curiously absent. "Come and sit

by Matilda. I want to speak to you. Matilda, Merrick, please leave us for a few minutes. The two of you need to go and eat something. I've been keeping track of your meals." She smiled lovingly at them. "Merrick, put the book down and go with your sister."

"Yes, mom." He stood up obediently, not giving her an argument. Matilda stood and hesitated.

"Call us if you need us."

"I will." She smiled. "I have the buzzer right here." She held her hand out and unfolded her palm.

"Good. That was the best thing dad invented."

They quietly left the room.

"Again, we have a private chat. Have you met this Trey? I did, they brought him to me this morning. I know he wasn't the one that filled me full of metal. Well, of course you've met him, how silly I am for even asking that question--you and Matilda both acted on his behalf. Such good girls. I guess I'm just frazzled; I've had a life altering experience. I've never had a brush with death like that. I actually left my body, did Bryce tell you that?" She smiled weakly. "I don't think that's something I'd like to experience again. The reason I want to talk to you is because of some troubling dreams I had when I was unconscious slash nearly dead--and then, dead, and then alive again," she rambled. Alora smiled. She could see that Ace was ill at ease--it was probably her presence--

"In all likelihood, it was just the trauma manifesting in your dreams," she said softly.

Ace shook her head. "Do you ever think that life is a pattern of events that when hooked together by serendipity they will create a quilt of life the way it is meant to be?"

"I don't know. I do believe in happenstance. And yes, I believe in fate."

Ace smiled. "It would seem there was a reason why Matilda tripped over you." She coughed, weakly. "I just can't seem to shake this off. Ever since I woke up I've been plagued by it."

"You'll feel better soon--just give it time." She hesitated. Looking to the ceiling, she took a few deep breaths. "Ace, I don't know why you want to talk to me, but obviously your dreams have troubled you, and you think I can help. Tell me what you dreamt of."

"I think it was your planet. Hot and dry...it looked like hell at one part. The other part looked like a tropical paradise, it was lush and green with palm trees, and beautiful sparkling sandy beaches, with an ocean the most startling shade of green."

"My country." Her heart ached. "That's the way our country looked. We were separated from the rest of civilization from the Emerald Sea on one side of us, and the Unforgivable Desert on the other side."

"The Unforgivable Desert. That's a good name." Ace sighed. "That's what I dreamt of. I was wearing chains, and I was so tired. The strength was ebbing out of me, and every time I thought I was going to find the blissful release of death--I found that I woke up in hell again."

"That's me. You're remembering what happened to me," she murmured softly, lost in the throes of a horrible flashback. She shivered, shaking her head to dislodge the distasteful memory.

"These Barbarians should be wiped out of existence for the crimes they did to you...I'm sorry. When I told you I had tragedy in my life, I didn't know what had

happened to you. But I think you'll agree that losing a child is one of the worst things..." her voice broke. "We didn't get her back to Bryce's home world in time, and that's what happened. Now, Bryce is driving himself crazy, thinking he'll lose the race against the clock just like we lost our race with Lark."

"You shouldn't upset yourself so..."

"Upset myself?" She shuddered out a sigh. "The damage has already been done, my dear--maybe if I did just drift away, I'd see Lark again, but then, maybe not." Ace startled her with the intensity of the gaze she settled on Alora.

"She wouldn't want you to do that."

"Matilda and Merrick will live immortal lives, and it will be a long time until they see Lark again. She will be alone. You remind me of Lark...it's strange, I don't know why I didn't see it before--but you do. The dreams pulled it all together for me. Locking in place the missing pieces to the puzzle."

Silence draped between them, right up until Alora mustered enough courage to break it.

"Thank you. I'll take that comparison to Lark as a compliment."

"You and Garrett have made amends. I'm glad to see it." She smiled. "A Phoenix they tell me will always rise from ashes. When Lark died, her body disappeared."

"I don't see why you are reliving this--it can't be healthy for you."

"My health isn't my concern right now. What I need to find out is something that's been nagging me since I almost crossed over last night."

"I don't follow you..."

"Lark wasn't Bryce's child. But she was mine."

Chapter Sixteen

Alora's heart stopped.

Drawing a shattering breath, Ace continued, "She wasn't my biological child either, but I'd loved her from when she was a baby, and I'd taken her into my heart like she was my own. She belonged to my half-sister. My half-sister was never a good woman--she was spoiled, and she was used to getting everything that she wanted. When it was determined that I would take over the throne, she went mad. She wanted to ruin me. I think she thought she could accomplish that by nailing a man like Bryce. Oh, she did that, but when she found out that she'd been forever tied to him, she didn't want that. She pushed him away, she told him that he was inferior and he left, never knowing that she was pregnant with his child."

"Please, tell me Bryce isn't my father--because then, I'd be related by blood to Garrett, and that would give me information overload."

Ace chuckled. "No. As I already said, you do not belong to Bryce; in fact the immortal that got my half-sister pregnant wasn't related to Bryce or Garrett. You are safe." She smiled, her eyes carrying on that distant look that people got when they were recalling past events.

"When she had you--she knew she could never take care of you. She was going to take you out into the barrens of space and leave you there--in fact; she wanted to give you to her full-blooded sister that had moved to a faraway planet, nicknamed Hades on New Eros. I see now that it's really called Delania."

"I still don't understand..."

"Let me continue. I knew I could not allow you to go to Delania. They did not like your father's kind there--so, I convinced her to let me take you. Years later, when you were three years old, you fell ill with a sickness that can affect Bryce's kind. I only knew Bryce for a few months when you got sick, and he didn't know how to cure you, so he told me we had to rush you to his home realm. We did so, but we were too late."

"I died."

"Yes...or at least, I thought you had. Garrett tells me that when a Phoenix of his variety dies, they will rise from the ashes and be reborn within a distance of their nearest closest blood relative. Since I was only your mother's half sister, and because Danita and your mother shared the same mother and father--well, you can do the biological connection thing. "

"My mother's full-blooded sister was my closest relative genetically speaking."

"Indeed."

"I am not who I think I am."

"Oh, you are who you think you are, just not who I hoped you'd become. I am sorry that you were reborn to live a life of misery. We didn't know what you were--if I did, I would have raced to Delania and rescued you. I never would have allowed you to stay on Delania, especially when your aunt died so long ago." She nodded her head. "I know when Danita died. I heard about it from my sources scattered throughout the

Universe."

"I can't believe this."

"I can't either...but they say that life is a circle. You've come back to where you belong."

"I was never really where I belonged."

Ace's eyes flared with anger. "You were right where you belonged. Your aunt, was she a great adopted mother?"

"I barely remember her. She had her handmaidens look after me most of the time. I only recall her sitting in front of her many mirrors in our palace combing her hair and admiring her reflection. She had many parties, and many lovers. My adoptive father's tribe was very powerful at one point in time. Our power steadily declined after she passed, and then, just before Garrett rescued me, we were almost done for. But I think deep down, she loved me. She never raised a hand to me, or her voice for that matter--and she made sure I had the best women in the tribe looking after me..." her voice trailed off. "I did mourn her passing. After her death, life as I knew it was over. She must have done more in the tribe than I knew about because when she died, our life just went from bad to worse."

Ace went silent. Contemplation worked her brow.

"I guess we can never go and undo what has been done. You ended up right back where you belong, in the end."

"You had other nieces and nephews, didn't you? Why would I be so special?"

Ace smiled. "Sometimes, we just meet kindred spirits. You were a kindred spirit to me when you were a child--and now that I really see you, I know you are Lark. I was blinded before--I am so sorry."

"We will have plenty of time to make up for what we lost."

"Perhaps." Ace looked her straight in the eye. "You must promise me that if I don't make it to Bryce's home realm, you will be there for Matilda. She'll need someone to lean on when I'm gone. Merrick, he will withdraw inside of his own little world, I trust you to pull him out of it. Please, Lark."

Alora pulled back at the unusual name. It sounded so foreign to her, and yet, something deep inside of her recognized it.

"I am Alora now."

"Indeed, you are not. You've been living someone else's life, Alora. Danita had a daughter named Alora...she died in a mysterious plague that ripped through the village--when they found you, they probably believed it was a sign...and so, they named you Alora for their daughter. Danita would have jumped at the chance, because I know she wasn't a woman without a soul or a heart. Losing her child must have affected her deeply, she probably saw you as a gift from the Gods."

"I've been living a full out lie for all of my life."

"Not anymore. You are Princess Lark Lyndon. You are meant to hold that name, and use that name."

"My birth mother, is she still alive?"

"The last time I heard about her, she was running a brothel out in a really bad area of space."

"That's what Garrett said, too."

"Don't feel sorry for her, Lark. She chose the life she leads. She was never made

to leave New Eros. She did that on her own accord. Life takes us down many strange twisting paths, your mother just decided to take a permanent detour."

"Finally, I know who I really am. There was an actual reason why my people on Delania didn't want me."

"I'd say so."

Ace's face turned even whiter. "I think I'm going to have to cut our chat short. I feel like I need to sleep."

She still clutched Alora's hand. "What do I call myself?"

"I don't know, Lark. Only you will be able to make that decision. I named you Lark, you ended up becoming Alora. This is your choice now."

Alora stood up and leaned down over Ace. "Don't you dare let this thing beat you, Aislynn. You need to buck up and fight."

Ace stared at her. "I think you're finally finding your true self, Lark. Don't let what happened to you on Delania cloud the rest of your life. Become the woman you were meant to be. Stay strong, and be tough. You were beaten down, but you survived. You have risen from the ashes time and time again, and here you still remain. I can't say that even I would have survived the ordeal you suffered on Delania. I don't know if I would have. As for why you didn't just come back to us, when you died out in the middle of that damnable desert, I have no explanation. Perhaps, your heart and soul knew that the closest person to you was coming for you. Garrett found you--he loves you more than anything, and I have no doubt that you and he will have a life of love and harmony."

"Stop talking as if you won't be around to see it."

Matilda walked slowly into the room. "It's been ten minutes, and I couldn't stand staying outside much longer."

"How much did you hear?" Ace asked.

"Enough." Matilda smiled. "I think it's grand...I also think that Alora is right, you need to stick around a little longer. You're just like Alora, mom; the two of you are survivors. I also think that Alora should get up to the bridge. Merrick told me that something questionable was going down."

"How questionable?"

"Find out for yourself." She winked at her.

She ran through the ship, almost colliding with a few of the crewmembers.

Skidding onto the bridge--she stopped, transfixed.

"What did you do to those ships, and what are those?" Dumbstruck horror erased any of the lingering worry she had when she took in the sight before her.

Silence met her.

"Garrett, answer me! What have you done?"

Garrett turned, slowly. He sighed.

"I thought you'd understand. In fact, I thought you'd be pleased."

"Pleased? You've made them into collectible figurines, and those ships look as if they've been shrunk somehow. I honestly don't think humans could work and live on that size of a vessel."

"It is quite doubtful. But that's what they get for trying to take you from me."

"Are they still alive?" She stared in incredulous amazement at the life-sized figurines of five people. They had their mouths perked in a perfect 'o' shape, and their eyes were widened to the extreme. They looked terrified, and panicked.

"I don't think the transfiguration process would kill them..."

The crewmembers laughed. "It's just a wee bit of magic." One of them mumbled.

"That's right." Garrett nodded his head, placing his hands behind him. Tossing a glance at the figurines, he snorted. "Besides, now I can send a party to release the other captives that little bastard has back on his home planet. I feel quite certain that they will be most relieved to be released."

"I know--"

"Plus, I found out that this one." He reached for the life-sized figurine closest to him, "Was the one that hired Trey and he also was the one that hired the man to kill if necessary. He admitted that he knew Trey's reluctance to use extreme force, so he enlisted someone that wouldn't shirk if it came to killing."

"He's this Tann guy then?"

"Aye." Garrett eyed him with disgust. "I should have killed him myself, unfortunately, there's an outstanding warrant on his head back in my realm, and I must relinquish him to the proper authorities. Lieutenant Mitchell, please transport Lord Tann and his companions to our brig."

"Yes, sire." Mitchell stood up, bowing to Garrett.

There was something weird in the way that Mitchell and the other crewmembers referred to Garrett. It was something she'd disregarded up until now.

"I think he only got what he deserved. He turned people with extraordinary abilities into slaves for his collection--and now, he is a collectible." Garrett's eyes flashed with humor.

She smiled, not being able to contain her reaction. No matter how annoyed she became with Garrett, he always knew how to make her laugh.

Did he know what Ace had just told her?

His eyes focused on her. He came toward her, gripping her elbow, he steered her to his ready room off the bridge.

"You look like you want to talk."

"I do," she said, nodding her head.

"Talk." He settled himself on his desk, staring at her in encouragement.

"How much do you already know?"

"I know I love you."

"That's not what I'm talking about."

He sighed. "I suspected as much. I guess Ace has finally woven together the tapestry of your life so to speak."

"Yes." She crossed her arms over her chest. "How long did you know?"

"I knew as soon as we kissed that very first time. Once the psychic chain between you and I started to grow, I could look back into your past. I saw everything."

"Then, you know that I was that Lark Lyndon."

"You are that Lark Lyndon. Whether you want to acknowledge it or not, you are not Alora Bishop anymore."

"I will always be Alora Bishop," she insisted.

"Not when you marry me. You will be my wife--you'll have to change your surname to Firestorm."

"That's just your opinion, Garrett."

His eyes went from twinkling one minute, to being somber the next.

"I need you to understand something, Alora. You must embrace both sides of your self. Alora is the woman you became, but if you wish to return to being Lark...."

"That's just it. Alora is the woman. Lark is the child. I can't go back to being Lark...not after what I've seen, experienced and done. There is no other choice. I will always be both Alora and Lark but Alora is the woman."

"I think I understand. If that is how you feel. Just be warned, Ace won't be calling you Alora--she's infernally stubborn that way, she'll most likely be using your childhood name of Lark."

"I suppose I can live with that."

"Good. I love us being together especially when I can do this." He cupped his hands on either side of her face, pulling her close; he gave her a scorching kiss that made her toes curl in her boots. She leaned into him, drinking in his warmth and his scent.

"The scent of cinnamon is getting stronger in here." She tapped him on his chest. "I think somebody is getting all hot and bothered."

"Hot and bothered, would be right." His voice deepened, and she arched her back when he reached to cup one of her breasts.

"I don't think this is neither the time nor the place to get into some hanky panky."

"I thought we were going to make love." His eyes sparkled at her, as he splayed his fingers out to take the full globe of her breast into his hand.

"Garrett. The crew might hear us or walk in on us!" He looked toward the door. "Not now. It's been made sound proof and I locked it. Nothing short of a huge magical blast will get through that door."

"And that's supposed to make me feel better?" He gave her a cheeky grin and wink.

"I can't get you out of my head, Alora. I've had a taste of you now, and I can't get rid of my insatiable appetite for you." He smiled, making her heart lighten and her throat constrict.

"I love you, Garrett, but we've just...."

"Don't tell me you're already worn out...perhaps, I underestimated you. Our kind is known for our sexual appetites, but then, you are part human." He sighed forlornly.

"You are not playing fair."

"I don't think there's any rules in the art of seduction, save for the fact that your partner must be willing. I don't see it written in stone anywhere that I have to play fair." He chuckled. She groaned.

"You will absolutely be the death of me."

"Only for you to rise again!" He sobered. "Don't even jest about that, Alora." He swallowed thickly. "Unfortunately, there are ways to kill us. Few and far between ways, but they do exist. I don't ever want to contemplate losing you. I couldn't bear it." His choked up voice made her want to kiss him, so she did.

Running her hands through his hair, she pushed him back so he sat on his desk. "I think we should ease our minds by loving not arguing." He let out almost an animalistic growl, nuzzling at her neck. She could feel his want for her. It was palpable.

His magic whirled around her. She threw her head back to take it all in. Ruby red mists entangled them both. Slowly, they rose up into the air. Rose petals rained down from the suddenly cloud-filled ceiling.

"What are you doing?"

"Romancing my love. You are my lady, and as such you should have clouds of perfection to lay on."

"How?"

"I've had many years to fully perfect my magical art. You deserve to have everything Alora--let me give it to you."

They hovered in the air; she'd never noticed how high the ceilings on his spaceship were until now.

Springy softness enfolded her, as they relaxed on the magically conjured cloud.

"You are amazing."

"Now let me love you."

He ran his hand up her leg, pushing her dress up until it was bunched around her waist. "You know magic can come in handy at the most opportune moments." As he'd done before, their clothing magically melted away.

"I was fond of that dress." She pulled him up to meet her hungry lips. He abandoned her lips to worship her breasts, and then he moved lower. Her skin erupted in tingling little goose pimples. She lost herself in ecstasy as he brought her to the highest of peaks, cresting her on wave upon wave of pleasure.

She was in heavenly bliss.

Chapter Seventeen

Garrett lowered them to the ground. She stared at him, fully clothed once more.

"Would you like to get me my clothes back as well? I just don't know why you can't do it the good old-fashioned way."

"I thought we--"

"Taking our clothes off, not making love, you insufferable man."

"I like to look at you naked."

"Yeah, well, I'm getting a little bit chilly now that I'm not wrapped up in your arms!"

His facial features creased with alarm. "I can't have that." In the next second, she was wearing the clothes she'd been wearing before they'd made love.

"We can't have anyone suspecting what we were doing..."

"By the look on your face, I don't think they'll have to do much guessing." She smirked.

The floor beneath them jolted. He caught her before she could lose her footing.

"What's going on?"

"Exactly what I want to know."

Wind ripped into the room. The force of the gust made her fall backwards, and pulled Garrett forward.

"Garrett!" she screamed. Watching in horror, as the suction of the whirlwind actually overpowered him.

She had to do something. She had to help him.

His body went limp. When she went to stand up, she fell to her knees again. Something in the air was making her feel queasy. Her head felt as if it was going to explode. She could only imagine how it affected Garrett.

A light glittering on her hand made her look down. Her wedding band glowed purple. Her heart froze.

She reached deep inside, hoping to draw upon her Phoenix fire. Instead, she felt the power dam being blocked.

She still had her humanoid powers though.

Raising her hand, she activated her telekinesis, willing Garrett's body back to her.

His body jolted, and actually moved a few inches toward her.

Red alert klaxons rang through the ship, nearly deafening her.

"Garrett, fight it!"

His eyes were closed. He had to have been knocked unconscious by the initial gale.

Blackness swirled around her, finally transforming into an object of solid matter.

Glittering obsidian-colored eyes looked at her. Her stomach clenched and unclenched.

She swallowed the lump in her throat. Her powers weren't affecting the dark beast in any way. "I am an Immortal of the Dark Realms. Garrett Firestorm is now my prisoner.

I will take him back with Lord Tann. Now, Lord Tann's collection shall be complete. For he has the Great Lord Firestorm--his power is unrivalled until now. You may give this message to Lord Firestorm's forces. Tell them the Crimson Phoenix has fallen never to rise again."

Garrett groaned. The Dark Immortal waved his hand, and roaring winds ripped through the room again, knocking her to the floor. She pushed herself up. Her heart ached.

"Garrett!" she shouted, hoping that somehow she'd be able to summon him back. But it was no use. Garrett was gone.

Chapter Eighteen

Garrett's body felt sluggish to the extreme. Never before had he felt so drawn or so powerless. He should have seen through Lord Tann's ruse, he should have been on his toes.

Instead, he'd allowed his love for Alora to cloud his judgment. It had been his greatest gift, and ultimately his greatest downfall.

They'd placed him in a cage lined with material that would suppress his powers. Darkness surrounded him. He had to hold on--he had to wait until the time came when he'd be back to full strength and able to escape.

"Not so powerful now, are you, Lord Firestorm?"

Lord Tann looked down upon him from the high perch he claimed on his regal throne. He'd become the self-professed Emperor of this part of the Galaxy.

"You've come so far from the gutter I dumped you in when we cast you out of our fold," Garret said.

"Ah. Yes. The Shunning. I recall it well. I also recall your hand in getting me thrown out. You were so cordial when you testified against me at the High Hearing. You could have saved me--you could have intervened--instead, you condemned me. I had to become what I am. I had to turn to the Dark Realms in order to continue using magic. My own light magic had been stripped from me. I went from being one of the most revered Immortals of Magick, to nothing at all."

"Killing humans for your own pleasure couldn't go unpunished. Just because you are more powerful does not mean they deserved what you did to them--you are just as bad as the evil we hunted."

"I only killed the very lowest humans. They were no good. They were nothing. They were not fit to take up our airspace."

"They had not been given a proper trial, and many could not help the situations they were in. Luck had not been kind to them--so you believed you'd be merciful by exterminating them. You were nothing! You are nothing!"

"You can say that now, but look at where you sit. The High Council, they took everything from me! And now, I plan to take everything from you--starting with your precious little bird, Alora...or is it, Lark?"

"Lark?" A woman to his side asked, seemingly astonished.

"Go and amuse yourself with something else, Dianna. You are not needed here."

"I know you just said Lark--and while it could be just coincidence, I had a child named Lark."

"A child that you abandoned without a single glance. Either shut up or leave, Dianna. If you don't, I just might decide to put you in a cage as well."

The woman named Dianna fell silent. Garrett looked at her. She had the same black hair, and her eyes--commanded his gaze just like Alora's. She had to be Alora's birth mother.

His chest constricted again. The damn poison lining the cage was making it

difficult to breathe. Tann had researched all of his weaknesses and now, he was making good use of the information he'd found.

"You can't kill Alora. She is well protected."

"Oh, I can't kill her while she's on the ship. Getting you off was a miracle to be sure--your crew almost foiled my attempt, but they were not prepared for all of the distractions I'd put in place. I knew that Trey would lead me right to you. I always knew that Trey's heart was for the side of good--and I used that to my advantage. Clever, no?" Tann laughed.

Dianna was getting paler by the minute. Could the thought of Alora being in danger actually affect her? She looked like an Ice Queen, and yet, maybe just maybe, a heart did beat deep within her chest.

"You can go to hell, Tann," Garrett shouted.

"I don't think they'd let me rule down there." He laughed. "No, I'm going to remain right where I am."

"One way or the other, I'm getting out of this prison," Garrett promised.

"Same old Garrett that I remember. You always did have a high opinion of yourself. You always did believe that you were better than everyone else. Well, now the mighty hath fallen. You are done with."

Garrett tried to stand up, his legs turned to jelly, and he collapsed once again. His head throbbed. When he closed his eyes, a vision of Alora met him. She was beautiful in her fine ruby red gown, with her eyes sparkling with worry?

He shook the vision out of his head, opening his eyes; he stared at the high dais where Tann sat.

Dust particles floated in the air, beasts howled in the distance. Men and woman sat at long tables around the cage. He was placed in the center of the expansive room, chained to the ceiling by a metal he hadn't seen in hundreds of years.

Tann had definitely gone to great lengths in anticipation of his capture.

Evil Bastard.

He shut his eyes once more. His body quaked again when he was met with her image.

"Garrett." Her voice filled his head.

He clapped his hands over his ears.

She sounded terrified. His heart broke. She'd found a way to activate the psychic chain between them. His breathing became ragged. He couldn't allow her to pinpoint his location in space. If she did, she'd come zeroing in on him like a homing pigeon.

Summoning his strength, he attempted to break the link between them. She pushed back. He was now sprawled out on the floor, with his belly on the ground. Dealing with the cage, and her pulling at his psyche was literally bringing him down.

"I need to know where you are--your crew is eager to rescue you."

"I don't need rescuing."

"I think you do." Her consciousness whispered against his.

"Leave me alone," he shouted. His telepathic link with her was secure--no other magic could impregnate the bond shared between mates.

"I can't. Just as you would not abandon me when I needed you. You have rescued me so many times--you have literally brought me back from the edge of hell. Let me help you now, when you need it."

"I am Garrett Firestorm, I need no one's help, and I certainly do not need your help, Alora. You got me in this mess in the first place, and now, now, you can just bugger off!"

Pain hit him like a fist to the gut. He gasped for air. He shared in the pain she was suffering from his insult.

"You lie. I know you would never say such cruel things to me unless you thought you were protecting me. I'll figure it all out, Garrett. I'm not the same woman I was when you found me. I have found my strength. I found you. And, I'm not letting go without one hell of a battle."

She broke the connection between them, causing him to breathe a sigh of relief. She wouldn't come for him now--or would she?

"Have we regained full control of all of the fleet's operating systems?" Alora asked shakily.

"All ships report ready for action." Lieutenant Mitchell stared at her.

Bryce had taken control of the ship and then, he'd immediately given command to her. It puzzled her--but he'd told her that it was custom for the mate to take over control when these sorts of situations occurred.

"Tell me again, what you saw." Bryce gave her an encouraging glance, making her forge ahead. They all clustered together on the bridge--everyone except for Matilda and Ace.

"He was being restrained. I think they had him in a cage protected with some sort of substance that prohibited the use of his powers. The area was a cruel unforgiving place. More like a Great Hall of a large building I'd say. I couldn't really glean anything else. I just felt Garrett's pain."

"That means whatever they lined the cage with must not only be restricting his powers but also making him sick. I'd say it's a form of poison that affects our kind." Bryce nodded his head, grief etching his features.

Merrick stepped forward. "I say we start trying to track him, with Lady Alora's permission, of course." He bowed gallantly to her.

"I don't understand why you need my permission. I've already told you to do whatever needs to be done."

"You fail to grasp what Merrick is referring to, Alora. We'll need to hook you up to a device that will cerebrally attach to the ships systems. From there our computers will be able to get the coordinates to wherever Tann is having Garrett held."

"The systems were disrupted by a virus that Tann created solely for these ships. Are you quite certain all of the bugs are out?"

"We have done a complete disinfection of all systems. Our top men and women worked twenty hours straight on it, Alora. We told you we would leave no stone unturned. I assure you, my dear, Alora that you are totally safe. Ace would have my balls if we unintentionally fried your brain, not to mention the damage that Garrett would inflict upon me on his return."

"In that case, hook me up."

"Once you are in the systems you'll have to re-forge the psychic chain between you and Garrett."

She took a shaky breath. "Easier said than done, Bryce. He wasn't too pleased

with me contacting him the first time. I have a feeling there's more to this than meets the eye, he doesn't want me to see something--or worse, he fears for us--I don't think he wants us to come and save him."

"Lord Tann has probably set up an ambush for us." Mitchell sighed. "We all know the sordid history he and Garrett share. I don't even know why he let Tann on this ship in the first place."

"Because, he didn't believe that Tann had become so skilled in the art of dark magic. Besides, Mitchell, it isn't your place to question Lord Garrett's choices."

"Aye, sir." Mitchell sighed and cast his eyes downward.

"What sordid past?" She pinned Bryce with an unwavering stare. Out of the corner of her eye, she watched as Merrick and a few other crewmembers started to ready some form of machinery. It didn't look too threatening. She could live with wearing it for a little while.

"Tann had a penchant for killing humans. It gave him his kicks."

She gasped.

Bryce nodded his head. "He managed to keep his dirty little secret a secret from our kind until one fateful night. Garrett and I were out on a mission. Garrett had left me to investigate a disturbance. What he found was Tann finishing up one of his nasty little deeds. You see, Tann only killed what he deemed to be useless humans. They were prostitutes, beggars, drug addicts, men and women alike that had fallen down on their luck. If the killing lust hit him, he satisfied it. Garrett had an exception to what Tann was doing. When he discovered Tann a titanic battle went down. I came onto the scene to witness power such as I'd never before beheld. That day, Garrett truly came into his own. It is why he is so revered, why he is so lauded within our magical community. Garrett values all life--no matter what species, or ability of the individual. He doesn't care if you have all the magic in the world--or none at all."

"So, what happened to Tann after Garrett was done with him?"

"After Garrett had literally beaten him to a pulp--we took him back to our home realm for our Judges to decide his fate. They decided to strip from him, his magic, his immortality and they shunned him for all time from our realms."

"And, yet, he still lives--didn't this happen a long time ago?"

"Garrett took Tann down three hundred and ten years ago. I'd say Tann has aged a bit, but not as drastically as he should have. The Dark Arts are probably extending his life--stupid little fucker that he is," Bryce said.

"So how do we kill him?"

"As far as I know, he should be able to be killed the good old-fashioned way." Bryce grinned.

"But what if he's been given Immortality from the Dark Realms? You said yourself after Garrett was abducted that it was powerful dark magic that infiltrated our systems and took him from us. What if that same powerful dark magic has imbued Tann with an elixir of life?"

"Tann will still die in the end, even if Garrett has to kill him in his own Phoenix fire. He will die. Garrett has been waiting for an excuse to kill him these many years--Garrett always knew what Tann had become even if our kind was unwilling to see the truth. Remember, for every dark soul, there is an every greater light soul there to force back the darkness. Garrett is the soul of good sent to keep Tann from propagating his

tyranny."

"It is ready, dad."

"Good, thank you, Merrick. He's a boy wonder. I swear his intelligence even exceeds my own." Bryce winked at her, gesturing for her to follow him to the other side of the bridge.

He pointed to the chair. "Sit down there and I'll put this cap on your head."

"It just looks like a regular run of the mill beaded cap."

"It's meant to look that way, so we can wear these devices without being suspected. Of course, you won't be going off world with this device on your head, so keeping a low profile isn't on our to-do list. When you first feel it connect with your consciousness, you might experience a rush of emotions, a flood of old memories, and maybe, you might even see a glimpse of the future. Our seers made up this device to not only connect with our mates, but also to wear in case they needed to amp up their own telepathic abilities. I hear that you possess human telepathy, as well as the magical kind that Garrett and I have. This might be interesting when used on you." Smiling at her, he gently placed the beaded cap on her head.

As soon as the coolness met her hotter head, her sight was filled with visions. They mixed together, blending so she didn't know where one began and one left off. Scenes from her childhood hit her first. She saw her adopted mother smiling benevolently at her, while ever so politely telling her to go away. She saw her adopted father losing his patience with her, and most importantly, she finally saw the strange glances that her people served her with when they thought she was not looking. Even then, they believed she was an abomination. Why hadn't she seen it sooner?

She'd been an outcast living in denial for most of her life.

All of that had changed when Garrett had arrived on her world.

Garrett.

Pain struck her again, and this time, she saw Garrett as she remembered him that fateful day on Delania.

Tall, strong, and larger than life.

"No more memories, Garrett, I need you in real time." Her whispered words were barely audible.

"Alora, are you okay?" Bryce touched her shoulder gently. Wincing, she nodded her head, keeping track of what was real and unreal was proving challenging.

Her head raced. Images blurred together. She needed to see Garrett as he was, right at the moment.

Suspicion plagued her. Was Garrett purposefully trying to block her attempts?

'Let me in.' She willed, battling him for a breakthrough.

'Leave me alone. Go now. Run back to Delania.'

'You stupid son of a bitch. I'm not going to let you wind me up like this. You are deliberately keeping me from finding out where you are. Why? Do you think that we are facing an ambush?'

'I don't think. I know. Only death awaits you if you come to rescue me.'

The finality of his words hit her like she'd been socked in the gut.

Chapter Nineteen

Alora's pulse raced.

"Alora? Come on, ease yourself out of the trance," Bryce commanded softly.

Bryce took hold of her wrist to gain her attention. She shook him off.

"No," she moaned. "You don't understand. I must continue."

"You are going to give yourself a bloody stroke if you don't calm yourself down--do you hear me? Your human frailties are getting the beating of a lifetime. This is just too much for you."

"Human frailty, my ass. I'll have to relay that remark to Ace."

Bryce looked stricken. "Don't you dare! On second thought, go ahead. Just don't come back on me if you're lying in a hospital bed later on tonight."

"I won't be beaten. Not by Garrett, and definitely not by this asshole Tann. Garrett!" she screamed.

The crewmembers let out shocked exclamations.

"I'm going back in..." She grimaced, perspiration breaking out across her brow.

"That's it, Alora. Just keep on being a stubborn little bitch, you're more like Ace than I gave you credit for. We're getting a fix on Garrett's position. Glean a bit more from his mind, and we should have it."

"Will do." Gasping, she prodded his mind further. Garrett kept attempting to evade him, and at every turn she intercepted him. He was good at the mind tricks, but she wasn't exactly a bloody novice in the field either. She'd had loads of practice when it came to telepathy and now she was showing him that.

'You come to your death. Please, Alora. I'm begging you to keep your nose out of this! Only your death awaits you if you persist in this foolhardy mission.'

'Phoenixes can be reborn!'

His telepathic groan of anguish made her heart clench tightly.

'I will be fine, Garrett. I'm not the one in peril. At the moment that would be you, my dearest.'

Silence answered her. He'd given up and was apparently giving her the age-old silent treatment.

Living with that was easy. As long as he was there to break the silent treatment he was now giving her.

'We'll be there as soon as we can possibly travel through space.'

He remained silent.

In his silence, she sensed something else. Something he was desperately attempting to conceal.

'Garrett, you shouldn't keep any secrets from me.' Her mind wandered. Magic bonded them together, could magic take her to him? What if she used the psychic chain between them as a conduit for her soul? Would she actually be able to travel through time and space and rematerialize wherever he was?

'NO!' His telepathically shouted command rattled her brain, making her gasp with

pain. Her loud moan caught the attention of all of the crewmembers once more.

"We've got it, Alora!"

Her brain was numb. Whatever Garrett had done had almost put her down for the count. Gasping for air, she broke the link between them.

She leaned forward, crossing her arms over her abdomen.

"You'll be fine. Deep cleansing breathes. Shake it off. Did he use force to push you from his mind? I saw you clinging to the psychic chain with almost your last breath. Thank the Graces; he broke it before it could kill you. You can't take that much strain, Alora. Your body was only made to endure so much," Bryce murmured.

She shouldered another large gasp for air. Dragging in a huge lungful, she pushed herself up from the chair, and took off the beaded cap. Handing it to him, she tried to collect her nearly shattered nerves.

"When will we arrive at our destination?" she asked shakily.

"You don't look fit to go down with the landing party. I will take a strike force down to the surface. We'll use our combined magic to break him out," Bryce said.

"I'm going with you, Bryce."

"No. I can't allow you to put yourself in the line of fire--especially when it's a foreseen certainty that Tann wants to use you to torture Garrett. He will drive Garret to the breaking point by using you. You don't understand...you will be safer here!"

The sound of someone arriving on the bridge drew both of their attention. Ace stood framed in the doorway, leaning on a walking staff on one side, and using Matilda as support on her other side. Her color had nearly returned. Over the last twenty-four hours, she'd made a nearly miraculous recovery.

"Bryce, you listen to Alora. You ceded to her authority willingly, you can't exactly renege and take back the mantle of command, not now. You must pay attention to Alora."

"You shouldn't be up and about, Ace." Bryce's face hardened. He looked ready for a good and proper row. She smiled serenely at him.

"Yet, here I stand. I thought you'd be put to ease to know that I could get out of bed, much less come down here to set you straight. Matilda has been monitoring the situation up here, she thought maybe Alora would need our help." Every time Ace said Alora it sounded as if she was forcing the word out. Alora understood her desire to call her Lark, but she just couldn't resign herself to that name.

"Thank you, Ace," Alora murmured.

Ace inclined her head to her and smiled. "We women need to stick together when the men start to get dumb ideas. Besides, Bryce, you will need Alora. She'll know exactly how to free Garrett."

"I will?"

Ace sighed. "You should know once you see him in live person. The bond the two of you share will hopefully kick in and give you the knowledge to get the both you out of there alive."

"I'll take your word on it, and hope that it comes to pass." She sighed.

"When was the last time you gave your body nourishment? You have dark hollows under your eyes. I would take what little time we have before we arrive in the Obsidian Sector and get some food and rest." Bryce eyed her nervously. "If you're so bloody adamant about coming along, I won't stand in your way. When have I ever held

great women back? I'm not about to start now. Just be sure that you're ready, and know that I will be there guarding your back."

"I wish I could tag along," Ace said softly.

Alora gave her a horrified stare. "I don't think you can muster the energy, even now, you look like you're getting drained."

"I wish I could dispute that, Alora, but you're right," she relented. "I am starting to feel quite peaked. I think I should like to go back and rest now. Give me a few months, and I'll be back and raring to go."

"I have no doubt, my love." Bryce nodded his head, herding them toward the bridge doors. "Let me lead the armada into the Obsidian Sector, and when we arrive, I will send someone to wake you, Alora."

"Thank you." She smiled at him. Bryce still seemed troubled, as if the weight of a thousand bricks were on his shoulders. A heavy burden, indeed. As she turned to leave, she reached for his hand. "Do you think we'll get there on time?" Her heart leapt up into her throat. She almost felt suffocated for a mere second.

"I think as long as you hold onto hope and continue to send your love to Garret via your psychic chain that anything is possible."

"I pray you are right."

"I'm rarely wrong." He smiled showing his brilliant white teeth the grin was so wide. "Just go back and eat, sleep, and try to be merry. Don't dwell on the negative, be positive and if all goes our way, we'll have Garrett back."

"He's so powerful--how did they get him in the first place?"

"I suspect that Lord Tann has been planning this since he was exiled. His heart is black, and he knew all of the ways to bring one of us down. He figured out a way to breach our systems, and with that freaking computer virus of his, he crippled us long enough to distract Garrett, and snatch his prize."

"And now he lures me as bait so he can kill me in front of Garrett, therefore causing him more pain than if he just killed Garrett personally."

"You know." Bryce sighed. "I'd hoped you wouldn't jump to that conclusion, alas, you are right. Exploiting our greatest weaknesses is a trait shared by all of our enemies. That's why he ordered the hit on Ace, and why he wants to draw you out to his planet where he rules supreme. In fact, as soon as we enter the Obsidian Sector, we'd best be ready for a struggle. I'm sure a nice little welcoming committee will be waiting for us."

"Bring it on." She grinned back at him, and walked out the door.

* * * *

Garrett felt like he'd walked through the pits of hell. His head throbbed mercilessly and his arms and legs suddenly felt numb. The clothing he wore made him feel even hotter. He had the urge to draw on his magic, and he couldn't. It was taxing him to the point of no return. He needed to figure a way out of here.

The Great Hall had grown quiet somewhere in the early morning hours, after the revelry had finally died down. Celebrating a capture of his caliber was something that had deserved several hours of debauched merriment.

Bile rose in his throat as he thought back to Tann's form of pleasure mixed with cruelty. He couldn't exist in the darkness for much longer. It was literally starving his soul.

The screams of unwilling women still drifted to him from afar. Clapping his

hands over his ears, he tried to float away from the misery. If only he could astral project, maybe then, he'd be able to survey the holding he was in and take a look for any signs of visible weakness the structure might possess.

"Where are you, you saucy little bitch? I'll have you one-way or another...don't draw this out. I like the hunt just as well as any other men, but now, I want my prey!"

Thundering footsteps approached.

A woman sped around the corner. Her hair was matted with blood; her eyes were wide with fear. She was bedraggled. The dress she wore was ripped in several places. She skidded to a halt near his cage. Looking up, she met him with an imploring gaze.

"Help me!"

"I can't." Garrett pushed against his bars, adrenaline filling his veins.

"You must help me! I am about to be--" Her bone chilling scream pierced the air when her pursuer sped into the Hall.

"There you are, you little slut. I told you to wait for me in my quarters."

"I won't be your whore anymore. I want to be free!"

"Freedom isn't something I readily give my slaves. You aren't good for anything else save satisfying my carnal lusts. Get used to me using you!"

It was Tann.

Garrett railed against his cage, making it shake and shutter.

"I wouldn't exhaust yourself, Garrett. Nothing you do will allow you to break free of that prison. I made quite certain that it would withstand any sort of force you might decide to throw at it. I have learned from your little escapade with Emperor Xian. The Red Dawn won't be rising anytime soon." He laughed a cruel sound that made Garrett want to hurt him even more.

"Let her go. You must have some semblance of compassion hidden deep inside of you. How can you cause her such suffering?"

"I love it. It only makes me get off more, didn't you know that, Garrett? It makes my day to see her writhing in pain while pumping my cock inside of her, I like to make it as painful as possible for them, and you'd be surprised what black magic can do to make that dream a reality. She should be ever grateful that I won't be killing her anytime soon. You see, she's become my favorite, and making her my favorite over and over again, gives me the greatest satisfaction. But then, you knew that when you dragged me back to our Hidden Realms so many years ago. You should be pleased with yourself. You got exactly what you wanted--except, you should have hunted me down when you had the chance. Instead, you let me run amok among the very humans that you always tried to protect. You are such a sweet man--you've got one hell of a furious temper--but you're soft when it comes right down to it. You're as soft as this one's pussy. What would you do to me now, if you could get to me?" His eyes flashed black light at him.

He roared with rage. Making the cage shake again, as its hinges rattled.

The woman beside him sat stock still in fear. He could almost taste her apprehension.

"Should I make you watch, as I take her until she screams, and cries begging me for mercy?"

His stomach clenched again, he couldn't allow Tann the pleasure of his reaction. He should have just disregarded all the rules by killing Tann all of those years before. He should have wasted him just like Tann had wasted so many countless human lives. He'd

allowed him to go free, believing that the Judges of his realm had made the right decision--the just decision. Now, he knew that he'd made a mistake--a horrendous mistake that he would rue and revile himself for, for the rest of his life.

He would make Tann pay.

"I can see the fury in your eyes and written across your features. How very touching. You are worried about this good for nothing, here. Well, she's good for fucking but other than that, she's a witless little thing." He dragged the woman up by her hair. She wailed with pain.

"Really. My dear, you should save your energies for later...I intend to have a few hours of good fucking fun. On second thought, perhaps, we should start our fun right here, with an audience."

"Please, help me. You are the great Crimson Phoenix, you are legend." Her fervent plea made something snap inside of him. His heart never felt so heavy.

"Legends are mainly made up of myth, Blanche. You should feel humbled to know that I have elected you as my own personal sex slave. You do realize that there were many other women vying for the sacred position."

"Not sacred. Vile." Her words enraged Tann. He yanked a table over and flung her over it, pushing up her dress. She struggled against him, only to earn a few more good hits to various parts of her body. Her struggles were futile. He closed his eyes, blocking out the scene of violence, as Tann raped and beat her.

He took another tantrum fighting his prison in his need to get out. The only thing it accomplished was nothing, except he now felt as if he was dying. Listening to her screams and being absolutely helpless was the worse torture that Tann could serve him with. And Tann knew it.

He reveled in it.

"I'm so sorry." He opened his eyes again to be met with her tear-streaked face. "Forgive me." The woman looked at him one last time pleadingly, before Tann picked her up and threw her over her shoulder.

"Come you tasty little filly, lets go and fill you full of some more of my seed. I'll have you swollen with my child soon enough and I'll delight in every single grueling moment of it for you." Tann sniggered.

"Oh, yes, one more thing before I forget, Garrett. When your little damsel arrives, I'm going to give her the same greeting I just gave little Blanche here. So, don't worry, your lover will know what having a real man is like."

Frenzied rage consumed him once again. Standing up, he threw himself against the cage, causing it to swing from side to side. "I'll see you rot in the fires of hell, soon enough, Tann!!!"

"Too little, too late." Tann smiled at him, slapped Blanche on the ass, and walked out of the Hall.

He slid slowly down the side of the cage. Never before had he felt so distressed. Fatigue invaded his body, paralyzing him. Blanche's screams echoed in his ears.

For the first time in hundreds of years, he hanged his head in defeat.

Chapter Twenty

"Alora! Wake up!" Matilda burst into her bedroom, already wearing her day clothes.

"What time is it?" Alora mumbled sleepily.

"Time for you to get up. Dad hoodwinked us!"

"What do you mean? What did Bryce do?"

"Mom is infuriated. He went behind her back, transported us off the flagship and put us along with Trey and his men on one of mom's battle corvettes. He even programmed the ship to fly us back to the boundary between normal space and his realm! Mom is beside herself...she's beyond livid."

Through her haze of drowsiness, she finally comprehended what Matilda was babbling on about. Sitting up in bed, she grunted angrily. "How dare he do that!"

"That's exactly what mom said, before she went into a whole other rain of expletives, words that I'm not allowed to say."

"Can we turn the ship around and head back to the Obsidian Sector?"

"Merrick is already on it. He's trying to deprogram the autopilot. Dad really mucked it up big this time around."

"He went against my orders--why would he even give me command if he didn't want to take me seriously?"

"I wouldn't worry about it, Dad will get his due from mom. I can't say I blame him--he's only trying to help us. That Tann guy must be really bad news if he got Uncle Garrett. I shudder to think of what sort of black magic he'll pull on the landing party. I think Dad thought he'd be lucky if he could just get Uncle Garrett out alive."

Alora hurried into action, wishing that Garrett had taught her how to magically dress herself.

"You look like you need some coffee. I'll go and get it brewed for you while you shower and dress."

"Thanks."

"I'm also going to check with Merrick to see if he's been able to break through Dad's encryption codes yet. Now, we know where Merrick got his advanced intelligence from." Matilda snorted, walking out of the bedroom.

A half an hour later, Alora stood on the bridge with the rest of her team, which, now only consisted of Merrick, Matilda, Ace, Trey and the rest of the loyal androids that hadn't defected with Gertrude. They were working with a skeleton crew--going back into the jaws of the dragon was madness--but they couldn't just leave it as it was. Bryce would need her help--that much she felt sure of.

"Alora, Merrick just broke through the code." Ace stood next to Merrick overlooking his progress. "We should be able to be on the border of the Obsidian Sector in three hours at top speed."

"Then, get us headed in that direction, please."

Ace nodded her head at Merrick. "You heard Alora."

She sidled over to Alora, somehow managing this morning with just a cane to support her weight.

"Are you quite certain we should do this? I know I was mad at Bryce earlier, but my head has cooled down, and I'm starting to see the logic in his reasoning."

"You aren't getting cold feet are you, Ace?"

"I just know that I have everything to lose. If we go back, I couldn't take it if something happened to any of you. We've come so far."

"Ace, we aren't going to fall into the clutches of the enemy. At least, you all won't be. I'm the only one going into this nightmare."

"Not alone, you aren't." Ace shook her head empathically at her.

"I have to go alone. Merrick and Matilda are not old enough to go into battle."

"We are trained in magical combat," Merrick spoke softly, though his voice was determined.

"Nonetheless, I agree with Lark. I mean, Alora." Ace sighed. "I won't have my children walking into the fire...not when we can easily keep you out of it. I'll accompany Alora."

"Out of the question, Ace. In your current condition, you'll be a risk to yourself. I won't have it," Alora protested.

"And I won't have you going it alone," Ace insisted.

They each battled for their own way.

"I won't be alone. You forget. Bryce and his entire contingent will be down on the surface of whatever planet they sense Garrett on. Didn't you say that there are eight planets in the system, Merrick?"

Merrick nodded his head. "Ten, actually. But only eight are inhabited. The other two are really not fit for humans, not unless they like it really hot, or really cold." He forced out a rattled laugh.

"Fine. So we find which planet Garrett is on, you transport me down..."

Ace cleared her throat. "Alora, this ship doesn't have a functioning transporter. It was damaged in the battle for New Eros. Bryce, being the little mastermind knew that. Hence, the reason why he transported us to this ship. He knew the only way off the ship was through our shuttles. And, seriously, taking a shuttle down to the planet that Tann has Garrett on, wouldn't exactly be covert. Nor would be a good idea if we value living another day. They'd blast us out of the atmosphere as soon as we entered it."

"In that case, we will have to move to plan B," Alora said, sighing.

Matilda looked shocked.

"Is there a Plan B?" she asked.

"Now, there is. Desperate times call for drastic measures. I'll have to figure out a way to reactivate my powers and use them to transport myself down to the surface."

"Oh, what if you lose control?" Merrick asked worriedly. "When one of our kind first comes into our own, our powers are somewhat unpredictable--and they can go off on the drop of a hat. You just never know. You could end up all tapped out--you could freeze, you could be left at the mercy of Tann and his men. You have to see the idiocy in that idea, Alora." He looked plaintively at her, somehow jarring her senses. Right at the moment, the glint in his eyes reminded her keenly of Garrett. She sighed.

"I'll make sure nothing goes wrong."

"Alora, none of us are infallible. Maybe this time, the rescue is just out of your

hands. Let the professionals take care of it," Ace suggested. "We can access the damage that Bryce is inflicting upon the enemy, but if we're smart, we won't get involved." Ace stared imploringly at her. Unwavering determination lit her eyes, determination that would quickly fade if they found Bryce and his ships falling beneath Tann's onslaught. Ace would walk blindly into the battle to save Bryce; she only wished that Ace would understand her position. She couldn't leave Garrett in the clutches of the enemy as long as she drew breath.

"Mother, we have something on long range sensors," Merrick's voice cracked.

"What?" Ace and Alora waltzed over to control area.

"This isn't good." Merrick's voice dropped. "I'm sending an urgent message back to Dad's people right now. We need them. We can't face what lies ahead alone."

"Merrick, really. Didn't I ever teach you to not jump the gun?"

"I'm not jumping the gun, mother." He gave her an exasperated sigh. "Once you read the information I have here, you're going to want me to put an urgent flag on the message I'm drafting."

"Spit it out, Merrick," Ace ordered.

"Sensors are picking up a massive influx of dark energy coming from the Obsidian Sector. At last count, dad and Garrett had twenty-four ships in the fleet when we take in account The New Eros Space Defense."

"And the other side? Tann's side?" Ace's face drained of color.

"I'd say there are over one hundred ships on their side, and they look as if they're multiplying as we speak. For whatever reason, Tann is stockpiling a huge force of power--if Dad and the others were caught off guard--if Tann somehow managed to cloak the ships until dad wandered into that Sector...there's no telling what sort of damage our fleet has suffered." His agonized eyes fixed on both of them.

Pain seared Alora's heart. This wasn't exactly what she'd expected. But then, with a bugger like Tann they should have been expecting the worst possible scenario.

"Oh, my God." Ace had to grip a hold of the Captain's seat to keep from losing her balance. Alora's head reeled.

"They must have been in for a hell of a rude awakening," Alora forced out. "Is there any way to get the engines to move faster? How long will it take for us to receive casualty reports? How could we be getting by without taking catastrophic losses? We have to do something!"

"We're pushing it to the limits as it is, Alora." Merrick sighed.

"What about Dad?" Matilda gasped. "What if--" Horror streaked across her porcelain doll features. Her eyes widened to the point of nearly falling out of her head.

"Don't say it, Matilda," Ace whispered. "Your father will be fine. He's gotten into worse fixes than this. He'll be giving as good as they are. What we need to do right now, is get in there to help him, until more reinforcements arrive. Merrick, I know Garrett and Bryce's ships can move fast. Far faster than this heap of junk. How quickly do you think reinforcements can get here from the Immortal Realm?"

"They should be able to get to the Obsidian Sector in less than four hours once they receive the transmission. I've told them that it's of the utmost serious nature. Once they receive the communiqué, I'm certain they'll use whatever means necessary to get there on time, even if they have to open up a magical space portal."

"Can they do that?" Alora queried, hope flaring in her heart.

"They can do anything." Merrick nodded his head solemnly. "They won't let Garrett and Bryce down, not when they know how grim the situation is. If we don't stop them, Tann and his armies will ramrod across most of the galaxy before we can make a stand. We have to make that stand right now, and try to take out as many of the enemy as possible. Even if we do that, we might not win. There's no telling if he's placed pockets of darkness around the known galaxies. We could literally be fighting the shadows."

"Then, we continue on our set course to the Obsidian Sector. I suggest we do what we have to do, to get this ship ready to make a blazing trail of glory through the border between the Vandalia Sector and the Obsidian Sector," Ace said.

"I'm scared." Matilda's eyes continued to widen with her heart felt and honest admission.

"You don't have to come with us, Matilda. We'll drop you and Merrick off before we reach the border." Ace stroked Matilda's hair lovingly.

"You don't understand. I'm not scared for myself. I'm scared of what will happen to the rest of the galaxy if we fail. It will turn into mass chaos. Nothing will ever be the same again. Even now, I can feel it. The waves of despair are rippling through. Change is coming."

Merrick coughed, clearing his throat to gain the attention of everyone else.

"We'll be okay. We'll give Tann and his cronies something to remember."

"The odds are against us, Merrick. Don't try to cover your apprehension with bravado. We can do what we need to do to get out alive. If it gets too serious, I want you to grab your sister and get out. I don't want the two of you being little brave soldiers. You can leave that to the over eighteen crowd. We'll do whatever is necessary."

"M-O-M," he whined out the word. "We aren't going to turn tail and run. We're probably even more powerful than you and Alora combined."

"Watch that mouth, son. Alora has just as much Immortal blood running through her veins as you do. You can dismount that high horse of yours. Whatever you can do, Alora can do, too. And, she's older. She's been through much more than the two of you combined. Whatever awaits us, whatever sort of visual horrors that we might see, Alora will be able to deal with it. I won't have you getting scarred for the rest of your life. You're still under eighteen, and I can still affect your destiny. I won't have you being traumatized...you've seen battle, but you haven't seen battle the way that the dark ones fight it. It will curdle your blood--from the tales your father has told me...no, absolutely out of the question. You will remain behind if we have to go in and fight."

"We should stick together," Matilda whispered. "I think it's the only way the mission will be success. Please, mom." Tears welled in her eyes. "We have a better rate of survival, if we use our powers together, don't you understand that? Alora, give me some help here."

"Matilda, Merrick, I'm sorry, but I tend to agree with your mother. She's right; Garrett isn't down in lost paradise--he's been stuck in hell. From what I can tell the world and atmosphere he's been put into is brutally unforgiving. The lowest sorts of humans and dark magical creatures surround him. You won't like the horrors you'll see. Pain, suffering and death lurk around every corner."

"Then, you'll definitely need the two of us. We have a way of casting light into the darkest areas of life. We'll be fine. We're getting older, and I don't need to remind mom that our kind has many operatives that are as young as us."

"My dearest, they might look as young as you and Matilda look, but they've been around for at least two hundred years when they are sent out on missions. That's a far cry from how long you've been alive for. I just hope that when the veil of innocence slips away you won't have any regrets. I can only shield you for so long. Fine." She relented. "You'll stay with us, through thick and thin, and if need be, at least I know I'll be there to protect you."

"Ace..." Alora pulled her away to have a private conversation with her. "Do you honestly think allowing them to come with us is the best idea?"

"They are right. Together we're stronger. And if we don't all stick together, I'm fairly certain that my children would find a way to sneak back into the realm of danger. So, in light of that, I believe they're better off with me, where I can watch out for them."

"Then, that's that."

"Indeed." Ace's eyes twinkled. "It won't be easy, Alora. This will be a claw your way to the finish line sort of battle. It won't be hard--it will be brutally hard."

"I realize that. But up until I met Garrett my life was anything but simple. Contemplating life without him is unthinkable. We've come too damn far."

"And I can't live without Bryce. I tried to time and again, and we always, always found our way back into each other's arms. This time will be no different." Her eyes sparked with loving hope.

"Except this time, we're going to be met with an iron wall of evil." Butterflies swarmed in Alora's stomach. Nervousness made her breath short.

"Alora, we will do what we have to do. In times of great peril, we humans have a way of finding the strength to forge on. It is our greatest character trait. We survive--no matter what, we keep picking ourselves up and going on--if we didn't have that in us, our species wouldn't have survived the first two intergalactic wars."

"We're not all human, Ace. We have mystical blood running through us."

"Aye. And from what I've seen, they can fight like no other being. There is a reason that they are the Guardians of the Universe. They are unstoppable. No one can make them do something they do not want to do. And no matter how hard the darkness tries, light will still stream in through the cracks. You worry about Garrett, with good reason. I have no doubt that he's sitting in hell--he will cope. He will survive, and we will all be celebrating our victory before you know it. We'll be toasting to you and Garrett's future together."

"I think you should stay with the ship when we get there. In your current condition."

"Not a chance. I'm coming with you all. If you leave the ship with my children, then, I'm coming, too."

"I rather thought that Matilda and Merrick would stay behind to watch over you. You're still recovering from grievous injuries."

"I'm feeling much better today. You'd be surprised how knowing that the man you love is walking into danger will put you on the mend."

Sighing, Alora shrugged her shoulders in a fruitless submission. There was no point in continuing her disagreement with Ace. She wouldn't win, no matter how hard she tried. Ace was one mule headed woman.

"Are we there yet?" she asked, turning toward Merrick.

"No. I'll tell everyone when we get there. Don't worry." He raised an eyebrow at

her.

"It's usually the children that ask that." Ace smiled. "Okay. We're going to have to make up a game plan. Merrick, Matilda, if you come with us off ship, I want the two of you to stick together no matter what. If we get separated, you stay together and get back to the ship. Fight your way out and return to wait at the rendezvous point over the border. Once reinforcements arrive, you can give them the intelligence we've gathered."

"I don't like that idea, but we'll go with it," Merrick relented, earning an elbow in the side from Matilda.

"Mom is right. We're like the wonder twins together, so we really should stay together. We can inflict the most damage that way." Matilda grinned deviously.

"Well, for the first time, I'm going to tell the two of you to go absolutely nuts using your magic. Do whatever you want, within reason, of course."

"Goodie. Did you hear that? We get to let loose! Just like Lady Swann taught us! She said we were the best little fighters she'd had in three hundred years!"

"I'm glad to hear it. I'm sorry your father didn't let me in on those details. He didn't even tell me that he was allowing Lady Swann to train you."

"He told us it was our little secret."

"I'm going to have to punch him for that one. He's got no right."

"Would you have allowed us to continue our training when we in the Hidden Realms if you knew?"

"Probably not. I honestly don't know. I think it's good that you know how to defend yourself. I was taught martial arts when I was very young, and I knew how to shoot a pistol when I was eight." She laughed. "My bodyguards thought I should know since I had such an awful penchant of getting in trouble. Fortunately, my mother was too busy with her various paramours and husbands to take any notice."

"I'm starting to think you had about as good a mother as I had," Alora snorted.

Ace gave her an intense stare. "You'd probably be right. Danita was a lot like mother dearest."

"If they were your older sisters, why didn't they inherit?"

Her question caught Ace off guard. "Well..." she started. "It's complicated. Mom knew who my father was, since she was married to him, and she stayed faithful to him long enough to conceive me. With Danita and Dianna--let's just say she would have had to have a lot of men tested to see who was the daddy. They were twins so she knew they were full-blooded sisters. Our line of inheritance states that the future Queen must be able to claim her bloodline as legal. Since Danita and Dianna were..."

"Bastards," Alora muttered. "Just like me."

"Oh, no. I don't mean that as a bad thing. You misunderstand. My own children are illegitimate, so why would I look upon that as being a disdainful stain on your character?"

"How would they have been able to inherit?"

"Simple. I changed the laws once I became Queen. Mother wasn't willing to go through all of the work that it took--and she didn't think that Danita or Dianna had a brain to be shared between them. You know, you're right. Mother wasn't mommy dearest. She could actually be quite cruel when she wanted to. On the other hand, Danita and Dianna weren't too brilliant. Sometimes, I wondered if they actually had a brain in their heads, or if the spot was hollow."

"I know." Alora sighed. "My adoptive mother would always steer the conversation toward something she could grasp when it became too intelligent."

"Mom..." Merrick sounded horrified.

"Yes, Merrick?"

"We're there. And, it doesn't look good. I think our side is losing. We're getting creamed into butter."

Chapter Twenty-One

Garrett could sense the battle raging in space. He could feel it in his bones--even with the cage dampening his abilities. He'd also heard and seen Tann's panic. He was slipping--soon, he'd completely lose control. The Great Hall had emptied only moments before, and now he was alone. He pulled himself up, wincing as pain traveled quickly through his body. His energy was still being siphoned off by the dark magic encasing the cage. His breathing was shallow, and he couldn't stop sweating, despite that, he was glad to be alone.

It was a welcoming change from being constantly ridiculed and having objects thrown at his cage. The taunting and the teasing were nothing in comparison to the guilt weighing on him.

Thoughts of Blanche's agony plagued his every waking hour--and tormented his dreams.

Creaking footsteps carried to him. Someone was shuffling quietly into the hall.

"Lord Garrett?" The voice was softly whispered and he recognized it.

"Dianna." He curtly nodded his head. He was caged like a slave, and yet he still had to retain some of his former dignity.

"The planet has almost emptied of its population. Everyone has been mobilized for the space battle waging above us." Awe mingled with fear flooded her voice.

"I suspected as much." He nodded his head.

"My daughter...she is coming for you, isn't she?"

"I didn't think you thought of her as your daughter. Didn't you give up that right twenty-five years ago?"

"I did what I thought was right at the time. I made a just decision on my part. I made sure she was given to someone who could take care of her. Look at me! I haven't exactly become a success. She fared far better than me, and I can't be looked down upon for that decision in my life. I gave her better than what I've had." She nodded her head solemnly.

"Are you another one of Tann's slave?" he asked bluntly. Her outfit was clean; the dress was made of a fine silk from the planet Elara. She seemed to have it all, but the haunted look in her eyes made him think differently.

She lifted her head proudly. "I am no man's slave. I am favored by one of Tann's top aides. I am not his slave, I am his employee."

He didn't want to have a war of logic or morality with Dianna. All he wanted to do was get out of here before Alora came for him and got herself snatched by the enemy.

"Why are you here? Are you going to free me from my prison?"

"Oh, no! I couldn't possibly. I don't have the ability to release you. If I tried I would be zapped with enough dark energy to kill me. Why do you think the other slaves have not tried to free you? He made an example of one slave before you were put into that cage. We learn well from example." She nodded her head, accentuating her point.

"Then, you are saying you are a slave."

"I am not one of Tann's slaves. That is a blessing upon itself." Shuddering, she crept toward him, stepping out of the shadows and into the dim sunlight that shimmered through the small windows in the Great Hall. Again, he was struck by her physical likeness to her daughter. He swallowed thickly.

"What do you want?"

"I want to be here when Lark comes. I want to look upon her as an adult. I left her when she was four days old. I just want to see the woman she has turned into, is that asking too much? I also want to see her safe." A catch entered her voice. "I do not wish her to come to any harm."

"Being here is only putting you in danger. Why chance your own safety? If Tann caught you conspiring with the enemy, he'd have you flogged, tortured or worse."

"I no longer care. I was once a Lady of New Eros's Royal Court. Now, look at me. My selfishness, greed and lust for power have put me here. I am taking what I deserve, but I will not allow Tann to make my daughter into one of his playthings." She swallowed thickly, her face filling with fear and horror. "That is a fate I would not wish on anyone, least of all my blood. Do you know Lark's father?" Hope creased her features, and carried to her eyes.

"I couldn't say. I have never been told his name."

"He was almost as stunning as you. His name was Lord Lyon." She sighed, he could hear paradise longing in that drawn out sigh. Her eyes flickered away from the look of adoration and sobered to the tortured one she seemed to cleave to.

"I know the name. I also know him from acquaintance," he paused, considering the revelation. "It makes sense. Lark and he share some of the same characteristics." He snorted. Lord Lyon was a powerful Immortal. His magical soul was a Griffin.

"Is he still alive? I mean nothing bad killed him?" She sounded as if she held her breath, waiting for his answer.

"He is still alive," he answered, assuaging her fear.

At his words, she exhaled. "Praise the Gods."

"--And the last time I saw him, he was quite well. I suspect that Lord Tann wants Lark not only because she is my mate, but also because Lord Lyon was one of the judges that condemned him to immortal exile. He is on a path of vengeance, and he wants to take down as many people as he can on that path."

"No." She fell to her knees. "He will make her suffer most dreadfully. I can't allow him to take her. What could I give you that might give you the strength to break out of that cage?"

He thought to contemplate her offer. Could she truly be sincere? Or was she baiting him to set him up for another trap?

Taking a long moment, he studied her wide expressive eyes. No shadow of betrayal haunted their dark depths. Only longing and deep anxiety.

"I don't think there's anything you could do to help. You said yourself that you would be electrocuted if you tried to free me. It would not be worth your life--only to find out that you had sacrificed yourself for naught. I can't allow you to do that."

"What about something like a potion or a food? There must be something! Anything! Please, Garrett! We must put an end to the diabolical plan Tann is putting into motion as we speak!" Desperation colored her tone. "I will try to get you anything. Lord Tann has many items and artifacts that he has taken in his many conquests and captures

of your kind."

He studied her intently. She was serious.

"There are a few things that can aid me in my escape of this cage. One that comes to mind is a healing force that will restore me to my former glory. It's called Unicorn's Ambrosia. It has great rejuvenating powers for my kind."

"Is it part of a Unicorn?" her eyes widened in terror. "That sounds like it's black magic afoot to me." Revulsion consumed her features. "I was raised to believe in the sanctity of the unicorn. To harm one is to damn your soul forever. I will not be a co-conspirator in giving you something of that nature!"

He sighed, rolling his eyes. Was the woman witless? He was an Immortal of the Light, why would he use something if it had caused harm to a Unicorn? She had to be out of her head. Looking around the hall, he suddenly understood--if he stayed much longer here, he too, would be clear out of his sane mind as well. "Of course not. Long ago, it was created by Unicorn Healers to help our kind when we are wounded most direly."

"Like you are now." Understanding tinged her voice. She relaxed her brittle stance.

"Indeed."

"So, it's a potion?"

"No. Indeed, it isn't. It should look like a biscuit. It will be small, heart shaped, and ideally, it should have the Royal Unicorn Crest on it, indicating that it is approved by the Unicorn Royal Family of Magical Immortals."

"I might be able to find that. Lord Tann has a kitchen full of things he takes from his prisoners. You wouldn't have had any of those on you? Because if you did, that is where they would have been taken to."

"Not me, not on my person anyway. And unfortunately, my fleet's stock ran out weeks ago. We had been meaning to return to my home realm to replenish our stores."

"I'm certain there's still a chance he might have a cookie jar full. He's taken many of your kind over the last few years. He says he's taking the Warriors of Light so he can spread his darkness without anyone interfering. There's a great many questionable things I've done in my lifetime, Garrett, but I'm not evil. Wicked, maybe, but not as black as Tann's soul has become. And I certainly do not want to see Lark die. Tann can kill your kind--and he does so in the most excruciating ways. It is most horrible to look upon...I can only hope that paradise awaited them in their final moments. I dream about it, compared to everything else I've seen and I've seen many horrors, the sight of one of your kind dying is enough to make you yourself feel as if you're being murdered. If anything could break one's soul--that is it." Her voice hitched with emotion, she cast her eyes downward. Her entire body was shaking.

"I know." He lowered his voice. "Go now. And try to find that Unicorn's Ambrosia. If you can find it, you should be able to toss it to me, through the slats of the cage."

"I will give it my best shot. You will see me again, Garrett. I will succeed at something in this brutal heartbreaking life of mine. In the end, I shall emerge victorious, for I have failed too many times in my life--as they say, you learn from your mistakes, and I have a long laundry list of those." Turning, her skirts whooshed. Her long hair flew in the wind she created with her movements.

She slowly walked out of the room, hunched forward as if she touted a back

injury. He narrowed his eyes. Dianna might not want to admit it to him, but he didn't think her own Master treated her very well. Rage rolled through him, once more.

"Where is the border space patrol? I can't make head or tails of the mess in front of us," Matilda mused.

"I think the border patrol is in the middle of the battle. By the looks of things the ships from the Vandalia side of the border are fighting for our side. Question is, who is winning?" Ace wondered aloud. She shivered. "Merrick, have you sent the transmission asking for help?"

"Yes, mom. I did that five minutes ago."

"Good. We'll wait until you receive a reply and then, we are joining the fight." Ace's voice turned to steel. "We're going to win this war."

Trey moved forward, breaking his self-imposed silence. "I would like to take a fighter space ship and enter the battle. I understand that you all need to stay here and wait to see if help is going to come, but I can't stand idly by and watch this continue without being right in the middle of the fights."

"I understand, Trey. You'll find the docking bay filled with the sort of ships you need. Just make sure that you leave behind enough ships for us if we need them."

"Thank you, I will." He rushed off the bridge, readying himself for battle.

"I'm joining the fight right now." Alora made to follow Trey.

"No." Ace gripped her arm tightly. "You can't go until we get our answer from Garrett's realms. Don't you want to know if reinforcements will arrive?" Her voice broke. She seemed near to the breaking point. "You aren't the only one with a loved one in harm's way. I won't let you do this--it's insanity to act alone. We will leave the ship in the android's care and we will fight our way through to the planet that Garrett is imprisoned on, but we won't go until we know this is a fight we can win. I won't allow my children to go on a suicide mission. If they say they won't aid us, then, Matilda and Merrick will turn back, and you and I will go on that seemingly hopeless mission, alone."

She threw her arms around Ace. "Thank you," she whispered.

"Hey, you didn't think I'd honestly leave Bryce alone in this fight? I don't think so." She hugged her back.

"Mom. The reply is coming in right now; actually, I think a portal is opening. Fairy Farts!" he exclaimed. "That's some advanced magic at work!"

They turned to look at the shimmering multicolored portal that was taking shape in front of them. Once it became stable, a man and woman emerged from it. Several other men and women followed.

They all looked different, and yet, Alora could sense the power radiating from them.

Off in space, another larger portal opened. Three ships emerged.

"We will need time to amass our fleet. For now, these three ships will have to make due. We can not leave the magical border to our lands undefended." The leader turned to address Ace.

"We understand." Ace bowed to the man in the front. "It is good to see you again, Lord Lyon."

He bowed back to her. "Your Majesty."

"I'm afraid that royal title no longer applies to me. I am a Queen without a

kingdom."

"Indeed, you are not. New Eros will come back to you in due time. For now though, we are happy to have you at this battle."

"My Lord, we are happier to have you here. I didn't think you'd mobilize your forces so quickly and so readily," Ace said.

"It wasn't a hard decision to make. The Council approved it unanimously. We heard the name, and we know it well."

"Lord Tann?" Ace asked.

"Aye. We've sent in agents to retrieve him to no avail. I guess we now know what has been happening to our operatives. We should have sent out a contingent of warriors long before this--it seems as if we have greatly underestimated Tann, and in our superiority complexes, we have put the entire Universe at risk."

"You admit your guilt, then," Alora said angrily, stepping forward. Ace put a hand on her shoulder and pulled her back.

"Cool your jets, dear. You wouldn't want to insult Lord Lyon. He's someone that Garrett definitely wouldn't want you to piss off. So, just bite your tongue and keep your thoughts to yourself. Sure, they neglected to protect us from the evil they tout to fight on a daily basis. Sure, their negligence has put the men we love in dire jeopardy--along with several other innocent humans and immortals alike. Why should we condemn them? They are here now--that's what counts. Who cares how many might die because of their asinine behavior!" Ace raised her voice to a shout. "Just see that it doesn't happen again!" She walked up to Lord Lyon and gave him a scathing glare.

"You are right." He nodded his head. "You are completely right, and we are completely wrong--we've admitted our mistake, now let's move on, shall we?"

He was addressing Ace and yet he stared at Alora. She took a step backward toward Matilda and Merrick. If he stared at her more intently, his gaze was going to bore right through her skin.

"Why's he looking at me like that?" she asked self-consciously.

Matilda shrugged her shoulders. "I have no clue. I guess he likes you."

"Well, he can like some other woman, I'm already spoken for."

Matilda smiled, her eyes glittering with mirth.

"I didn't catch your name," Lord Lyon pointed out, blazing her again with his penetrating gaze.

Ace sighed, "Really, I don't think we have time for all of these social pleasantries. Lord Lyon we are not about to sit down and chat. The time is of the essence. Remember the war waging in front of us and poor Garrett in captivity?"

"Poor is never a term that I would use to describe Garrett Firestorm. You are his mate, are you not?" Lord Lyon asked, his succinct tone making the hairs on the back of her neck bristle. "I can sense him around you--the psychic chain has been forged, by what I can tell."

"I am his mate." Alora kept her answer short and to the point. She didn't know what to make of Lord Lyon but she didn't particularly care for the way he looked at her, so she wasn't about to cozy up with him anytime soon.

"I see. I now understand the anxiety you are feeling. Just try to remain calm, hot heads are never good in times of distress."

"Listen to me, you high and mighty immortal," she began, taking a few more

steps toward him.

Ace intervened, stepping in so she blocked her path.

"Steady on there, Alora. There's nothing to get into a raging tizzy about. Lord Lyon has graced us with his company and his help. You'd do well to show your appreciation. And, even if you don't want to, you should show some respect to the man that sired you, even if he is for all intents and purposes a huge pain in the backside. It is a wonder that you sprung from his loins, but I am sad to say, you did." She nodded her head in somber resignation.

"What did you say, Aislynn?" Lord Lyon gave her a sharp look. The others that had come with him let out little muted exclamations of surprise.

"Oh, you heard me, Lord Lyon. You have hearing keener than mine, or anyone else that I know for that matter. You didn't know that you got my sister pregnant but you did. It's bound to happen when you fuck as many times as the two of you did without using any form of birth control. The odds just aren't in your favor. You were like bloody rabbits!"

He went deadly silent. Thick tension permeated the air.

"My daughter." He seemed stricken with disbelief.

"Oh, yes, and I will say one thing--she does have an affinity for trouble just like you did. She can find it and get into the thick of it with a smooth effortless ease."

His eyes widened. He looked like he'd just sucked on a huge lemon.

"I hate to disappoint Lord Lyon, but could you please ask him to stop looking at me like I'm an attraction at a Telasion Circus?" she asked Ace.

"My apologies. I didn't mean to gawk." He lifted his gaze from her face, and looked instead at Aislynn. "Why didn't someone notify me of the child's existence?"

"Oh, we tried. Unfortunately, they told us that you were too busy to deal with my concerns; I am, as you well know, just a mere mortal. They gave me the old, you're off saving the universe routine again."

He flared his nostrils. "Whoever you told obviously had a bone of contention with me and wanted me to be oblivious. They did a bang up job of keeping this from me for the last what is it, twenty-five years?"

"Round about there," Alora answered, still trying to gage his response. Was he pleased or annoyed with the information?

"Well, at any rate, I've settled down in the time since."

"Of course you have," she taunted, turning away from them. "I don't want to be the cold water on the flame here, but could we please get this show on the road?"

"Yes, of course. We can't dilly-dally all day. I'm sure Bryce is wondering where we've gotten off too, as he no doubt sensed the magical portals opening," Lord Lyon mused. "Aislynn, your mate always was quite astute when it came to such matters. I have admired him for that personality trait."

"You are too kind," Ace muttered.

The same bell chime that always rang when Garrett was being hailed filled the bridge.

"That would be my men and women wondering why we're stalling."

"Why are we stalling?" she asked, staring as intently at Lord Lyon as he was staring at her. Finding out that he was her father hadn't changed her opinion of him. He was the sort of man that she would never warm up to.

"I shall return to my ships immediately. This ship..." he looked around disdainfully at the bridge. "Will remain here on the edge of the fight. If you took this thing into the heat of battle, it wouldn't last for three minutes. As it is, it looks as if it's being held together by a hope and a prayer."

Dryness prickled in her throat.

"He could be right, Ace. This ship did take a huge beating during the battle for New Eros...it's only common sense to think that the shields wouldn't hold, even though the Androids have been working night and day on it."

"She's got a sensible head." Lord Lyon smiled. "Warms my heart to see she isn't as fanciful and flighty as her mother. Your mother, when it came right down to it was as shallow as a mud puddle. Randy as a bitch in heat most of the time, though." He snorted.

Ace grunted. "Let's not rehash my sister's affinity for being promiscuous. She got off on how many men she could screw with. She even kept detailed records. Fortunately for you, Alora, you were conceived during one of her bouts of faithfulness, to her fuck buddy of the hour. They were far and few between those bouts, but they did happen once in a blue moon. Let's not dwell on those sad matters. Since our ship is just too battle weary to take another beating, we'll have to hitch a ride on one of yours, Lord Lyon."

His jaw dropped for a brief second. Clearing his throat, he stepped backward. "I don't think so. You are mistaken. I thought that all of you would remain on the ship out of the fight--safe and sound."

"Before you came here to lend your helping hand, we were doing quite fine on our own. We were determined to go into the battle alone. Without your help," Alora muttered.

"If it was a winless battle, we would have of course, left the children behind," Ace said.

"Yes. Very wise. But still, you are not coming," Lord Lyon said emphatically.

"He has a rather thick skull, doesn't he," Alora asked, turning to roll her eyes at Ace.

"I think we've certainly figured out where you get that annoying habit from." Ace sighed. "Listen, Lyon, you are taking us with you, you can say no fifty times over and that still won't change our minds. We'll just go along on this ship, either way."

"And you say, I'm thickheaded. The two of you just don't know how to listen to orders." Lord Lyon sighed heavily.

"You don't have the authority to give us orders," Ace interjected.

"I do now. I'm the one with all of the playing cards," Lord Lyon declared, a slow smile working across his features. He was as cunning as he was powerfully stunning.

"Listen, fat head, don't try to use that kind of trick to twist me into relenting. I will not budge on this. You are not my keeper," Alora said, flourishing her hand at him in a wild and useless gesture.

"Aye. Your keepers seem to be in trouble at the moment."

Her gaze flew to Ace. Ace's eyes widened. Enraged, she walked forward and slapped him soundly on the face. His eyes bugged out of his skull. Alora couldn't decide between laughing and gasping.

Light streamed around Ace, encasing her in something so brilliant that Alora wished she had a pair of shades.

"You stop that. She just hit you. And I've been told by Garrett that nothing we can

do can hurt you!" She walked up to Lyon and pulled on his arm. He shrugged her off.

"I am not doing that, my dear girl," he said, glancing down at her in bemusement.

"You aren't?" She pulled his face to meet her gaze, and stared deeply in his eyes. No sign of magic swirling in their depths, true, they twinkled more than most men's but she didn't see the sign of active magic in their depths that she did when Garrett employed his powers. "I believe you."

Matilda and Merrick stood mesmerized. "She is undergoing the change," they murmured in freakish unison.

"The change?" She looked over in perplexed amazement at them.

"You had the same look when you activated your latent powers. I suppose you didn't see your appearance," Matilda mused.

"Latent powers?" Lyon raised an eyebrow of interest.

"I don't think we need to go into those details right now. I'm more concerned about Ace. We can discuss my powers at a later date. Besides, they're not really any concern of yours. Ace, on the other hand, is a concern of mine."

"She'll be fine. She's a survivor. And, if her Immortal powers are finally awakening, all I can say is that they took bloody long enough. She's a late bloomer. She's almost middle aged for you mortals, isn't she?"

"She's young. We mortals live fairly long lives--longer than we used to since the latest advances in medicine over the last twenty years," Alora explained.

"She's sprouting wings!" Matilda sighed. "Oh, she's going to be beautiful. It looks like she has a faerie soul. How enchanting!"

"Is it painful?" Alora asked.

"Did it hurt you?" Merrick asked, pinning his steadfast gaze on her before looking back at his mother.

"I didn't exactly sprout wings. My powers are more translucent, I don't exactly shape shift."

"Really? Do tell us more," Lord Lyon encouraged. "We are all able to shape shift, with our powers. Whether we chose to, is a whole other issue. I'm certain you just projected a shield of energy representing your magic around your body. Am I correct?"

"Spot on," she answered, giving him a pursed up smile.

"You have cheek." Lord Lyon smiled. "You remind me of myself when I was your age. It's sort of disconcerting, and it's almost like looking in a kindred soul mirror." He beamed again at her.

"Can we please stop focusing on me? Ace is the one in peril, right now!"

"Peril. Tosh. She's just going through a transformation that is most celebrated among my kind. She's harkening back to her ancestral bloodline. It looks like she's going to be a Cupid."

"Cupid?"

"Wings, and that." He pointed to the swirling mists rolling around her. "It's called Bewitching Glamour. She'll be able to entrance anyone she wants to now. That power could become useful in the battle ahead. There was a time ages ago, when my kind took Cupids onto the fields of battle. Who says you can't win war with a little bit of love? They infected them with huge doses of love dust coupled with their bewitching glamour and they were nearly driven mad with the intensity of the emotions flooding them. It wasn't a pretty sight to see."

"Didn't they start making love right out on the field of battle?"

"Oh, no. Not unless they are truly meant to be together. A Cupid's magic will only affect true soul mates in that sort of amorous way. With any other victims, love dust can almost be fatal. If your true love is not in the vicinity, it fills the victim with hallucinations. I don't need to tell you how much mental hallucinations can adversely affect a subject."

He'd moved closer to her, so that they were now just a hairsbreadth away.

"What are you doing?" She tried to inch away from him, and ended up slamming into a bulkhead.

"Trying to see into your soul."

"You just want to know what my powers are!"

He gave her a sheepish grin. "It's a father's right to know."

"You haven't been much of a father--ergo, I don't think you have much of a right."

"Were you raised on New Eros? I should have thought I would have come across you there, since I did return about five years later after your birth, to see if I could reconcile with Dianna."

"I wasn't raised on New Eros, no." She kept her gaze fixed on Ace's still glowing form.

"Where, then? I can't imagine Dianna hauling you from star system to star system."

"She didn't. I was raised on Delania."

"What?" Anger surged through his voice. "How?" he roared, shattering the eerie stillness of the bridge. "I don't believe it. No daughter of mine should have ever set foot on that Godforsaken planet. It's unthinkable. How could Ace commit you to such a foul fate?"

"She didn't. I sort of had an accident of fate, and ended up there...through no fault of her own. When I had my accident, I was rerouted to the nearest blood relative. I guess you were too far away, as was Dianna. And, you know that Ace is only Dianna's half-sister."

His nostrils flared. He swallowed thickly, his hands clenched at his side.

"Now I understand." He looked furious even though he seemed to be relaxing his physical stance. He seemed ripe to pitch a fit. She took a cautionary step backward.

Ace's brightness started to diminish. The light gradually faded away. When it finally faded altogether she stood before them, seemingly none the worse for wear.

"Well, that was certainly something different." She flared her wings out, looking behind her. "I'm not stuck with these forever, am I?"

"Until you learn how to control your powers, you will have to learn to live with them," Lord Lyon said. "Once this is over, you should return to my home realm, and bask in the company of other Cupids. They will be able to show you how to master the special abilities you possess. You are a quite different from the rest of us. Bravo, Aislynn, dear, you have finally fulfilled your destiny."

She tried looking back over her shoulder at them. "They are quite stunning. They remind me of my Great-great-great-grandmother's pictures. She had wings just like these. Of course, she didn't always have them on display. Wouldn't she be proud! Alora, you look a bit pale. Maybe you should sit down."

"I'm fine. I just feel strangely like I'm being pulled away...almost as if someone is

splitting me into two. I don't know what's going on."

Lyon grabbed her. "Oh, bloody hell. She's fading fast. Stay with me, my daughter! Don't give into it; fight it with all of the will you possess. From the little I've seen, you have quite the iron will--you will not give in and give up!"

"I'm not dying--it doesn't feel like I'm dying."

"You're not dying, Alora, you're being pulled to Garrett via your psychic chain. He's activated it either knowingly or unknowingly. Fight it, don't let him transport you to him--do whatever you need to do to stay with us." Ace's urgent voice carried to her. "You can't give in. Now is not the time to submit!"

Lyon kept a grip on her. "He's not pulling you into a battle zone, without us to keep you safe, no way am I going to let you slip out of sight when I've only just discovered you. Fate wouldn't be so cruel!" His fingers started to pass right through her. "I can't get a grip on you, no!"

"I can...I'll be able to travel with her through the chain of love--if I've really transformed into a Cupid--it makes sense. I might not know all there is to know about what it implies to be a Cupid, but I have the tales my grandmother told me about her grandmother. You all just try to rendezvous with us as fast as you can! You stay here, and make sure that we emerge victorious."

"Ace...you'd better move fast--I feel as if I'm being pulled away--quick!" She reached out for Ace, suddenly realizing that she didn't want to go on this journey alone. She could only imagine the type of danger she was going into, she needed Ace by her side!

"No. I won't let you go without me. I'll transform into my magical soul and follow. My men and women can battle Tann's forces without me. You'll need a Warrior of the Light on your side! You can't go at this alone!" Lyon kept trying to get a hold on her. She watched in mesmerized amazement as he called upon his magic. It nearly blinded her. Even though he had called upon his magical soul that did little to aid his cause. She kept slipping out of his grip.

Ace dashed toward her, Lyon waylaid Ace for one brief moment. Reaching into the folds of his cloak, he stuffed an item into her pant pocket. "You'll need this." Ace gave him a perplexed look, and then looked back over at her own children.

"I love you, Merrick and Matilda!" she screamed grabbing onto Alora, in the next instant, they both vanished.

Chapter Twenty-Two

The dark magic seeped into Garrett's pores, into his system. He tried to fight the lulling effect it had on him--he was too weak from being drained in the cage. He knew what the torture master was attempting to do. He was trying to learn all of his secrets. But he would take those secrets to his grave if it came right down to that.

Tann's torture master cackled with glee.

"I have never interrogated a Phoenix before. This will definitely be a tale to tell in my journals."

He fell to the floor again, as gravity took its toll on him. He yearned to fly, he yearned to transform, and yet, the darkness invading his soul prevented him from enjoying that freedom.

"You will die when Tann gives me the order." The Torture Master walked toward him, extending the dark magic warlock's staff that he held. Magical energy shot out from the tip, encircling him and causing him to once again writhe in pain.

He had to fight it.

Dianna had not returned in time. Before she could reach him, the torture master had taken him from his cage and transported him into the fortified dungeons.

Filth and sickness permeated the air. Misery clung to the atmosphere like a second skin.

"I will not allow you to beat me," he rasped, his chest heaving with the effort of speaking.

"I'm already pounding you into painful oblivion, light one. You will never see the sky again. You will never see the stars twinkling in space. The sun will not touch your face, and the glow of moonlight shall not encircle you with its healing light. You are doomed, you pitifully pathetic creature. Tann's dark glory will spread throughout the known worlds. Your kind will fall from their pedestals as the beacons of light that humanity clings so tightly to. The reign of darkness shall begin. We have been forcing our way across the border for many years. We shall have our rightful dominion."

"No," he coughed, pain splintered throughout his body, making him wince once more. Never had he felt this sort of soul sucking pain.

"You may say whatever eases your guilt. I see it tearing away at you, Phoenix." The man's eyes glowed.

Garrett's eyes widened, he almost regained his footing, when another blast of dark magic hit him straight in the gut. He toppled back, hitting the back wall of the interrogation room.

"You are a specimen of great strength. They told me your kind were nearly invulnerable. Through trial and elimination, I discovered exactly what your weak points were. I know everything there is to know about you and the rest of your kind. I've had many lab rats--and they have met the same fate that awaits you." He laughed again.

Garrett regained his wits, and lunged at the man. He ran on pure adrenaline. Surprisingly, his rage gave him enough strength to knock the warlock's staff from his

hand.

"No...this can't be possible!" The torture master looked at him, his eyes wide with fear.

"Where are you guards now?" Garrett roared, placing his hands around his scrawny neck.

The man's eyes widened with terror.

"You are a warrior of light...you do not kill in cold blood."

"I don't...unless the victim happens to be pure evil. That description applies to you, my enemy--my friends' murderer." He snapped the man's neck like a twig. The sound echoed in his eardrums. Coughing once more, he released the wretched man's listless body. It fell to the floor with an ominous thud.

Garrett Firestorm had mastered the master.

He sank to his knees. Death clawed at his being. Blinking his eyes, he watched as an angelic vision appeared before him. An angel of mercy had answered his call for help.

"Oh, what is that awful smell?"

He knew that voice. Blinking his eyes furiously to clear his distorted vision, he gazed upon the winged woman once more.

"Ace?" When she stepped away to move toward him, his heart stopped. Her wings had concealed another traveler.

Alora.

During his torture, the psychic chain must have activated instinctively calling out for her to help him. Mates had an emergency button to hit through the psychic chain.

His breathing grew shallow. He wasn't long for this world. In order for him to reclaim what little life he had left, he had to be able to call upon his magic, which, in turn would reawaken his immortality.

"Break the staff. Before it starts to affect the two of you," he rasped, foregoing on any fervent declarations of love for Alora.

Alora looked worriedly at him. "Do it!" he ordered.

She raised her arm, he watched as she called upon her mortal abilities. A fireball the size of a tennis ball began to materialize in front of her. Ace stepped to the side, clearing a path for Alora.

She directed it at the staff, and hurled it at it. It struck the staff, burning it to ashes within a few seconds. Calling upon her powers once more, she extinguished the flames before they could burn them up.

"Glorious." He smiled. She dashed toward him, falling to her knees beside him.

"What happened to you?" She cupped his face in her hands, planting an achingly tender kiss on his dry, parched lips.

"Him." He pointed gravely to the dead torture master.

"The stink of death--that's what hit me when we first materialized here." Ace frowned, coming to surround him on his other side. "You don't look good."

"I have to be able to call upon my magical soul."

"Well, we aren't stopping you." Ace's frown grew deeper.

"You misunderstand...the torture."

Ace sighed. "I just connected the dots. How dare that little man do this to you!" She patted him comfortingly on his back, while Alora went one further and pulled him into her arms. He sighed, luxuriating in the warm feelings she wrapped around him.

"You must regain your strength. I can feel you slipping away from me. Ace, what did Lord Lyon give you before we started to transport?"

Ace shrugged. "I have no idea." She reached into her pocket and pulled out a wrapped item.

"It looks like it's shaped like a heart," Alora mused.

His heart raced at her words.

"Unicorn's Ambrosia. It can't be," he said, his voice dripping with awe.

"Maybe he thought we'd need it." Ace gave it to him. He quickly unwrapped the paper covering it.

"What is Unicorn's Ambrosia?" Alora asked.

"Only the best damn magical healing food in the known worlds. They are coveted among the human population. They say it will give a normal mortal an almost immortal life--as it will continue to heal any of your illnesses or physical ailments. Bryce used what we had left on our ships to bring me back from the brink of death--if we hadn't had one piece left--I'd be dead." Ace nodded her head. "Eat every last crumb, Garrett. I think we're going to need you in order to find our way out of here." Ace studied the small room. "I don't even want to know what those gruesome looking instruments over on that far wall do." Her face contorted with anger and sympathy.

"I want to destroy this place when we leave." His voice started to lose its throatiness. Though the Unicorn's Ambrosia was a cookie-like food, it was quenching his thirst quite nicely. Nothing but Unicorn Magic could work that sort of miracle.

"The Cupid look suits you, Ace." He addressed her, though he couldn't wrench his gaze away from Alora. She looked tired. No doubt, she'd been feeling the effects of his misery, and it was wearing thin on her.

"I'm okay." He pressed her hand gently beneath his.

"You weren't before we came." Her sad eyes moved to the dead body a few feet away from them. "I shudder to think of what that monster would have done to you had you not overpowered him."

"I won. That's what matters at this moment in time." He drank in her full essence, basking in the bond they shared. She traced her fingers lovingly across his cheek.

"You feel bristly. That's a stark change from your clean-shaven appearance you like to keep. I think both looks suit you like a glove." She leaned forward to give him another scorching kiss. He leaned into her embrace, thankful to have her close and safe with him once more.

"How goes the battle?" He could feel his limbs growing limber, soon, he'd be able to stand up without losing his footing...soon, he'd be able to call upon his magical soul. The Phoenix inside of him, fought to get out.

"I...it wasn't going well when we first arrived in the Obsidian Sector." His brow creased at Alora's announcement.

"My hero of a husband decided to leave his family behind while he went ahead in a blazing trail of glory to save you," Ace muttered, snorting.

"I take it that he's in command of our two fleets?"

"You got it." Ace sighed. "Problem is we're outmatched. Lord Lyon came with reinforcements but even with his troops, we are sorely outnumbered, Garrett." Pure fear mingled with desperation lingered in Ace's eyes.

"I will cling to hope. It's what got me through this."

"He's planning on taking over the known galaxies." Alora's voice was soft, and he heard the horror tingeing it.

"We won't allow him to get that much of a foothold," he stated, shaking his head.

"You didn't see the stats. It's not a good sight, Garrett. Evil is spreading fast. It's like a bloody scourge," Alora explained, sighing heavily.

"The light will hold it back. We will keep it from consuming the rest of the known worlds."

"Even you would be shocked to see what we're going up against, Garrett," Ace said gently. "Our world is changing--fast. If we get out of this mess alive, we can be thankful for that much."

"No. I will not concede defeat. Even if we can't win this battle, I will see Tann die. I won't allow him to take breath for much longer."

"Well, let's just get out of this suffocating room before someone happens upon us. We don't need someone setting off the base's alarms, before we can make a quick getaway." Ace groaned.

"I'm not leaving the slaves behind," Garrett proclaimed.

Ace stiffened. "Slaves? Of course! Tann is a sadistic son of a bitch, why didn't I think of that? He's probably one of the financial backers of the slave trade. We'll try to rescue all of them, don't worry."

"I'm not worrying, because I know I'm not leaving without seeing them free."

"I agree." Alora's hushed voice sent tingles through his body. Haunting pain etched across her face. "I had a short taste of what it's like to be someone's slave. I wouldn't wish that destiny on anyone. It's horrible. It takes away all that you hold dear, stripping you to your bare bones, emotionally and psychically. No. We will not leave the chained behind. This is about freedom--if we don't help the prisoners and slaves of Tann's then we betray all that we hold dearest."

"That's the spirit, Alora. Besides, there's a woman that I'm sure you will want to see," Garrett mused.

"I don't know what you mean? Are you sure you're still thinking clearly, Garrett?" Alora's forehead creased with concern.

"Of course. I'm starting to feel right as rain." He chuckled. "What I would do to feel the caress of the wind against my face."

"What are you talking about, Garrett? You never finished your thought." Ace walked closer to him, fluttering her wings. He swung his head back, reveling in the slight breeze the movement of her wings created.

"Your mother."

"Dianna?" Ace gasped. "She's no slave. Last I heard she was running her own brothel..."

"That's not what she's doing now. Trust me, Ace. She's here, and I'm betting it's not willingly, no matter what she tells me to the contrary."

"My sister? A slave? Not possible."

"I almost became a slave. In this crazy world of ours, Ace, anything is possible. It's frightening how quickly your life can change--one wrong move, and everything goes to pot," Alora said.

Ace gave her a frenzied look. "Okay. We get the slaves out, and then, we get out of here. Agreed?"

"Agreed." She nodded her head. "We also make sure that we blow this entire set of buildings to kingdom come. What is this place anyway? Is it constructed like a castle or what?"

Garrett slowly shook his head. "I have no idea. It's a large building, constructed by Talavian Stone. In case you are unfamiliar with that kind of stone, it's nearly unbreakable...but we'll find a way to destroy it."

Alora dragged in another shattering breath. "Do you think you can stand without assistance or would you like to lean on Ace and I?"

"Ace shouldn't even be up and about."

"Well, thanks to the last piece of Unicorn's Ambrosia, and the 'change' I've undergone, I've never felt better in my life."

"When you first change, it does do wonders for your body. If you had any injuries, they would be healed during the transformation, and since you were injured, I think transforming into your magical soul did the trick quite nicely."

"Why didn't you just transform, in that case?" Alora asked.

"I didn't have the energy required to draw on my magic." He sighed. Pushing himself up from the floor, he shook off Alora's offer of assistance. "I need to know if I can do this on my own, since the two of you will have to scout things out while I take a moment to gain my bearings."

Ace wandered away from them.

"The door is locked," she said, trying the door that kept them sealed into the damp dungeon. "Do you think he has the key?" She looked over in disgust at the dead body.

"Yeah, he put it in his pocket. I saw him tuck it in there just before he started our getting to know each other session."

"Garrett, you shouldn't be so blasé about what happened to you," Alora chastised. He tossed her a look of love.

"I thank you for your continuing concern."

"Okay, I guess I'm the nominated party sent to retrieve the key?" Ace crinkled her nose up. "I'm so not going to like this. He looks pretty nasty; do you think he even bathes?" She took a cautious step toward him, and then stepped backward. "Are you quite certain he's dead?"

"I broke his neck. I killed him."

"I don't think so, he just blinked." Ace pointed horrifically at him.

"Oh. Shit. Maybe he's one of the undead?" Alora suggested, standing upright to her full height and falling into a defensive stance beside Garrett. "So, any ideas how to kill an undead? Like is he a vampire or a zombie?"

"I'm a vampire." The undead torture master jumped up.

Ace and Alora screamed. Garrett attempted to call upon his powers, but found the well to be dry.

Alora glanced over at him, suddenly getting the hint. She pushed him out of the way. He lost his balance, and slammed into the wall.

"Damn, that smarted." He rubbed the back of his head; obviously, the effects of the torture hadn't been completely healed by the Unicorn's Ambrosia.

Alora raised her arm, once again calling upon the human witch talents she possessed. He wished she'd tap into some of her immortal magic...it would serve her far better in a battle with a vampire.

The undead torture master's body contracted as one of Alora's pyrotechnic blasts hit him straight in the gut.

He sneered. "Is that the best you can do, witch? That tickled." He laughed, making Garrett's hair stand on end.

"My life since I met you has become a roller coaster of a ride." She gave him a quick smile. "Do you think the undead can survive being blown up?"

He shook his head. "Without a body, they can't be the undead, can they?"

"I am a vampire. You do not know what I can do."

He was starting to shape shift. "Don't let him alter his appearance."

With one hand still holding him at bay with her telekinesis, she directed the other hand at the door. It started to bulk under the pressure of her abilities. "Oh, to hell with this." He watched her brow furrow with concentration. In the next few seconds, it blew off its hinges.

"Impressive." He regained his bearings and gave her a slight bow.

"Thank you."

"Alora?" Ace still sounded worried.

"Get out of the room, now! In a few seconds, it's going to be getting a helluva lot hotter in here!"

Ace didn't wait for Alora to pressure her any further. She dashed out into the hall, peeking her head around the corner to see if he followed.

Grudgingly, he walked the few short steps to the new exit Alora had created for them. Stepping over the threshold, he watched her call upon her immortal magic.

Purple magic danced off the walls. The torture master screamed, still struggling to shape shift so he could escape the huntress that had him in her clutches.

"Another bloody Phoenix! I'm starting to think you wretched beings travel in packs!" His eyes goggled out of his eyes, and he swallowed thickly. He looked downright petrified. He knew that her immortal magic would take his immortally depraved life away from him.

"You will rue this action! I am most prized by Lord Tann."

"Good. When he senses your death, he'll get my message. I don't appreciate someone fucking around with the man I love!" Her amethyst-colored flames licked around the vampire, scorching him with the intensity of their blaze.

His screams echoed off the walls.

Garrett waited, fighting the strong desire to rush back into the room and stand by Alora's side. Unlike her, he would be affected by her powers, especially since she'd worked up such an all-consuming rage.

Alora's storm had begun.

Now, there would be no stopping her.

Chapter Twenty-Three

They all lost their footing when a huge blast shook the building.

Ace sat up, rubbing her back. "I should have just used these wings," she muttered ruefully. "I can only hope that's Bryce and he's broken through the blockade to reach us."

She stood up.

Garrett waited for Alora to emerge from the room. Destruction floated around her. The vampire had been killed with the effects of her storming rage.

She emerged from the room, dust floating around her.

She was a magnificent sight of power--it oozed off her in almost soul shattering waves.

"I think we need to finish this and get out of here. I'm so tired of the dark feelings clinging to the atmosphere and I've only been here for a short amount of time compared to the hell you've been enduring," she murmured wearily.

She walked toward him, taking purposeful steps straight into his arms. He held her close for a brief second, resting his head on top of hers. Her sigh of contentment made his throat constrict. Having her in his arms again was the most blessed feeling.

"We have to keep moving. We should make our way back to the Great Hall, from there, we should be able to make it out of this compound," he instructed.

She nodded her head. "Ace, can you feel Bryce drawing near to us? It would be a miracle if he was able to break through the lines of ships that Tann has protecting his inner sanctuary."

Ace closed her eyes, obviously drawing on the psychic bond she shared with Bryce. Her sigh of disappointment gave them their answer.

"He's not close. I feel him out there, but not close enough to be able to help us get the slaves out of here." Ace looked furtively down the hall. "I say we break whomever is still left in the cells lining this hallway and then we do as Garrett suggested. We also have to find your mother--we can't very well abandon her to her gruesome fate as a slave."

He glanced over at Alora. She pursed her lips in annoyance, but nodded her head in agreement.

"Let's get started."

She slipped her hand into his. "Just give me the word if you start to feel woozy again."

"I'm fine, Alora."

"I've never seen you so pale before, Garrett. Contrasted against your flaming red hair it was a horrifying sight. I think I might have just earned a few silver strands in this black or rather sometimes purple hair of mine."

He chuckled, surprised at the strong feelings of levity invading his body and soul. He studied her exotic dark eyes, fringed by her long black hair that looked more purple than ever. It was a sight to behold the way that it transformed from one shade to the other at will.

"I'm going to have to draw on all of my strength, Tann will be returning once he

figures out that you've sprung me from my prison."

Her eyes hardened. "He won't get to you. I'll make sure I give him the same sort of treatment I gave that bloody vampire."

"Help me!" They all started at the loud voice emitting from a cell ahead of them.

Exchanging quick glances of concern, Ace moved toward the cell.

"How do you think we should open the door?" Ace asked.

"Let me do the honors." Garrett stepped forward. "Move behind me." He gestured for them to use his body as a shield. Stepping forward, so he was mere inches from the door, he drew on his magic. Concentrating deeply enough, he called upon an ancient spell. His crimson magic swirled around them, reaching out with its ghostly fingertips; his spell literally melted away the cell door.

The prisoner inside looked as if they'd been here for years. The bedraggled almost defeated sight took his breath away.

"Come forward. You are safe now." His voice boomed out, displaying far more confidence than he inwardly felt. Since being taken as Tann's prisoner, he'd started to doubt himself. Becoming unhinged in that way was slowly eating away at him. He had to put the demons behind him, and reclaim who he was. Now, he completely understood how shattered and fragile Alora had felt when he'd first rescued her.

"Garrett?" Tortured eyes met his gaze. His stomach did a nosedive.

"Hawkeye?"

The man he'd called friend for several hundred years, stood up. His knees wobbled almost buckling beneath him. His wings were shriveled up to almost being nonexistent. His normally vibrant life-filled eyes were now dull and listless. Being one of Tann's prisoners had almost broken Hawkeye.

"My friend." He took a step forward.

"I must look a sight. I knew our salvation would come eventually. When did the Council finally realize what Tann was planning?"

Garrett cleared his throat. "We now know. That's what matters."

Hawkeye caught his gaze and held it. "They didn't know until you went missing, did they?" His disappointment shone brightly in his deep blue eyes. "I had hoped. Countless operatives have been executed while our kind sat by and did nothing. We were the lambs offered up for the slaughter."

"I do not think it was done deliberately, Hawkeye. Had they known you required rescuing, they would have sent out a fleet to pummel Tann into oblivion."

"And yet, here I sit, covered in my own filth, fearing the loss of my powers, fearing the loss of my very soul." Hawkeye broke off; he could tell the man was close to losing it entirely. "You are right, though, you are here now. And I am now free. At long last." He cleared his throat, making a hoarking noise in the back of his throat; he doubled over, and spit up blood.

Garrett stood by helplessly. Alora gasped. "We should get you some water."

"I'm fine." Hawkeye gave her a wan smile. "A lady of your beauty eases the strain on my heart."

"Oh, Hawkeye," Ace murmured, heartbreak tingeing her voice.

"Is that Queen Aislynn I see standing behind you?"

Ace stepped forward into the small compact cell. "Hawkeye. I must say it's good to see you again."

Hawkeye moved toward her. "Bryce is well, I trust?"

"Last time I saw him, he was quite well." She assured Hawkeye, reaching to take his hand. "You on the other hand, don't look as puffed up as I'm used to seeing you."

"Well, I'm sorry I couldn't greet you with my usual hilarity, my days have grown too dark. I'm afraid my time of jesting is quite over. I used to play the part of the fool to your delight and now, I could not come up with a riddle if my life depended upon it." He sighed, the sound of a thousand tears echoed in that heavy sigh.

Garrett backed up until he stood side by side with Alora. Life was hurtling out of control. This had been personal from the start, but after seeing Hawkeye, the man he'd been trained with back in their days at the Academy, drove it home.

His stomach clenched. "This is almost unconceivable."

"It has happened, it would still be happening had Tann not given into his need to have you as his prize," Alora whispered, locking her gaze with his. He wanted to drown in her eyes. He knew that they had to do something to ease the suffering of the countless men and women that Tann had hurt along the way in his insatiable quest for power.

"He wanted to use me to lure you here. He wanted to kill you in front of me, but before he killed you, he wanted to make you and I both suffer. I couldn't have borne it, Alora. I couldn't have borne watching him violate you."

His words hung in the air--the things he didn't say were still between them, as she touched his mind.

"We have hope now. Tann won't beat us. You have to start thinking like the Garrett I know...don't allow his manipulations to scar you forever. You are the great Garrett Firestorm, the Unstoppable Crimson Phoenix."

"What I was I am no more. I found just how powerful I was when I was caged up like a bird with clipped wings. I found just how much my magic would serve me when I needed it the most. It didn't. Tann's dark sorcery turned me into a powerless shell. I couldn't even help a woman begging for me to save her. I became my own worst enemy. I now know what it feels like to be completely powerless. To be chained inside your own body, fervently hoping to get out--and not being able to is a fate worse than the prospect of death. I was a prisoner, trapped within my own body, and in turn, I shared the sorrow of the ones that needed me. I was supposed to be her champion, and instead I failed her."

She pressed his hand. "We can save her now."

"It will not undo what has happened to her. Nor will we ever be able to atone for what happened to our kind, and mortals alike. We made a grave miscalculation when we willingly unleashed Tann on an unsuspecting universe."

Another force of energy rattled the ground beneath their feet.

"What the hell is that?" Ace demanded.

"I have no idea." Garrett closed his eyes, drawing on the power subdued deep down inside of him. His magic was slowly growing stronger. He closed his eyes, and drew on the images outside of the building.

A Griffon clouded his vision, nearly making him pull back in alarm. For a moment, he felt as if the Griffon was going to hit him with a magical bolt of lightning.

"Your father. Lord Lyon, I presume." He touched her hand, sharing the vision he'd conjured with her. "And, by the looks of it, he's pissing nails. Tann is going to have a whole lot of hurt coming to his doorstep. Your father is notorious for not having any mercy when it comes to dealing with those that wrong him. Trust me, I was on the

receiving end of his wrath once. I got put on sentinel duty for fifty years because of something I'd said that offended him. Do you want to know what I was guarding? A statue. A statue made in his honor." He snorted.

She drew in a deep sharp breath. "He must have done good on his word to follow us. I don't know why, but he seems quite invested in my safety."

He sighed. "He is your father. In case you haven't noticed it, our kind takes familial ties as seriously as mortals, or even more so. I can't really say how loyal a mortal is to his or her offspring since I've never had any first hand experience with it."

"Indeed, and he was too busy with saving the known worlds to pay attention to Ace when she tried to get the news to him. Because of him, I lived a life that I could have done without. If he's trying to make up for lost time, he really needs to stop it. I won't ever be able to think of him as my father. I did without him for so many years--I can continue to do without him for many more."

"The journey of your life brought you to me. Maybe that wouldn't have happened had you been brought up by the magnificent Lord Lyon. That man has a superiority complex that even outshines mine. He's not really that fond of females, when it comes to them having more power than us men."

"He's a chauvinist?"

"Not exactly. He just thinks our women should remain within the safety of our home realms. He has no issues with women in power; he just has issues with them leaving the safety of our ancestral lands. I am quite certain that had he known about you, he would have dragged you back to our home realm, faster than you could blink. Of course being a child, you wouldn't have cared one way or the other, but you would have missed out on a great many experiences."

"Yeah, like almost being sold into slavery. Somehow, I think I'm going to side with Lord Lyon on that one. Then again, I know I would have felt smothered, and I would have become one hell of a rebellious daughter."

"You also would have been fully trained to use the powers you hold deep within yourself. That would come in handy for us right now. Just be careful, you keep drawing upon your magic but it could abandon you at the drop of a hat. I warn you to take care, Alora."

"I won't have to worry, you'll be right by my side."

"Hawkeye is ready to move on. He says the other cells were emptied out right before you came here, Garrett. It looks as if the prisoners were..." Ace went pale. Suddenly, she was at a loss for words.

"They were no doubt exterminated." Garrett's gut clenched again, he felt short of breath.

Grief filled Alora's dark expressive eyes. "He's going to pay."

"Damn straight. He's got a world of screaming agony coming to him. If only he could get a taste of his own medicine. He should be put through the misery he put so many of his prisoners through."

"Garrett!" He stared at Ace.

"What?" he asked.

"Men. Coming our way. It has to be the Cupid thing acting up on me; I can sense the desires of the men coming toward us. It looks as if they want to get done with containing us as soon as possible so they can...alleviate their carnal lusts." She

shuddered. "If this is part of a Cupid's Job Description, I'd like to return it."

"We need to either run the other way or stand and fight," Garrett said.

"I'll vote for standing and fighting," Alora said, in reaction to his proposition.

He glanced down at Alora's hands. They glowed with Amethyst fire.

"Ace, get Hawkeye back into the safety of his cell. Alora and I will take out whatever is coming at us."

"If that's the way you want it. I forgot to take a pistol before I took a ride with Alora, and since I'm not really sure what sort of offensive or defensive powers a Cupid wields, I have no issues with taking cover with Hawkeye." She ushered Hawkeye back into the cell. Out of sight of the men approaching.

When they came around the corner, Garrett counted their number at six.

"Do you think you can take three?"

"You bet," Alora promised.

The men finally noticed them.

"Oh, fuck it. We have a breach of security." The man in front was about to reach for something in his coat, when Alora's fireball hit him. He screamed and dropped the communication device he held. He fell to the floor, his eyes frozen open in death.

The question was, had he been able to transmit anything before Alora had taken him out?

A second man moved forward cracking out an electric whip. Garrett used his own powers on him, to make the man pull back his whip and hit himself with it. The man wobbled back, crashing against the wall. He slumped to the ground, whining non-stop.

By this time, the others had found and drawn their weapons. Throwing knives arced at them. He easily deflected them, watching as one of them drew out a secespita that sent his magical hackles on edge.

"Don't let that pierce your skin, whatever you have to do. It's been poisoned probably with a substance that can greatly harm us."

"Bloody hell," Alora swore. "Do they have no honor?"

"With Tann as their leader, I'm sure they wouldn't know where to begin when it comes to playing fair. Honor isn't in Tann's code."

"Killing and making people suffer is probably the only thing in Tann's code. Death should be his middle name," she muttered.

"That's why we'll just have to reacquaint him with death, and this time, I'm going to make sure there's nothing left of him to bring back to life," Garrett vowed.

"You never killed him before."

"Aye. But he should already be dead. He's obviously found a way to prologue the mortal lifespan that he was given when he was shunned from our society."

While they talked, they each took out the rest of the men. Finally, stillness invaded the hallway.

"I don't think I like the killing part of this," Alora grimaced.

"It's kill or be killed, Alora."

She gave him a rueful gaze, and then carefully pulled her purple fire back into herself. He admired her restraint and the way she fluidly moved between using her Immortal Magic and calling upon the powers her human side had endowed her with.

"Do you prefer fighting as the Purple Phoenix or using your own human talents?" he asked gently.

She shrugged her shoulders. "I haven't had much time to compare the two. I can use my magical abilities with a lot more ease than I can use my human abilities. Sometimes, calling upon my telekinesis can give me a roaring headache."

"You can use your magic to move objects as well. Some skeptics among our kind would say that you don't have any human abilities. They would argue that your gifts are weaned down powers gleaned from a Magic Immortal in your genealogy. In truth, you could have one of my kind in your bloodline going back thousands of years. Ace is that way, though hers is much closer than I suspect yours would be."

"My father is one of your kind."

"Indeed. And that is why you have the impressive powers you wield. The human powers inside of you would be no match if you were to go up against another Immortal, as I suspect we will be doing before the end of this particular battle."

"What are you talking about?"

"Tann has Dark Immortals working for him. That's where he's gotten all of his dark arts. He always did hanker after the power and the lack of rules that the dark ones employed."

"A Dark Immortal? That would make sense. I went up against one back on your ship when Tann was taking you. He nearly knocked me for a loop. His dark magic bite was wicked."

"Well, I suspect he's not the only one. I sense at least two in Tann's employ. They will be hard to defeat. They are probably protecting Tann as we speak. The vampire he had, as his torture master couldn't begin to compare with the dark magical skills these Dark Immortals would command. Comparing their magic is like comparing apples and oranges."

"No matter how powerful they might be, we fight them. We fight whomever and whatever we need to fight in order to end this."

"That's just it, isn't it, Alora? I don't feel the end of our battle drawing near, though I do feel the end of life, as we know it. Events have been put into motion that are undoable. We can't think to reverse the events that our choices have put into place."

"In that case, we'll just have to make it as right as we can, so that the future has a hope."

"Darkness is spreading. Like a cloud that will shroud all of us in its suffocating embrace," Garrett explained.

"Drive it back. I was once told that there might be dark but there will always be stronger beings of the light ready to stop the dark from gaining ground."

"During the years that my kind were ignorantly keeping ourselves busy elsewhere the dark was growing stronger. Don't you understand? They've used the Warriors of the Light that they captured in order to treat us like guinea pigs. They've thrown countless tortures at us, to gauge and measure our responses to them. They have taken into account our secrets, and how to use those secrets to their advantage. They know us inside and out."

"I'm certain there are still things about you that they won't be expecting."

"Counter measures have been put into place. Tann wouldn't have been able to take me hostage had he not done his research so well."

"Is the coast clear, yet?" Ace's tentative voice flooded out to them.

"It is. Come now, we must continue on our path to the great hall." Garrett turned

from her.

"Just a minute. We aren't done yet."

Garrett smiled at her. Magic now pumped liberally through his veins. The Unicorn's Ambrosia was fully kicking in.

"We should get ourselves freshened up. Don't you agree, Hawkeye?" He looked at Hawkeye. Though he could do nothing about the sad state his friend's health was in, he could give them both a fresh set of clothing and make them feel a little less grimy than before.

He flourished his hand at Hawkeye. Spiraling ruby red magic coalesced around him. Hawkeye sighed as the magic levitated him into the air.

In the next few minutes, he was lowered to the ground.

A fresh set of sapphire-colored robes wrapped around Hawkeye's almost deflated looking body.

"Great. Thanks for that mate. I'd almost forgotten what it felt like to be clean. I've been living under layers of dirt and grime for so long. I'll be happy to feel water on my body and soap, but for now, the magical cleaning spell makes me a happy man. To feel myself again, is a refreshing and welcoming change."

"And now, you need to freshen up." Ace nodded her head at him. "Do so quickly, I can feel a ship approaching the building and I'm fairly certain it's not ours."

"Aye, and I can feel Lord Lyon breaking through the sky toward us. The ship most likely belongs to Tann since he'll be racing to stop us from completing our mission." Garrett sighed.

"And our mission? I know it was to rescue you and free the slaves..." Ace trailed off.

"By taking out this outpost of his, we'll be serving him an irreversible blow. I'm quite certain that this building is a nexus of dark magic. He's probably got a black crystal somewhere that is feeding off of energy from the dark realms. How else could he possibly be so unstoppable? As my mind clears and shakes off the dark magic seeping through my veins from my torture, enlightenment is coming to me in cascading waves," Garrett proclaimed.

"Well, as you become more enlightened, keep us updated. I'm sick of walking my way through this journey completely blind," Alora advised.

Moving away from him, Alora caught up with Ace.

She could still sense his love for her, and yet, there was something between them. An invisible barrier that he'd erected as a result of his captivity. She had to figure out the best way to shatter that invisible barrier before it ended up in their undoing.

Sharp concern tingled at the back of her mind. Had he picked up on her suspicion?

She wouldn't be surprised if he had. In essence, they were an open book to each other. Wishing for privacy from him was never going to happen. They didn't just have to be lovers; they had to share in everything.

Mind, body and soul were the full deal with them.

"He's changed." Ace's voice was but a whisper. "I don't think it will keep you and him from being together, but his altered attitude has me concerned. I pray to the Gods that Merrick and Matilda are with their father if they did decide to join the battle. I don't want them coming here. Never have I felt such a thick atmosphere. This building is filled

with dread, agony and hopelessness. It's like a vacuum sucking the very life out of you. I don't even know how I'm going to stick it out here."

"You'll do fine. Maybe now is time for you to start spreading the love," Alora murmured.

"I work much better when I can fight. Problem is I'm out of my element here. Even if I did have my weapons, I don't think they'd be of much use against Tann's armies. They're made of something that bullets just won't affect."

"I'm certain that's why you've found your magical soul."

"I found it, aye. But what am I meant to do with my newfound talents? You have magic that I could really love to have, and yet, here I am a bloody Cupid!"

"You've lived up to your bloodline. You've followed in the footsteps of great women before you."

Ace held up her hand. "Can you hear that?"

They each listened. "We must be getting close."

Garrett sidled up next to them. "One more turn and we'll be in the area of the Great Hall," Garrett said.

"Did you just hear that, Garrett? It sounded like women screaming."

Garrett gave her a look of alarm. Pushing past them, with Hawkeye following, he shouted out an order. "Stay here."

With that, he and Hawkeye disappeared.

"I wonder. Does he actually think we're going to listen to him?" Ace asked, winking at Alora.

Alora shook her head. "It's impossible to get through to him. He just can't take the thought of us wanting to be right in the thick of battle."

"This is madness," Ace sighed.

"Madness, maybe, but can you stand by idly while those women continue to suffer?"

"Not on your life," Ace nodded her head at her. "Let's go."

Chapter Twenty-Four

The female slaves were corralled into the Great Hall, and now, Tann's men were trying to kill as many of them as they possibly could.

Garrett's stomach turned. He looked at the ones that had already fallen.

"Can you do anything, Hawkeye or would you rather just stand here and watch for any other threats coming around?"

"Kill that one, and I'll take his weapon."

Hawkeye pointed at a man near them using a flamberge. Garrett nullified the man, and picked up the flamberge to hand it to Hawkeye.

"Hand to hand combat isn't something I've done in a good while. Could you give it some magical flame to help me out?"

Curtly, he nodded his head, brushing his hand over the length of the blade. It now glowed with crimson magic fire.

"Brilliant. That should help me to take out any demons lurking amongst us."

"Just watch your back. You're still weak."

"I'm out of that bloody cell and in a few more hours I'll be completely free. Nonetheless, we can't stand idly by and watch them kill those women. Tann is far more insane than I'd originally thought. He's a true blue psychopath."

"And he was once one of us."

"Just goes to show that even we can be duped. Tann tricked a lot of people for many years--until you finally discovered his true nature."

"Even then...the Council didn't heed my warnings." As they talked, Garrett took out three more of Tann's men, while Hawkeye took out one large one.

"You know, this weapon is working just the way I like it!"

Alora and Ace rushed into the Great Hall. Garrett and Hawkeye had become separated from them when all hell broke loose. She looked over at Garrett battling several of Tann's men.

Ace and she looked over the balcony down into the Great Hall. Women were falling under the blasts of energy that Tann's soldiers fired at them.

"We have to get down there. With Garrett and Hawkeye keeping the men up here occupied we should be able to get down there to protect the survivors."

Ace's wild eyes fixated on her. "You're right. Do you think you can use your magic to fly down there? I'm going to try these out. If you don't think you can summon your abilities, I'll fly you down with me."

"No. You'll need your arm free to wield that sword." She nodded at the sword Ace now held in her hands. "How fitting that we are using their own weapons against them."

Ace gave her a wan smile. "Time is of the essence, Alora. Take to the air."

Ace raised herself up into the air, her long majestic wings flapping swiftly; she did a nosedive down into the fray of the battle.

The floor beneath her rumbled again. The slight shock set her on edge. It felt as if

a ship had just landed on the roof.

Drawing on her Phoenix magic, she transported down to the Great Hall floor.

Without thinking, she wrapped a cocoon of energy around the huddled mass of women.

The next few energy bolts were absorbed by her force field.

"We need to get them out of here!" Ace screamed.

"I know!" She shouted over the sound of battle.

"We need a ship to get them to!" Ace said loudly.

"There are ships down in the docking bays," someone said.

A woman moved forward. She looked like her. Alora's stomach clenched, the knot winding even tighter when Ace breathed in sharply.

"Dianna!" Ace moved in front of Alora so she stood between them. "You...my God, you could have been killed."

"I share the same fate as many of my sister women. Fortunately, I took these from the kitchen right before they herded us into here like cattle." She pulled a cookie out of one of her pockets. "Those that have fallen have been fed these. My supply is dwindling. I give it to them when they are hit tell them to eat it, and it has restored their health. But if we don't get out of here soon, I'll run out and Tann's men just might succeed in killing all of us! He's even madder than I thought he was!"

"How did you know about Unicorn's Ambrosia, Dianna?" Ace asked.

"Your lover, Garrett told me," she answered Ace, but she was talking to Alora.

"It's astonishing how much you resemble me. What a marvel." She took a step toward Alora. Alora stepped back, indecision plaguing her. Dianna drew back. "You probably don't even know who I am...."

"I know full well who you are. Had I not known before I took into account Ace's reaction, I would have been a simpleton. The two of us look like long lost twins."

Dianna gave her a soft smile. "I've no right to call myself your mother--but I am glad you are here. I'm also glad that you seem to have taken after your father's side of the family. If you didn't, we'd be in more trouble than we already are."

"We are still in quite a lot of trouble. Before I came down to this level, I heard and felt a ship land on the roof. Could that be Tann?" Alora asked.

Dianna looked panicked stricken. "Most likely. He's probably coming back to make sure that his orders were carried out."

"Garrett told us you weren't a slave," Alora said.

"Tann had my master killed. He was dead before he knew what hit him. Without his aid, I am just another one of Tann's slaves. Tann doesn't like having to transport his slaves when he thinks he needs to abandon an outpost. Your side is obviously gaining the upper hand, or else, he would not be running so scared." Her eyes darkened with grief. "My master could be rough and harsh with me at times, but deep down I think he held a certain affinity for me, or else he would not have shielded me from Tann's tirades for as long as he has. In the end though, his immortal life as a werewolf ended when Tann disposed of him." A catch entered her voice. "I don't think he was ever truly evil as so many of his brethren are considered. I wish your side had joined the battle before my Talzyn was murdered."

"Bryce is not a warrior by nature, but when he needs to, he knows how to fight and win a battle." Ace's eyes glowed with loving pride. "I knew he wouldn't fail us."

"Well, unless he can get down here and help us out with a ship, we're sitting bloody ducks. Could I have a Unicorn's Ambrosia, Dianna?"

Dianna looked at Alora.

"Here you are, why do you want it, are you hurt?"

She shook her head.

"Hawkeye!" she called through the din of battle. He looked her way, while still battling two foes. Upon seeing what she held, his eyes lit up. He incapacitated his two foes and then strode toward her, knocking out whoever tried to block his way.

"Eat this up, and you'll be knocking them out by the tens," she advised. He took the magical biscuit she offered him.

"Thanks, Alora." He winked at her, gobbled up the Unicorn's Ambrosia and then jumped back into the heat of battle.

"Where did you say the other ships were?" Alora demanded, turning her attention back to Dianna.

"If he's left any behind, they'll be down two levels in the docking bay. This castle is set up in the clouds so to speak. We aren't on the ground...it keeps the slaves from being tempted to escape. Many have climbed out of windows only to meet their deaths." Dianna shuddered. "I don't know what is worse, listening to Tann's slaves scream while he is having his sadistic form of fun with them, or listening to the blood curdling cries coming from them as they plummet to their doom. It is a heavy burden to bear, and the echoes of their screams will never truly leave me. I'm afraid I'm marred for life." Her eyes rested on Alora. "I wish I could have spared you the distress you must be suffering right now."

Alora sighed. "So much misery, aye. But I assure you, Dianna, I have endured my fair share of torment during my lifetime. As it is, it looks as if Garrett is making headway up above us. I'm going to telepathically relay to him our plan, and then, he can fall back and follow us. Ace, you'll know how to pilot the ship, won't you? I'm not familiar with spaceships as you are. In fact, being with Garrett is the first time I've actually been up in Space for such a great length of time. Meeting him has changed my life beyond recognition. So much so, that I feel like a different woman. I should be able to keep us shielded while we make our way to the docking bay. If the stars align for us, pray they do."

"That will definitely help. Come on ladies, get yourself together and get ready to do some walking. We have to abandon the Hall. It was our death trap anyway." Dianna regarded the ragtag bunch of women, they all hung on her every word--evidently, they had silently elected her as their spokeswoman and leader.

The women on the floor groaned as they stood up. Some of them looked like they were half starved, while others looked happy at the prospect of freedom. She could see that they had come from all walks of life. Had Garrett not rescued her from the Barbarians one of these women could very well be her. A shiver raced through her, making her blood heat and her palms sweat.

"Dianna, if you know the way, you'll have to walk with me in front. Ace, if you could..."

"Got it. Guard the rear. Not that I'd be able to do much magically, if your force field failed since I don't even know if I can fight with my sort of magic. Dianna, have you gotten in touch with your magical side? It would make sense that you too would be able

to tap into it since we both shared the same mother."

"I can't say that I have, it would have done me little good anyway. Tann would have gotten rid of me at the first sight of coming to the cusp."

"Hmm...I wonder if Tann knew if you'd someday pose a threat to him," Ace wondered.

"I don't think there's anything magical about me, save from the fact that I have a magical child." Dianna's voice swelled with pride.

Alora listened to them talking, but only from a distance. Her thoughts were focused on Garrett and telling him through their psychic chain what they had planned.

'Garrett, we are off to the docking bays two levels down.'

'Good, I'll rendezvous with you there once I can finish off a few more of Tann's minions. With Hawkeye almost back to top form, we shouldn't be long. He's battle hungry, can't be helped when your magical soul is a Griffon.'

'Not another one.'

'Come to think of it, I think he's part of your father's clan.'

She sighed. "I guess we'll have to get to know one another once we get out of this mess alive. Garrett, just be careful. I'm not so sure if you should even be fighting, let alone purposefully going after more of them. Sufficed it to say, I just want you to stay safe.'

'Ditto for me. Run. If it comes right down to it, and I don't get to you on time, then hightail it out of here. Get to Bryce no matter what. Only he and your father will be able to take down Tann if it comes to that point. I don't want Tann getting a hold of you. Understood?'

'I don't want to say I understand, but I do understand where you're coming from. If it comes down to it, Ace will get the women out of here en route to safety and I will return to you.'

'Returning to me is not a good idea. Don't fall into that foolhardy trap, Tann is banking on it.'

'Tann is a defeated man. By all accounts, Dianna tells us he would not have ordered the mass executions of his slaves if he weren't running scared. Bryce and my father's forces are obviously gaining ground in the space battle.'

'Go now, Alora. Leave this damned place.'

With that, he broke off their telepathic link.

She groaned. He'd done it again. Looking behind her, she waved her hand forward. "We have to move quickly, I have a feeling Tann is going to become a problem soon."

Dianna gasped. Ace grunted. "If I see this Tann bastard, I'm going to find a way to give him something to remember. A monster like him shouldn't be allowed to draw breath for much longer. He is the vilest creature I've ever heard of."

The ground shook again. This time, the mini quake threw them all off their feet. Alora screamed, wavering slightly. Her shield around the imprisoned women fell. They were now vulnerable to an outside attack.

The sound of men approaching carried to them.

The women scrambled toward her. She tried to lift the shield up around them again.

Nothing.

Her magic had finally failed her when they needed it the most.

"Run to the docking bay!" she shouted over the din of stampeding footsteps.

Dianna helped her to her feet. Ace was already up and listening to the footsteps pounding toward them.

She reached out psychically and drew back as if she'd been slapped in the face.

"It's not Garrett, Ace! Get out of there!" In one split second, her world tipped on its axis. Ace was in the direct line of fire. The energy building up to strike out at them was concussive enough to do Ace a good deal of harm, it was an energy weapon being powered with black magic.

Dianna rushed forward, pushing Ace out of the way, only to take the blast of energy that would have hit Ace. She screamed in anguish and fell to the floor.

"Oh, shit. No, Dianna." Ace leaned down, and pulled her up. "Alora, move quickly, we have to get her out of here and toward safety. She's still breathing, thanks be!"

Alora moved into action, hooking Dianna's arm around her shoulders while Ace supported her other side.

"You need to take Dianna to the docking bay. I'll try to fend them off for as long as I can," Alora muttered.

Their darkest hour had come.

"I can't just leave you alone and vulnerable." Ace shook her head. "I won't do it!"

"You have to do it. I'll be fine. I'm going to erect one hell of a wall of magical fire here. They won't be able to breach my flames, and if Garrett and Hawkeye stumble across it, I'm banking it won't hurt them since we are all of the same magic kind."

Ace shook her head again, tears erupting in her eyes. "I can't allow you to sacrifice yourself."

"I won't be sacrificing myself, just do what I ask, please, Ace. I don't have a feeling of impending doom for myself. You and Dianna on the other hand, are a totally different story."

"We're going. But I'm coming back for you once I get Dianna onboard a ship. She'll take a freaking conniption when she wakes up and realizes that you're not with us."

The floor shook beneath them again. The footsteps drew nearer.

"Go! They haven't fired again thinking they've taken us out. But they will be coming around that corner in no time at all. I plan to have a little greeting waiting for them."

Ace smiled. "You're too damn brave for your own good." With that, she took the full burden of Dianna on her shoulders, and used her wings and gift of flight to speed them along to their destination.

Turning around to face her unseen foe, she let her power ripple around her. She could feel the energy tingling along her body, from her fingertips to her toes. Purple flames shot out around her, as she morphed into her magical soul.

Screams rent the air.

"It's another one of them! Except, this one's purple!" Five men stopped in unison in front of her. "Turn back, you bloody clusterfucks! This one is about to blow us all to hell!"

Crimson fire started to edge into her line of sight. She could see that Garrett had been fully restored to his former strength.

"We can't turn back! It's coming for us, just like he said he would be! We have nothing to fight them with. The black magic energy weapons are useless! He did something to them, right after our last shot!"

She flew toward him, her amethyst-colored magic smoldering a blazing entrance for her.

"We're going to be burned alive!" They shrieked.

She stopped. Pure fear blanketed their voices. Could she stoop so low as to become just like Tann? These men were the lowest of the lows. They were going to murder innocent women en masse, and yet, something made her hesitate. Indecision plagued her.

Her heartbeat stammered. Her mind reeled. She had to do something. Thinking swiftly, she enveloped them in a cage of her own making, using what little knowledge of her magic she had, to conjure one forth.

Then, without giving it a further thought, she turned her direction toward where Ace had fled with Dianna.

She knew Garrett would be following momentarily, and if he decided to eek out his vengeance on the ones she'd imprisoned, she wouldn't be around to witness it.

The docking bay was dead ahead. Reaching out with her psychic vision, she saw it in her mind's eye.

Another sensation brushed her temple. The sickly sensation made her go still with dread.

Tann.

Increasing her momentum, she'd made it to the docking bay doors when the two of them collided. He was in the room. He was stalking his prey.

She had to do something to distract him from Ace, Dianna and the countless other women that were in peril.

"Tann! You stupid sod! Pay attention to me!" She shape shifted back into her human form. An amethyst glow lingering around her gave evidence to her magical powers.

Tann whirled upon her. He looked like a deranged beast. His eyes were wild, his hair stood on end almost as if he'd been electrocuted.

"And the prey comes to me. Are you going to be the sacrificial lamb, my little pretty?"

She could feel Ace's anger. She was coming toward them. But Ace could not get into this battle. This was hers to fight alone.

In one blinding instant, the landscape and the battle zone changed.

Three streaks of multi-colored light shot into the docking bay. Another sensation hit her as she felt the minds touch hers.

Merrick, Matilda and her father.

She couldn't allow them to be caught in the crossfire.

"This ends with us. We go to the surface to battle this out. The victor will not be you."

Tann laughed.

Without giving him time to respond, she activated her Phoenix fire once more, engulfing him in her flames, and transported them down to the surface of the planet.

This was the end. This was his end, and if it had to be, it was her end as well.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Garrett followed the trail that Alora had left in her wake. Tracking her magical essence was like following breadcrumbs.

Hawkeye rode with him in his magic fire.

"You know, I almost forgot what it's like to live like this!" He held the flaming sword in his hand. Garrett smiled at him. "One Unicorn's Ambrosia wasn't enough to get me strong enough to call upon my magical soul. But I do like feeling the white magic whirling around me, even if it isn't my own."

"Once our healers get to you, you'll be embracing your magical soul once again!"

"I fear not. That part of me died long ago. If it does come back to me, if I can become whole again, it will be a miracle of the grandest proportions. Being with Tann all of this time has literally sucked the soul out of me," Hawkeye lamented.

"No, it hasn't. You will heal. I have faith."

"I might heal, but my wounds will still be festering on the inside. I will never be able to shed the baggage that is ingrained into me."

Garrett slowed to a standstill.

"No!" His breath went ragged. "She couldn't have thought to take on Tann alone. Alora has engaged in a duel with him. A magical duel. She's insane."

"Is she your mate? Because as it is, I'm a tad confused."

"Aye. My mate. She's lost her mind."

"She's a brave one if she thinks she can win against Tann. That bloody bugger has amassed power the likes of which she couldn't possibly think to fight. Where do you think all of our energy has been going? He's channeled it all into himself! He's become a force neither one of us could take on alone least of all her even at her greatest strength."

Garrett shook his head, tears stinging behind his eyes. He wouldn't think of Alora perishing. He couldn't think of losing her and continue to go on.

"I won't allow it to happen. I'm going after her. Get to the docking bay and get out of here. Get to safety. If Alora is lost, then, I don't want to live."

"Garrett! No. We need you!" Hawkeye said urgently.

Without replying to him, he dropped Hawkeye off and flew away.

Alora needed him. And that's all that mattered.

Heat bombarded him as soon as he morphed back into his human form. Dirt rose up from the sweltering desert, settling in his lungs.

The planet's surface reminded him of Delania but even hotter. He couldn't see where any human could survive living on this shit hole.

In the swirling dust, he made out two figures in the throes of battle. Coupled with the black fire mingling with the purple fire and he didn't have to wonder who the two figures were.

By what he could see, it looked as if Alora was holding her own. In a way he hadn't expected. She was indeed molding with her magical soul.

Four other spirits hit the sand next to him.

"Holy cow, this stinks worse than an ogres farts!" Matilda's voice reached out to him, through the din of the winds roaring around them.

"You should go back to your mother!" Garrett called out.

"We can help!" Merrick's voice carried to him, echoing across the landscape.

"Lord Lyon told us, that in order to defeat Tann we'd need to combine all of our magic. He's become some sort of a super charged demon!"

"Merrick is correct. I asked them to come with me," Lyon stated.

"And their mother wouldn't allow them to go at it, alone." Ace's steel edged voice met his ears.

"I want to go to her first. Lord Lyon, I suggest you all shape shift back into your magical soul forms, as I will be doing in a moment. Alora has chosen madness in this scheme of hers to battle with Tann in her human form."

"She's chosen correctly. Tann is slowly losing all of his humanity. He will be pure evil in a few minutes. By fighting him in her human immortal form, she is challenging him, to give into his inner demon."

"And when he does? What then, he eats her alive?" Garrett demanded.

"No. She will hopefully channel her magical soul at that precise moment and vanquish him into oblivion."

"She won't know how to do that. She hasn't been trained like we have! She has no idea how to use battle magic! You should be trying to help her!" Garrett shouted, his voice turning hoarse.

"Use your psychic chain to help her. In this matter, I think trusting my daughter is the wisest course of action," Lyon said sagely.

"And if that ends in her getting herself blown up?" Garrett asked incredulously.

"Then, I will be very heartsick."

"You just don't get it. I love Alora," he proclaimed fervently, love welling through him in strong waves.

"We all do, Garrett," Ace spoke softly. "We all wouldn't wish to see her come to harm, and while I think Lyon is talking out of his ass, I also don't think we should rush to her rescue yet. She seems to be winning so far."

Following Ace's judgment of the situation, an arc of black magic blasted out at Alora, knocking her off her feet. He watched Tann move toward her.

* * * *

In one startling moment, the tide of the battle changed.

Alora screamed as her head throbbed with pain. A pain like no other--a pain that made her feel as if her mind was going to pieces.

In the next mind numbing moment, her entire conscience unraveled.

She stood on Delania, hitched to the back of Jim and his partner's Caravan. Her head continued to throb under the heat of the sun. Her feet were blistered, her back ached from her many beatings, and her knees felt as if they were about to buckle beneath her.

Opening her eyes, she stared up at the sun's beating rays. Her heart thundered. It had all been a mirage.

None of it had been real.

Garrett had been an illusion. Matilda, Merrick, Bryce and Ace had all been figments of her imagination. A suffocating weight settled over her shoulders. Tears trickled down her face, running through the grime caked on her face.

Her heart actually hurt. How could she have created a world so real?
Her mind whirled.

"Come on. Let me do her," Jim whined. "Just once. I swear. That's all. I can't take it if we sell her without me screwing her first. Look at her ass! She's one hot little slut! Let me fuck her silly! I want to fuck her seven ways to Sunday!"

"Garret," she sobbed between shattering breaths. He wouldn't answer. He wasn't real. The mind wraiths had finally gotten to her, they were slowly driving her insane. In fact, she'd probably already snapped.

"No. Out of the question," Jim's partner Del answered.

"I don't know why, but she keeps falling asleep and then coming back, almost as if she's a Phoenix rising from the ashes," Del muttered.

"Alora!" Garrett's voice thundered across the dune they'd just started to climb.
"Fight it!"

The psychic chain, she could feel it pulling at her.

"Fight Tann! He's working on your worst memories--don't let him beat you!"

She stood up straighter.

"Go away!" she screamed. "You are just my imagination coming to life! I can't drown myself in my own little world anymore. I have to face the reality of my life--no matter how depressingly painful it might be at the moment."

"Alora!" A fireball raced toward her.

Why was the fireball shaped like a Phoenix?

Her heart hammered in her chest again. Garrett rematerialized in front of her. He walked toward her, stirring up dust in his wake.

He shot a fireball at the Caravan. It disappeared in a billow of red smoke.

"This is Tann torturing your mind, you need to snap out of it!" He placed his hands on her shoulders, pulling her toward him. "Tann might be getting to you right now, but he can't fight the psychic chain. Come back to me, Alora, my love."

She was sucked back into her physical body. Her eyes opened to the real reality in front of her. Tann screamed in anger, shooting her with another dark energy bolt. Her knees buckled beneath her and she fell to a kneeling position.

Garrett couldn't let Tann get to her. He couldn't let him touch her. Tann had already committed the unforgivable crime of infiltrating her mind, and now, he was going to finish Tann.

Without giving Lyon a further thought, he transported himself in between Tann and Alora.

Tann laughed, drawing up short.

"You are no match for me, Garrett Firestorm. Move aside, so I can have my fun with your bitch."

"Not today, Tann."

"You can't think to defeat me. I am unstoppable! You forget this planet imbues me with the strength I need to wipe out the light and bathe everything and everyone in soul sucking darkness!"

"I will protect Alora."

"Alora doesn't seem to want your protection. She's getting back up to come and get me again. She must really be fond of me."

He gave Garrett a smile that made Garrett's insides twist.

"You fucking bastard!" Drawing upon his magical soul, he transformed completely, and hooked Tann into his fire, carrying them far up into the atmosphere.

"You are weakening, my boy. As you carry me within your phoenix fire, my dark energy is sapping away your strength."

They rose up high into the darkening sky, shooting past the moon, and out into space.

Red fire blasted across the blackness of space, taking out a few of Tann's spaceships.

Garrett was slowly losing control. Tann was right. His black magic was gradually draining what energy he had.

"I won't allow you to make any more innocents suffer," he said angrily.

"Are you willing to burn out your flame in order to defeat me? You'll have to do that if you truly wish to strip me of my powers. I couldn't see you being a man without your magical soul."

'Garrett?' He tried to push Alora back from invading his mind. 'Let him go, Garrett. He's killing you slowly! If you persist, he will make your flame burn out! Don't allow him to do that. Wait for me. Together our combined light will blast him to the very bowels of hell!'

'No.'

'This has been written in the scrolls of destiny. Several warriors of the light will take out a great menace of the dark arts. Lyon just told me the story. You can't do this alone, Garrett. You might be the great Garrett Firestorm, but you will only continue to be great if you rely on your friends. Look around you! Without Bryce, we wouldn't even be this far! Tann would have pummeled us into defeat long ago.'

Garrett heeded her words, and released Tan.

Black swirling mists, blanketed the space between him and what Tann had become.

Bryce's ships were drawing back to take sanctuary behind the moon. Its mystical power would protect them from the showdown of power that was coming. If they won, they'd have a chance of pushing the darkness back into submission. If they didn't win, Tann's reign of terror would begin.

Remnants of shattered ships littered space. He could recognize a few of the ruined ships as those of his own. His heart fell.

Had Bryce been one of the good ones to fall?

He hardened his heart against Tann. If Alora didn't make it up to him soon, he would lock into mortal combat with Tann and be damned the consequences. If he had to sacrifice himself then he would do it gladly if only for the greater good.

Multicolored beams of light splintered through his vision.

The cavalry had arrived.

'Tell Merrick and Matilda to go and see if their father is among the living. We won't need them. You can tell your father and Ace to back off as well. If this has been foretold, then the two of us are the only ones needed to drive Tann into being non-existent.'

He felt Alora's silent agreement.

Tann was hesitating.

Was he trying to figure out if he should engage him in battle again, or run back to

the borderlands of Darkness?

"I will follow you, Tann." His voice shattered the brief stillness between them.

"I will gladly accept final battle with you, Crimson Phoenix. You can know what is like to go up against the Black Beast. I have powers you can't think of knowing or defeating. I've become your worst nightmare, Guardian!"

Alora zoomed to his side. He drank in her beauty. Her Phoenix fire surrounded her earthly body. She was a sight for his very sore eyes.

'We need to attack him now.'

'No.'

Her voice was resolute and took him by surprise.

'What?'

'We can't fight him. We must take whatever he uses to strike out against us with, and reflect it back at him.'

'You're insane. We will be destroyed.'

'No. We won't be. If we use the Psychic Chain and become one entity for a brief moment, we will be able to reflect his dark magic back at him.'

'I can't say I agree.'

'You must. It's the only way. The seers I am told by Lyon have envisioned several different scenarios. One in which we were both killed, one in which only one of us perished and one in which we were both locked in combat with Tann for eternity. None of them resulted in our victory, and eventually the entire known worlds fell to the Legions of Darkness. If we don't succeed in this last stand before the beginning of a fight for our very survival we will never have a hope of winning. We must bow to the only fate that is a fate with good tomorrows.'

He hesitated. Tann looked ready to launch into some more bloodshed against the ships scurrying for cover.

'I trust you, Alora. I believe in you. You are the herald of good things to come. You are my angel of fortune.'

'Then, be my avenging angel and mold with me. Let our magical souls dance together in unison. Let us destroy a great darkness and reflect light back upon our kind.'

With that, they merged. Their amethyst and ruby colored flames becoming one.

Tann roared with outrage. "Fight me!" He shot off one devastating blow toward one of their ships.

Alora and Garrett held fast to each other.

'He'll direct his rage at us next. Be ready for it. Lord Lyon, Matilda and Merrick are ready, should we lose sight of our magical souls in the fallout.'

He wrapped his arms around her. Though they were embracing their magical forms, they still held onto their human forms. He kissed her forehead, and then her nose, and just as their lips met, Tann's rage hit them.

Burning agony tore through him. He could feel Alora stiffen with pain as well. As the energy struck them, something that Tann hadn't anticipated happened.

Their combined love created a shield and purged his dark magic from them.

It went driving back toward him, destroying him in one shattering blast of power.

Alora went limp in his arms. He could feel his own strength waning. Before he too lost consciousness, he heard her talk to him through the psychic chain.

'I love you, Garrett Firestorm, my hero.'

'My heart, I love you until the end of our days.' And then, he succumbed to the night that had fallen for both of them.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Morning came for all of them. Tann was gone as was his planet.

As far as they knew, he'd been vanquished in the showdown between him, Garrett and Alora.

Alora and Garrett clasped hands, standing in the twilight before dawn. This was their wedding ceremony.

Their family and friends surrounded them, blanketing them in their unconditional love. Beside them, Ace and Bryce exchanged their own vows. In the tenuous time awaiting them, the only thing to fight the hate was their hope and love. Without it, the darkness would spread.

Once their union had been blessed, they ran out from under the magically conjured flower petals raining down upon them.

Alora leaned against Garrett, letting his love wash over her.

"We are facing an uncertain future," he mused, holding her to him.

"With you by my side, I think we can face anything." She smiled.

"Do you ever wonder what it would be like if I hadn't found you on Delania?"

His words hung between them, she reflected back on her struggles against him in the beginning. She'd fought him tooth and nail, but it had been all for naught. She'd lost her heart to him, the first time she'd set eyes on him. He'd been her champion then, and he'd be her champion for the rest of forever.

"You were always meant to find me on Delania. We were always meant to be, Garrett, and I won't have you changing my mind on that. We've been through a journey that is still ongoing. Whatever comes to pass, whatever the dark might throw at us, as long as we are together we are strong."

"Then, you don't ever want to break the psychic chain between us?"

"Never. You are stuck with me for the rest of your immortal life, Garrett."

Their lips met in a sweet kiss filled with the promise of their true love.

Laughter surrounded them. "Come on you lovesick, firebirds, it's time to celebrate!" Ace called.

Walking hand in hand, they embraced their entwined destinies.

They were truly one, forever.

The End.