

ELLORA'S CAVE TWILIGHT



EVE
JAMESON

Aurora's
Myrian
Destiny PROMISE

An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



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Aurora's Promise

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AURORA'S PROMISE

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Chapter One

Connyn crossed his arms over his chest and planted himself in the middle of the sidewalk, forcing the stream of holiday tourists to walk around him. "I don't like this. This is too open." He stood on the edge of San Antonio's Riverwalk and glared at a woman who had backed into him while trying to take a picture of three other laughing women. When she turned around to apologize, she stuttered to a stop, her wide-eyed stare focused on his chest. Slowly her gaze moved upward and then without warning, she brought her camera up and snapped a picture of him instead.

With a curse, he jerked his head back and tried to rub the sudden flash-blindness from his eyes.

"You could try to fit in so people wouldn't stare," Amdyn said and then, not trying to hide his smirk, "or take pictures."

Connyn ignored his cousin's jibe and looked around at the crowded café tables that lined the pedestrian walkways. Why someone would be interested in taking his picture when there were floating barges in the canal with all sorts of bizarrely dressed people waving and vying for attention was beyond him.

What was it in this country with old men parading around in red-and-white suits when it got cold? Some customs he just would never understand and he sure as hell was not going to stick around this planet until his hair turned white and they tried to put one of those outfits on him. One more reason he was more than ready to get out of this world with its constantly changing climates and back to Ilyria with the cool breezes at night and warm, sunny days. Every day.

He shook his waist-length hair over his shoulder and used the two long, thin warrior braids hanging from his temples to tie back his light brown mane. Unlike his cousins, he refused to let the years they'd spent in this world pry from him ancient traditions he'd embraced as a youth. He was not of this world and there were only so many concessions he was willing to make to fit in here while looking for his missing mate.

He glanced over at Amdyn. Though their hair and eye coloring might differ, in size and basic features the descendants of each of the five Royal Houses of Ilyria all resembled one other to a certain extent. But he and his four cousins, who each held the title of Eldest Heir of his individual House, bore a similarity that ran much deeper than outward appearances. They were all desperate to find their mates and complete the prophecy required by the gods to break the curse that had plagued their people for centuries. Being Eldest Heir of the Third House and in the direct line of the House that had been instrumental to bringing the curse to his world, the drive to remove it had settled especially heavily onto his shoulders.

The women they sought were from one of the last families of Mystics and key to completing the prophecy, but they had disappeared from their homeworld over twenty-five years ago. During a particular vicious Sleht attack, Magdalyne and her daughters fled through an unmanned portal, leaving behind few clues to track them by. For a quarter of a century he and his kin had relentlessly searched portals, worlds and countries and several months ago their efforts had been rewarded when two of the sisters had been found. Only the oldest and youngest of Magdalyne's daughters were still missing, Magdalyne herself having died soon after they left Ilyria.

Though the three eldest had been officially matched to his cousins before the attack, the youngest had disappeared before the Matching Ritual could be completed. That was the daughter he would claim. She was the last known full-blooded unmatched Mystic from their homeworld and he would make her his. Finding Amdyn's mate in this crowd was one more step to completing that goal since they had good reason to believe that Ellyna knew the location of her youngest sister.

His whatever-it-takes attitude regularly stepped on some toes but lately the tension had been building more than normal between Connyn and his cousins. The simple fact was that there were four daughters and five Heirs and time was running out on the prophecy. Though some of his cousins were as close as brothers, Connyn had always held himself apart, unwilling to let even a friendship distract him from fulfilling his family's role in Ilyria's destiny.

Muffling an impatient growl, Connyn side-stepped around a couple who had stopped in the middle of the walkway to video a decorated barge as it floated by. His shoulder brushed a tree trunk and dislodged a line of twinkling Christmas lights that landed on his arm. Shaking them off, he wondered whatever could possess people to string thousands of lights and decorations over and around every damn thing that didn't get up and walk away. The only good thing he could see about this place was that at least here in Texas he wasn't freezing his ass off waist deep in snow like he'd been in Colorado.

Connyn's gaze traveled over the crowd, snagging on the occasional redhead and wondering if she were the one Amdyn looked for. Frustration pounded under his skin with every step he took. They should know more. Amdyn, eldest Heir of the First House, was a full telepath who had been linked to the oldest daughter, Ellyna, at their Matching Ritual over thirty years ago at Ellyna's first birthday. However Ellyna had been in this world for a quarter of a century and her thoughts could slip like quicksilver through Amdyn's mind. The mental connection would be strong enough one moment, her thoughts as clear to Amdyn as his own, and the next moment nothing.

It was during one of those short moments of clarity that Amdyn had discovered she planned on meeting some friends here at a local restaurant for dinner tonight. He sure as hell hoped Amdyn had gotten his information correct. Connyn ducked his head to avoid a low-hanging branch dripping with more of the garish lights and muttered a curse. Though there were things he could appreciate about this world, tourist traps were not one of them.

"There." Amdyn's deep voice cut through Connyn's thoughts and the holiday throng. He motioned to Jordyn, the commander in charge of the military unit assisting the Royals on their hunt. He'd been flanking their position and now moved to support their movements from a hidden vantage point.

Connyn followed his cousin's gaze to two women sitting at an open-air table. As crowded as the restaurant was, it surprised him that they had been seated at a table set for four. It also surprised him that the woman Amdyn had pointed out didn't fit the description they'd been using all these years. The woman who faced them was tall with curly blonde hair. He could only see the other woman from the back, but she had long black hair and was equally as tall, or perhaps even taller, than Amdyn's mate.

"Are you sure?" Connyn asked. "None of the Mystics have ever had anything but red hair and green eyes."

Amdyn didn't answer but moved through the swathe of humanity with the intent of a heat-seeking missile locked on a fireball. Connyn looked around to see which position Jordyn had taken up, but the soldier had melted into the crowd. No doubt he could see them perfectly though. He and Jordyn had nearly come to blows not long ago and because of that situation, Connyn had been against the decision to bring him along. But as this was Amdyn's matched mate they were officially tracking and Amdyn was the Heir to the First House, there wasn't really much he could do about it.

The blonde smiled at the woman in front of her and Connyn could all but feel the electricity that surged through his cousin.

She looked up and saw them heading toward her table. Her smile froze. He wasn't sure what he saw in her eyes. Surprise. Fear. Acceptance. They all seemed to fly over her features in the brief seconds before she blinked, turned away and said something to the woman she was with.

By now, Amdyn was beside the table. The way he was looking at Ellyna, there could be bombs exploding and buildings crashing and he doubted his cousin would notice. He'd never seen Amdyn so intense. Considering the man's natural demeanor was as focused as a laser, that was saying something.

"Ellyna."

She tilted her head up to look at Amdyn and Connyn could clearly see the resemblance between her and the other two Mystic daughters they'd already located. Up close, her eyes were the same deep, Ilyrian-sea green as her sisters and there was just a hint of dark red roots at the base of her blonde hair.

With a slight nod, she acknowledged Amdyn. "It's been a long time."

"You were expecting me?"

"Of course. I told you where I'd be."

Amdyn's eyes narrowed. "You *told* me?"

Ellyna gestured toward the empty chairs. "Please sit down. People are starting to stare."

"I don't like this. It's too exposed." Amdyn spared a glance to a rowdy group of college-age couples who'd had too much to drink and were talking to each other at a volume that suggested they all had cotton in their ears. "Let's go."

The woman sitting across from Ellyna tilted her head to look up at Amdyn and said, "You were right, Ellen. They are big and bossy."

"Ellen?" Amdyn asked, irritation clear in his tone. "I prefer your true name. Ellyna."

Ellyna shrugged nonchalantly and reached for a cell phone that had been sitting on the table. "Whatever. Friends call me Ellen now," she said, dropping the phone into her purse.

Connyn stepped around to the other side of the table so that he could better see the woman who was speaking to Ellyna. "Who are you?" he demanded.

She turned her head around to look up at him, her dark brown eyes flashing with intelligence and inquiry. Something dark and possessive slithered through him. A reaction to her that came from such a primitive level, there was no modern expression adequate for the explanation. Only a single word burned through his consciousness — *mine*.

Before the woman could answer his question, Ellyna spoke up. "This is Aurora. She's my sister."

"Esraina?" he asked.

"I prefer and answer to Aurora." The woman's dark eyes flashed, but her smile was polite. Barely. "And you are?"

"Connyn Kilth. Heir to the Third Royal House of Ilyria." He frowned down at the woman. "I thought all Magdalyné's daughters were supposed to have red hair and green eyes."

"I thought the men from Ilyria were supposed to be arrogant assholes." Aurora smiled sweetly up at Connyn. "Good to know at least one of us was right."

A small hand shot out from a rolled up blanket on the woman's lap and slapped the table. Aurora cooed into the pink material and shifted the bundle. A curly-haired child gurgled up at her, reaching for her face. Aurora bent down and kissed the baby's fingertips.

The earth under Connyn's feet shook. The air became too thick to drag into his lungs. "Is that a child?" he asked.

Aurora's eyes, bright with laughter, lifted to his. "And here I thought all of you Royal Heirs were blessed with magic powers. Obviously yours isn't the gift of sight."

Connyn glanced at Amdyn, wondering if he had known about the child and chosen not to share that information, but his cousin looked surprised as well. "Is the child yours?" The question came out too harsh, but his mate's first child should be with him. *All* of his mate's children should be his.

"And if she is?" The challenge was clear in Aurora's biting tone and suddenly frosty stare.

"Where's the father?" His voice had turned to ice along with his blood.

A shadow of stark grief clouded Aurora's face. "He's dead."

"I am sorry for your loss."

Aurora nodded stiffly. "Thank you."

"Ellyna," Amdyn said, his voice straining against impatience, "it's time to leave."

She looked up at him and smiled. Folded her hands in her lap. "No."

Tension tightened the corners of Amdyn's eyes. Connyn watched him struggle with the natural urge to pick his woman up and simply take her to where she was supposed to be. With her mate. In Ilyria. Safe.

He glanced at Aurora and had to stifle the same compulsion.

Ellyna gestured to the empty chairs. "Please, have a seat. There are things we need to discuss."

"We should move to a safer place," Amdyn said.

"You mean a more private place?"

Connyn frowned at the sarcastic tone in Ellyna's voice. It was obvious she was going to be difficult. He turned to Aurora who had just set the squirming toddler down to stand beside the table and asked, "Do you understand the danger you're in? You should not be so exposed, so unprotected."

"And your only concern is our safety?" Ellyna's sharp response had two people at the next table turning toward them.

Amdyn grabbed a chair and sat down. Leaning toward his mate, he lowered his voice. "You know you must return with us—"

"Eventually. I'm not ready yet. There are things—"

"Nothing is more important than returning to your homeworld and fulfilling your duty to your people," Connyn interrupted.

"Jeez," said Aurora. "Take a chill pill, Captain America. And for heaven's sake, stop glowering and sit down. It's not like we're going to make a break for it before dessert."

The child turned and started to wander away from the table. Aurora leaned over and caught her by the sleeve of her jacket. As she sat back up, tugging the child closer again, the neckline of her gray sweater gaped and Connyn got a glimpse of full breasts and black lace. Desire snaked its way through his veins and Amdyn wasn't the only one impatient to get his woman somewhere much more private.

Abruptly Ellyna stiffened, her face paled to a stark white and her bright green eyes widened in fear as she twisted her head side to side, looking for something.

"You brought them with you!" she hissed.

"What's wrong?" Aurora looked around, trying to pinpoint what had alarmed Ellyna.

Amdyn was on his feet instantly and Connyn moved between Aurora and the closest knot of people. The baby let out a shriek of laughter and darted away between tables.

"Chloe!" Aurora shouted, jumping up and darting after her. The heavy bag Aurora had looped over her shoulder swung down to her elbow and slammed into Connyn's groin.

With a hissed curse, Connyn bent reflexively at the waist and cupped himself. Before he could draw in a full breath, two Predators came out of the crowd. One from the pedestrian walkway and another from the restaurant's door that led back into the main lobby and central seating area. Both Predators looked like they had been spawned from the same mutant combination of ugly and vicious.

With fists the size of bowling balls swinging at their sides, the creatures zeroed in on the two women Amdyn and Connyn had come to claim. Uncaring about the near riot they caused as they advanced on their targets, the Predators let nothing impede their progress through the crowded café and closed the gap with surprising speed for so much lumbering girth.

Amdyn jerked Ellyna to her feet and Connyn made a quick grab for Aurora before she could make it out of his reach. The command to split up and remove the women to safety Amdyn flashed into Connyn's mind came a second after Connyn had already started to push his way through the crowd with Aurora in tow.

Out of the corner of his eye he saw Jordyn scoop up the escaping toddler and yank a screaming woman out of the path of the first Predator.

"Chloe!" Aurora tried to pull out of his hold, but her best efforts didn't even slow him down.

"She's safe," he said as he pushed past a line of people trying to get around a baby stroller stalling quick progress. "One of our best soldiers picked her up."

"I can't just leave her!"

A startled, high-pitched scream from behind them was followed by a shout and a splash as something large went into the river. Connyn glanced behind him. Amdyn and Ellyna were headed in the opposite direction down the Riverwalk and Jordyn was nowhere in sight. But dogging their steps and less than a half-block behind them was one of the Predators.

"If you go back there, you'll die and lead the Predator right to the child or Ellyna. Is that what you want?" He threw the words back at her but didn't pause to let her consider any response other than following.

They were coming to a bridge and from what he could see, they could get to the other side of the river and then up a set of stairs to the street just beyond that. He pushed through a group of teenagers clustered around wooden carts with large iron wheels filled with tourist-trap jumble. Ignoring the testosterone-filled blustering of boys still shaking hands with puberty and the high-pitched screeching of the girls they were

with, Connyn was closing in on the bridge when Aurora swung her purse around and thumped him hard in the chest with it.

"What are you doing?" he snapped, catching the purse before she could strike him with it again.

"I *said* my car is that way."

He turned to find her pointing up toward a narrow stairwell almost hidden as it was tucked in and back between two restaurants. Easy to miss if you didn't know it was there.

"It goes up to street level," she said, already turning away from him and tugging her purse out of his grip. "My car is in a parking lot right across the street."

Instantly he switched directions and took the lead, barreling up the steps. Aurora took too long to readjust her direction and was flung around, her body jerked into position as if they were playing a child's game of Crack the Whip and she were on the tail end trying to keep up. Her purse and shoulder crashed into the wall bordering the stairs. Aurora cursed and looked positively mutinous.

"You need to keep up," he growled and took the next three stairs in a single step. Aurora flailed behind him, but managed to move her feet fast enough to avoid being dragged up the stairwell.

An ornate iron gate stood open at the top and the lights at street level cast a cold glow marking their exit. They had just cleared the passage when he was yanked to a stop so suddenly that Aurora's hand jerked free of his hold. With fear clawing at his throat he spun around to confront the new threat, expecting to see Aurora in the Predator's grip. Instead, he found her bent at the waist, untangling one of the long leather handles on her bag from a piece of the ornamental ironwork of the gate. The curlicue that had snagged her purse stuck out at an odd angle as if it had been bent under someone's weight as they tried to scale the door instead of opening it.

Just as he reached for her again, Aurora's head came up with satisfaction stamped on her face as she held the bag aloft. "Got it!" She pivoted around his outstretched hand and beat him out the door. "Quit messing around and come on," she said over her shoulder. And promptly came to an abrupt halt.

Aurora doubled over and jerked down to one knee, her long black hair obscuring her face as it flew forward in an ebony wave. Her change in motion caught him in mid-lunge after her and he had to leap at the last second to keep from running right over her. His momentum carried him into the street and over the hood of an oncoming car that had braked to a tire-screaming, horn-blaring stop. Landing on his feet, he ran around the front of the car to get back to Aurora, not paying any attention to being called a fucking moron or the squealing tires as the car sped off.

"Are you okay?" He went down on one knee to see what he needed to do to help. Aurora flipped her hair out of her way and looked up at him as she tugged on the heel of her boot. "I'm fine. It's just that my shoe is stuck."

He looked at her foot and saw where the stiletto heel was stuck in the pick hole of a meter plate in the sidewalk. This woman was a walking, talking comedy of errors. With a single, impatient jerk, he pulled her heel free and yanked her to her feet once more.

"Thanks," she said. For a moment, he forgot he was in a race for their lives as he looked down into her thickly lashed brown eyes. Dark and mesmerizing, they pulled on emotion deep inside him and made him want to wrap her in his arms and brand her as his for the world to take notice and back off.

Her look of gratitude was short-lived. Fright replaced it as she glanced behind him. He spun around and shoved her behind him. As the Predator crested the top of the staircase, Connyn grabbed the bar running across the top of the doorway and swung both feet into his age-old enemy, connecting with a solid thump in the middle of his chest. The creature grunted and flew back, barely stopping himself from falling back down steps with a wild grab at the handrail. Pinwheeling his free arm, the mutant was trying to regain his balance on the edge of the step when a blur of flying hair and twirling red coat shot around Connyn as he dropped back down to the ground.

Before he could stop her, Aurora darted in front of the monster and swung her bag up at him like a club. It collided with the Predator's chin, snapped his head back and ended the struggle for balance. Head over heels, the Predator fell down the stairs with Aurora's shouted *bastard!* bouncing off the walls around them.

Several people screamed at the bottom of the stairwell as the Predator landed on a couple of nosy tourists. Aurora didn't seem to notice the unwanted attention she had drawn to them as she stood like some ancient warrior princess glaring in victory down at a subjugated minion. With her hands on her hips, feet spread and hair streaming down her back, she turned to look at him with her dark eyes flashing and a grim smile of satisfaction lighting her face.

"You," he hissed as he leaned down to within an inch of her face, "are a menace!"

Her resultant burst of outrage was lost in a *whoosh* of air from her lungs as he picked her up and threw her over his shoulder. It was damn time they made themselves scarce around here.

Aurora squirmed around on his shoulder as he ran across the street and into the middle of the lot where she had indicated her car was parked. He did his best to ignore the long thighs and shapely ass his hands were splayed over to keep her in place. There'd be plenty of time to explore her body once she was safe and accepted her place. He'd not make the same mistake Rordyc, Heir to the Fourth House, had made with his mate and wait for her to fall in love with him before outlining the duties and responsibilities her privileged birth brought.

His woman was obviously intelligent, even if she was clumsy and fairly awkward. He expected it to take very little explanation for her to grasp her necessary adherence to the Ilyrian tradition of a Mystic daughter—her—willingly mating herself to the Eldest Heir of a Royal House—him—to further the lineage prophesied to save his world.

Simple really, now that she had been rescued from the world her mother had jumped into. Now with the apprehension of Aurora and Ellyna, they could finally return to their people, complete the prophecy, crush the Sleht and rule as they were destined to.

Without ceremony, he dropped Aurora back to her feet. She pushed away from him and straightened her red nylon trench coat which had come undone in their sprint through the Riverwalk. Besides the wrap-around gray sweater which tended to gape every time she leaned forward, she was wearing a short black leather skirt with two silver buckles up by her hip that matched the large silver hoops she wore in her ears. Added to the black high-heeled boots, her long black hair and red coat, the woman's appearance screamed *look at me and drool*. The sooner he removed her from public view the better.

She shouldered her bag and glared up at him. "I could have walked."

"Which is your car?" he asked, hoping for a nice, inconspicuous beige sedan.

Pulling a key ring with a remote attached from one of the copious pockets of her purse, she pointed it at the north end of the lot.

"That one," she said as she pressed the button. Lights flashed on a little BMW Roadster. A bright red convertible. Of course.

"Great," he growled as he snatched the keys from her hand and headed toward the car.

"Hey! That's *my* car!"

Connyn opened the door and slid the seat back as far as it would go before sliding into the driver's seat and starting the car. "If you drive like you run, we'll be the main course at a Predator's picnic by dinner. Now go around and get in." He paused for just a second. Aurora stood defiantly challenging his direction by placing herself in the way of his closing the door. "Fine," he said.

The brief gleam of triumph in her eyes disappeared as he grabbed her around the waist, lifted her over his lap and plunked her ass down in the passenger seat. He slammed his door shut and threw the little car into reverse. At least it handled well and had a decent amount of power under the hood. Even if it did stand out like a fucking emergency flare lit on a deserted road.

Aurora shifted so her feet were under the dash instead of resting on top of it and then twisted around in the seat to give him a death glare. "You are the most *insufferable* man I have ever had the mispleasure to meet."

He spared her a quick glance. "Put your seatbelt on."

"God! Has anyone ever told you that you are — *shit!*"

He made a sharp right turn, throwing her against his side.

"I told you to put your seatbelt on," he said calmly.

"You did that on purpose."

"The only purpose I have at the moment is to get you out of harm's way as fast as I can. Something that's proving to be much more difficult than it should be, thanks to your way of hailing trouble like most people in these cities whistle for a cab."

"I cause trouble? *I'm* not the one who showed up shadowed by two freaks from nightmare city."

The high-pitched shriek to her words made Connyn involuntarily squint and take the next corner sharper than he intended. He immediately had to swerve to the left to keep from kissing the bumper of a Toyota. Time to get on a highway and away from slow-moving traffic. Spinning the wheel under his palm, he worked the clutch and standard shift like he'd been born to it. Even in these circumstances, on a primitive level he enjoyed the thrill of pushing a machine to the limit of its creation.

Cutting across two lanes to make the closest on-ramp, he grunted as Aurora smacked into him again. She'd been in the process of shimmying out of her coat when the force of the turn knocked her off balance. Her hair whipped into his eyes when she lost her struggle to regain her own seat as he merged into highway traffic and her hand slipped off his knee. She landed with her head in his lap and shot his fantasy ride to a whole new level.

Aurora leveled a withering stare up at him. Unable to resist, he grinned down at her and said, "Now may not be the best time for that."

Shoving herself back into the passenger seat, she made a grab for her wind-lashed hair, twisting it around her hand and out of her face all while hissing a stream of uncomplimentary monikers at him. Using the hand not wrapped up in her hair, she reached behind her for the seatbelt and jammed it into place.

"Slow down! You're going to get pulled over. Do you even have a driver's license?"

"Does this highway merge onto I-10?"

Aurora took a moment from her ravings to look around at where they were. "Yes. Take the next left." She dug in her bag and came up with an elastic band to hold her hair back.

He was wondering what else she kept in her purse when her head nearly disappeared into it as she searched for something else. Reemerging with a cell phone, she flipped it open and checked her messages before hitting speed dial.

"Why I-10?" she asked, looking at him but keeping the phone on her ear. Whomever she was calling didn't seem to answer fast enough to suit her, since she frowned, pulled the phone away from her head and punched a different set of buttons. Once it was replaced against her ear, she looked back at him with eyebrows arched. "Are you going to answer my question or continue this abduction in silence?"

Silence? Did she honestly think that was a possibility with her in the car? "It was a rescue if you remember right and I-10 is the fastest route to Colorado."

"Colorado!"

Never in his life had he seen a pair of eyes get so big, so fast. Though not the expected Ilyrian-sea green like her sisters, in his opinion they were far more expressive than theirs. Before he could respond, someone answered on the other end of the call and the Colorado argument was saved for a later time.

"Ellen! Are you ok? I called Amy but she didn't answer. Is Chloe all right?" Aurora stilled as she listened and then brushed a strand of loose hair off her face "You saw Amy go with Chloe? So she's okay too?" The tension in Aurora's voice dropped drastically with her last two questions and she eased back a little more into the bucket seat.

Connyn kept an eye on the highway signs so he wouldn't miss his exit but listened intently to Aurora's conversation. The simultaneous attack by two Predators on a target was unheard of in all the years the Sleht had used them to hunt and kidnap or destroy Mystic females.

Bred by Ilyria's enemy, the Sleht, for the sole purpose of ensuring there would be no Mystic females left to mate with the final generation of Kilth heirs, Predators were extremely territorial and never shared a prey or reward. So for two to show up within seconds of their finding Aurora and Ellyna went beyond coincidental. None of the scenarios that made that a possibility left him with a warm fuzzy since the only ones who knew they'd be on the Riverwalk that evening were part of a very small group. The list of possible traitors within their company had just been fine-tuned. And he was pissed.

He glanced at Aurora. Whatever Ellyna was telling her on the other end removed the panicked look from her eyes.

"Yes. I'm fine. I'm with Captain America and we're on our way to—"

Connyn grabbed her cell phone and tossed it out of the car.

"What the hell!"

He ignored her shout and watched in the rearview mirror as it crunched under the tires of traffic behind them.

"That was my phone!"

"And you were about to give away our position. Plus there's always the possibility that you could be tracked by its signal."

"Listen, Mr. Cloak-and-Daggers Wanna-be, that was *my* phone and *my* business. You will—"

"Keep you safe. Yes. I will. And do whatever I feel necessary to accomplish that." He paused to let that sink in. Arguing about a cell phone was pointless in the larger scheme of being pursued by creatures genetically designed to hunt and destroy her and her sisters. Once she calmed down enough to be rational, he was sure she'd realize that. "Besides, you had all the information you needed."

"What?" Aurora's eyes were round in disbelief, but under the flashes of streetlights it was clear that her color was definitely rising to a heated blush he didn't think was due to her falling face down against his groin.

He turned back to the road. "Ellyna and Chloe are fine. Correct?"

"Yes, but I have other questions —"

"I will answer them."

"What if I want to talk to Ellen and not you?"

"You will have the chance once you are both returned to safety in Ilyria. Who is Amy?"

"What?"

Connyn took the I-10 exit and once he had merged into the flow of traffic again he said, "You tried calling Amy first. Why?"

Aurora looked away when he turned to her, choosing instead to stare at the headlights reflected in the passenger-side mirror. She slumped back in her seat and crossed her arms. He'd not spent much time with the first two of her sisters to be located, but it was obvious that the streak of stubbornness he'd seen exhibited by both Bethany and Brooke ran its strong line through her as well. He appreciated a woman who stood her ground, but he would not allow her to stand against him.

"Answer my question. Who is Amy?"

"My friend."

He frowned. "What kind of friend?"

"A very good friend. Of mine and Ellen's."

"Why did you call her?" When she remained silent, he glanced over at her. She was chewing on her bottom lip. Doing his best to ignore the spurt of lust that little nervous habit of hers triggered, he focused on changing lanes. "Esraïna —"

"Aurora."

"Aurora, who exactly is Amy and why was it important for you to call her immediately?"

She sat up straight in the chair and twisted around in the bucket seat to glare at him. "She's Chloe's mom. I was watching Chloe for her while she did some shopping. If something had happened to her..." Aurora sank back down into the seat looking like a blow-up toy that had just been punctured as Connyn, stunned, simply stared at her.

An angry horn blast jerked his attention back to the road. "You're not the child's mother?"

"No."

"Do you have any other children that were not with you at the café?"

"No."

Relief swelled in Connyn's chest. All was as it should be with his mate.

"Why does that make you so happy?" she asked.

He glanced at Aurora and found her studying him closely. "Anyone would be glad to discover that their mate had not had a child by another man."

"And if your mate had?"

He shook his head. "It's not worth contemplating since it's not a consideration."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means that in the time you were lost from your rightful place in your homeworld, you did not birth a child that would tie you to the wrong mate or to this world. You are therefore free to complete your primary destiny."

"My primary destiny, huh? What if I like this world? What if I have a lover I refuse to leave?"

Rage and denial rose like boiling lava within Connyn, a primal fire that threatened to incinerate every shred of civilized restraint and loose the elemental male that lived within every Kilth when it came to taking, keeping and defending his mate. The Royal Houses had initially evolved from a single clan that had been the greatest at protecting their line against all and any threats. The ability that had arisen and been honed in more barbaric times might hide under a present veneer of modern sensibility, but it was as strong in him and his cousins as it had been in his ancient ancestors.

"Do you have a lover you refuse to leave?" The question was simple, the emotions rolling through him anything but.

"What if I said yes?"

"This is not a game of hypothetical questions." His voice, though still low, cut with the razor-sharp edge of a tightly restrained fury. "We are talking about the fulfillment of a prophecy to ensure the survival of thousands of people. Do you have a lover? *Yes or no?*"

They were now on the outskirts of the city and Aurora's face was illuminated solely by the dashboard lights. Even in their dim glow her dark eyes flashed bright with anger. He was just about to pull the car over to force her to answer him when she said, "No."

Connyn took a deep breath and the wave of fury receded back beneath the surface façade of calm. "Then, again, it is as it should be. And from this point out, if I ask you a question, you are to answer directly and immediately." He ignored the icy silence of outrage radiating from the passenger side of the car and continued, "You are now my responsibility and I will have your cooperation to see you safely returned to your people and world."

"What if I refuse to go with you even though I don't have a lover here?"

"I will change your mind."

"You sound awfully confident for someone who doesn't even know me."

"I don't have to know you. I know me. And I know that I will do whatever it takes to return you to Ilyria and confirm you as my mate."

Silence ruled for several long minutes. He allowed it as he passed a minivan and two tractor-trailers. As he settled back into the right-hand lane, he glanced at her profile. Staring straight ahead into the night, her expression was grim and her glare harsh.

Adjusting to a more comfortable position in the body-hugging bucket seat, he said, "I have spent my entire life searching for you. I will not apologize for my questions or responses. Unlike you, I was born and raised in Ilyria and understand the weight of what fulfilling the prophecy means. I have seen firsthand what the curse laid on us by the gods can and will do." He paused, his fingers tightening on the steering wheel. With a conscious effort, he loosened his grip. "I also know the men and women as well as the children who will die if we are not successful."

He felt Aurora's gaze as she considered his words. After a moment, she turned back to face forward. They were well out of the city before she spoke again.

"And what about the family I have here? Will they be able to come to Ilyria with me? Will I be allowed to return to visit them?"

"You have no family here. You were the last of your sisters to be found and the rest of your relatives are already in Ilyria."

"But if I have friends that have become as important as or more important than family to me?"

"Nothing is as important as family."

"If you refuse to directly and immediately answer my questions, you cannot expect me to answer yours."

He sighed. She seemed determined to be difficult. "No. I'm to return with my mate. And most portals for inter-dimensional travel will be closed once all the Mystic daughters are returned."

Aurora's complete and extended motionlessness after so many emotional outbursts kept him uneasy for the next fifty miles. The only sounds breaking the interminable silence were the engine's low, smooth purr and the tires eating up miles of interstate. He finally broke the quiet himself by asking if she was hungry. She answered with a mute shake of her head. Deciding she simply needed time to mentally adjust to the situation, he let the silence stand.

With a straight road ahead and no close traffic, he allowed himself the freedom to take a more detailed inventory of his mate. The way she'd pulled her hair back set off her high cheekbones and sharpened the delicate angles of her face. Her bottom lip was back between her teeth as she stared steadily out of the windshield.

She was taller than either Bethany or Brooke and with the much darker coloring of her eyes and hair he wondered if perhaps she'd had a different father than her sisters. Though her skin was the same ivory coloring as theirs, her basic shape was different. Her breasts were similar in size to Brooke's but her legs were longer and hips narrower than either of her sisters.

The way the seatbelt cut across her chest emphasized the lushness of the curves he was ready to enjoy as the memory of the black lace she wore underneath her sweater marched unbidden through his thoughts. For the good of his people, he would have mated her no matter her appearance, but he offered up a prayer of gratitude that he'd need no fantasy other than Aurora running through his mind to complete the Mating Rite and begin the fulfillment of his part of the prophecy.

"What if the child had been mine? Would I be expected to leave her behind to fulfill this destiny you're so sure about?"

Her sudden question startled his gaze back up from her breasts to her face. She was still looking straight ahead, focused on some distant thought that had nothing to do with the highway in front of her.

"No. Of course not."

She closed her eyes. "And no one else but those agreeing to mate one of you guys is allowed in Ilyria?"

"That's the only reason we're here. To retrieve the ones destined from birth to stand and reign beside us."

Something shifted over her expression. Set. A determination. "Okay."

Her response should have relieved him. It did anything but.

Chapter Two

Aurora let the miles wash by her as she considered her options. She didn't have many. If anything, in most aspects she was a practical woman and long ago had accepted that fact that there were things you could change in life and there were things you couldn't.

She glanced over at Connyn. He stood solidly in the "couldn't" category. For the time being. At least he wasn't hard on the eyes even though he was a major pain in the ass. But she'd worked with enough male models to know how to handle the type who thought the world owed them their every whim simply because they had gorgeous hair and cut abs.

Turning back toward the road, she blinked as the lines blurred. Good god. As strongly as she believed in fate, it was still difficult to believe she was on her way to Colorado with a stranger from another world. She couldn't remember a time her life had ever been exactly normal, thanks to her mom, but her mother was gone and she would cling to the last bit of family she had with everything inside her. Even if it meant promising to mate an alien.

Things could be worse. The aliens bent on retrieving her family could have looked like rejects from the Star Wars bar scene with slimy skin, tentacles or googly eyes sprouting from various parts on their bodies. According to Ellen, Ilyria was similar to Earth, just located in a parallel dimension crossed by portals. Apparently that meant that the people were "human" to a large extent with various powers exhibited by the rulers to guard the general population from their enemies, though Ellen had been fairly vague in referring to said *powers*.

As far as the Predators, Ellen hadn't known much about them either. Her information was limited to two basic facts. They belonged to a race called the Sleht and she knew exactly how to kill one, a piece of knowledge that had come in handy at least once for Amy. Soon she'd need to know more about these Predators, the Sleht and Ilyria, but right now she just wanted to sleep.

She shifted again, trying to stretch her legs. They'd been driving for hours, stopping only once for gas and a dinner of prepackaged snacks that they ate in the car. At least they were in her car with the bag she had packed for the weekend in the trunk. Unfortunately for Amy, so was her and Chloe's bag. But more important than an extra set of clothes and makeup, Ellen, Amy and Chloe were all safe. For now.

Closing her eyes, she leaned her head against the seat and shifted her hips, trying to find the most comfortable position. She loved her car, but she hadn't bought it with long road trips in mind.

A bump brought her jerking awake suddenly. Regardless of the discomfort, she must have drifted off. Straightening in the seat, she looked out the window at a flashing bright pink Vacancy sign.

"So we're not driving to the ends of the earth tonight?" Aurora turned her head side to side, working out the stiffness.

Connyn turned off the engine. "Do you have a suitcase with you?"

"Yes. Wait—" she grabbed his arm as he started to get out of the car. "Where are we?"

"Outside Lubbock."

"Lubbock, Texas? I thought you had your drawers all in a knot to get to Colorado."

"I don't want to get to Colorado too soon before the portal opens back to Ilyria."

That got her attention. "But aren't we meeting Ellen in Colorado?"

"No." He pulled out of her grip and got out of the car, closing the door firmly behind him, leaving her in the dark in more ways than one. The man really knew how to piss a person off.

She flung her door open, slammed it shut and stomped to where he was unloading her suitcase from the back of the car. "What the hell do you mean, *no*?"

He glanced around the parking lot. "Keep your voice down. We'll discuss this in the room."

"Whoa. In *the* room? As in one room for the two of us?"

He didn't answer. Instead, he pulled out her red leather carry-on, not even glancing at Amy's army-issued duffle bag. Shutting the trunk with a controlled *froomp*, he headed toward the motel. For a moment, Aurora's world flashed red and before she thought to stop it, the magic she'd been born with snapped into life and two light bulbs in the vacancy sign popped and sputtered out.

Shit. She had to be more careful. The abilities passed down to her from her mother's family could flare out of control when she was angry. Forcing herself to calm down enough not to blow up the entire sign or draw unwanted attention to that particular secret, she consciously quashed the surge of power boiling inside her. Plus, there were obviously some things Connyn didn't seem to react well to. No point in testing the limits in that arena. But this macho be-a-good-little-woman-and-do-as-I-command nonsense was going to stop now.

Taking a deep breath, she raised her voice high enough to be heard over the wind and said, "I swear by all your Ilyrian gods that if you don't stop walking away from me this instant, Mr. Heir to the Third Royal House, I'll scream so loud it will wake the dead from Maine to California."

Connyn stopped. Even from the back, the anger that snapped through his body electrified the air and Aurora glanced at the midnight sky to check for stray lightning bolts headed her way. Her suitcase hit the ground with a dull thud. Slowly he turned around. His eyes had darkened and narrowed to a feral intensity, his mouth set in a

grim line. Light spilling through the motel's front windows outlined the massive shoulders squared on her position.

Though it only took a couple of steps for his long-legged strides to bring him back to within inches of her, everything suddenly seemed to shift into slow motion. For a brief moment, she wondered if perhaps it was normal for time to turn into decidedly measured seconds before one's own death so that every last heartbeat could be felt and heard as it thumped in your chest and pushed the blood through your ears in one roaring wave after another.

The flashing pink neon from the motel's sign cast Connyn's features into sharp angles and shadows, erased them for an instant with the darkness, then with the next burst of light brought them to eerie psychedelic life again as he moved closer. The gravel crunched loudly under his footsteps and the west Texas wind was doing its level best at filling the night air with a lonely, ghostly moan. With his hair now freed from the restraining braids, it whipped around him in the relentless wind. All in all, Connyn created quite an arousing and terrifying picture, reminding her of paintings she'd seen of ancient gods sweeping out of the heavens on clouds of fire, wielding in their hands the power and will to avenge and wreak indescribable havoc.

Aurora glanced down at the man's hands. Even in the dim light, they looked strong and well able to wreak the havoc of ecstasy on a willing woman's body. A streak of lust went through her, which she did her best to ignore. Thoughts that teased her erotic fantasies were not helping her concentrate on getting to Ilyria.

If the plan she'd come up with in the car was going to work, she'd have to be careful not to let her smartass mouth screw it up. Especially when she was pissed off. *Especially* since it looked like pissing people off was this man's specialty.

By the time he stopped, she had to tilt her head back to maintain eye contact. Propping her hands on her hips, she returned his glare and held her ground. If he wanted a fight, she sure as hell could accommodate him. All she had to do was funnel all this sexual tension he kept stirring up in her and focus it into an angry confrontation. She'd had lots of practice on *focusing* thanks to the unique abilities passed down through her mother's bloodline.

Connyn was so close, she could feel the heat from his body. The temptation to lean into it was strong and her thoughts took a quick little side trip imagining running her hands over his broad chest and pressing her breasts against that wall of solid muscle.

For a moment, she thought he was just going to try to stare her down. Braced for some form of assault, she was totally unprepared when he reached up and brushed his fingertips down her cheek. Shocked by his action, she flinched back from his touch. He frowned and slid his hand around the back of her neck, holding her gently but firmly. The staring contest ended when his gaze roamed over her face and his thumb gently stroked the side of her face.

"Aurora."

The way he said her name, a deep rumbling like a whispered roar, made her feel both wholly protected and completely vulnerable at the same time. A very unnerving sensation.

Closing her eyes, she took a deep breath. Mentally, she pulled away from the emotions he had pinging around inside her like a pinball machine on full tilt. She needed to keep her balance through this if she intended to –

All thought flew out of her mind as Connyn's mouth settled over hers in a kiss that sent electric heat zinging through her body, riding currents of lust that converged between her legs with a desire so strong she wondered if he hadn't drugged her at some point. His mouth moved over hers and her knees threatened to give out. In a reflexive attempt to keep upright, her fingers dug into his leather coat. Until now, she hadn't even realized she'd been hanging on to him.

His hand moved up her back, holding and supporting her as his tongue slowly but lightly traced the line between her closed lips. It was a gentle, sensual caress that sent a full-body shiver through her.

He pulled away from the kiss but enveloped her in his arms, hugging her close. "It's too cold to be out here without your coat."

Aurora was enjoying being pressed against the heat and solid muscle of his chest too much to inform him that it wasn't the weather making her shiver. "About the room..." she mumbled against the soft cotton of his shirt. He even smelled sexy. Something close to warm sandalwood but with a wild edge she'd never associated with that scent before.

Setting her back from him enough to look her in the eyes, he said, "We're staying in the same room."

The warm fuzzies still floating through her stomach from his kiss immediately did a nose dive and fizzled out. The man might have noble intentions, but he sure as hell could use some etiquette lessons. She was not about to let him think that he could mow her over whenever his gears flipped into Mr. Macho Man mode.

She opened her mouth to protest his high handedness but he cut her off. "I will not argue when it comes to your safety. In that regard, you will do what I tell you to do."

His last words were hard and clipped, leaving her with the distinct impression he expected her to snap to attention and bark out a *yes, sir!* Instead, she crossed her arms over her chest and raised her eyebrows at him.

"And if I don't?"

Holding her gaze with a look that reminded her of Superman's heat vision searing through solid metal, he leaned into her space until his wide shoulders blocked the light and put her completely in his shadow. "You will."

The steely, whisper-soft words growled out of the dark mass before her. Though the expression on his face was lost to obscurity, the set of his jaw backlit by the hotel's flashing sign clearly indicated he meant what he'd said. She'd been wrong. Pissing people off wasn't his specialty. Intimidation was.

Without another word, he turned and walked into the hotel lobby, picking up her suitcase on his way. She could stand out here in the parking lot, but it was cold and getting colder. And what would be the point? There wasn't a doubt in her head that after he checked in he'd bodily take her to the room if that's what it took. She could possibly get him arrested for kidnapping, but if she went there, getting to Ilyria went out the window.

She sucked in a long breath of cold air and cleared her thoughts of all the prickling irritation his behavior left behind. She'd dealt with assholes plenty of times calmly and logically and with not even close to the stakes she was playing for here. Returning to the car, she grabbed her purse and coat and followed him inside. Intimidation might not be her forte, but there were other methods of gaining the upper hand. She had a few tricks of her own up her sleeve.

Or in her case, tucked into the cleavage of her favorite black La Perla Balconnet bra.

* * * * *

Aurora stood in front of the bathroom's mirror and rethought her strategy to squash Connyn's I-am-lord-of-all-I-survey tendencies. Originally, she'd planned to keep him off balance by sexually teasing him. It was a talent she'd polished to perfection and used successfully over the years. From the way she'd caught him looking at her like she was a tall, cold beer and he'd just come in from a hard day's work in the sun, she knew she could have him twisted in knots with barely any effort.

The walk across the parking lot and around to the room had cleared her head and cooled her libido. After tossing her purse onto the bed and hanging up her coat, she pulled the scrunchie from her hair. She'd started the tease right then. Standing next to the bed, taking a deep breath which lifted the lacy edge of her bra just past the low neckline of her sweater, she tilted her head back and finger-combed the tangles from her long hair. Without even looking at Connyn, she felt the tension in the room ratchet up and knew she had him.

And then she made eye contact to ask him a question. Suddenly raw lust slammed through her, overriding any calculated manipulations as the tiny room with a big bed brought her breathtakingly close to a man whose sex appeal rating flew off the charts.

Every word she'd had on the tip of her tongue disappeared. The heat in his gaze as he stood stone-still and watched her burned through her prepared machinations like a flame-thrower through a pile of dried twigs. His lust, the want for her he was doing nothing to hide, hit her on a deep, gut-wrenching level that spurred a purely primitive response. It made her feel fiercely female as the power of his desire ignited her own.

That's when she turned away from him, grabbed her sleep shirt and toiletry bag out of her suitcase and locked herself in the bathroom. And now she stood staring at her reflection in the mirror ten minutes later, still trying to get her body under control and forget what that man could do to her with a single look.

What the hell was that? Ellen had said that Brooke described the Ilyrian warriors as big, sexy and running on testosterone overload most of the time, but she hadn't expected...well, expected *him*. He'd instantly knocked her off her game when she'd glanced up and found him standing there, just looking at her and waiting.

The man was undeniably gorgeous. Capital letters all the way *GORGEOUS*. He'd untied his hair and it hung loose and long down his back. His long-sleeved t-shirt hugged his amazing chest and shoulders. The jeans he wore made it very obvious that unless he walked around with a sock stuffed in his crotch, the man was *blessed*. Her cunt had started to throb, her nipples hardened and a deep yearning curled through her belly.

And she had made a break for it. Dammit.

Not because she was afraid of sex or even sex with an alien, though that thought still made her nervous if she dwelled on it too long. But she had to get to Ilyria and Connyn was her only ticket into that world. There was too much riding on this for her to screw it up with screwing.

Just thinking about the way he wanted her and the pleasure his gaze promised turned her on more than most men had by the time they'd made it to third base. Connyn was the living, breathing embodiment of all her sexual fantasies rolled into a man who wanted her *bad*. Could she afford to give up what he'd take if she slept with him? Where would that leave the control she needed?

She glanced down at her chest and sighed. Her nipples were still twin points poking through her bra and sweater. She knew where her control would be. Completely at the mercy of his lust, that's where.

Undoing the tie at the side of her wrap-around sweater she let it slide off her arms and onto the floor. The mirror covered the wall behind the sink and if she backed up close to the door, she could see herself in it down to mid-thigh, just below where her skirt ended. She traced the hem of her skirt around the front of her thighs, enjoying the faint buzz of sensation in her pussy the action caused. She allowed a small smile and widened her stance. If she satisfied herself right now, she'd certainly be less likely to jump Connyn the moment they got into bed and maybe, just maybe, she'd be able to get him worked up enough to keep him a little off balance without losing herself in the process.

Running her palms up the outside of her skirt, she stopped at the waist to splay her hands over her stomach before slowly pulling them up until they cupped her breasts. She'd brought herself to orgasm plenty of times but never in front of a mirror. Gently she pressed in the sides of her breasts so the upper slopes rose above the top of the black lace and increased the depth of her cleavage dramatically. If Connyn were watching her, she wondered if he'd be fantasizing about putting his face or his cock between her breasts.

The thought of how hard and hot his cock must be when fully aroused made the inner muscles of her cunt constrict and she knew she was already getting wet. Was he a

leg, ass or breast man? Was he a fast learner when it came to a woman's body? She tugged on her nipples through the black lace. Would he remember how she liked her nipples teased with quick pinching twists from one time to another?

Watching her breasts grow round and heavy as she teased her nipples, she imagined Connyn's large hands in place of her own. His hands were big enough that he'd be able to cup her breasts in his palms as his fingers worked her nipples.

Her breath was coming faster now and she could feel the magic begin to hum in her blood. A flush had spread over her cheeks and her eyes were bright with the need she was building. Hooking her index fingers into the top of the bra, she pulled down the lace until her nipples were free. They were nubbed and dark pink. Pushing her breasts up high, she gently bit first one nipple and then the other before swiping her tongue over both.

Her cunt was throbbing now and demanded attention. With fingers spread wide, she swept her hands down until they rested on her legs. Lightly, she brushed her fingertips up the inside of her thighs until they disappeared under her skirt. When they reached the top of her stockings, she smiled at her reflection. It was Connyn's loss that he was too sexy for her to control her reaction to him. She was sure he'd have liked the black garter belt and thong she wore under her skirt.

Tracking the front garters with her fingers, she pushed the skirt up and out of the way. Standing there with her long hair streaming down her back, her breasts spilling out of her lacy bra and her skirt pulled up to reveal black stockings and a matching lace garter belt and thong, she let the strength of her sensuality flood through her. Though the mirror was too high to reflect it, she knew the picture was completed by her high-heeled leather boots.

Damn. She could come right now with a couple of strokes on her clit. Her body was primed and ready, the magic swirling and sparking, pushing her further and faster. Simply thinking about Connyn had her mind right there with her body. But she needed this orgasm to be a big one if it was going to help deter her from jumping Connyn tonight once they got into bed.

The thought of being between the sheets and pressing herself full-length against all that solid muscle nearly made her come without even touching herself. She took a deep, calming breath and unbuckled her skirt before undoing the zipper. Slowly she skimmed the skirt down her hips and thighs, focusing on the slide of the cool leather over her skin and stockings. She bent with the skirt's descent until her hair brushed the floor in front of her. The position sent an erotic thrill through her as the back garters pulled tight against her skin and her thong snuggled up between her ass cheeks putting pressure on her clit.

Stepping out of her skirt, she spread her legs and took her time coming back up. As she straightened, she dragged her hands up the back of her legs to the curve of her bottom. She arched her back, pressing her ass into her hands and squeezed. Pulled her cheeks apart and let the satin strip of her thong rub along her crevice. Anal play was one of her favorite turn-ons if her lover knew what he was doing and was careful about

the necessary hygiene requirements of that particular pleasure. She imagined Connyn teasing her there. Gentle but firm, with plenty of lube to allow his finger to twist and push in even deeper.

She clamped her teeth over her bottom lip to stop a moan. She didn't want Connyn rushing in thinking she was sick or in desperate need of his cock. Tonight was not the time for an anal fantasy. If Connyn decided to come through that door for any reason and she was in the middle of one of her favorite daydreams, she'd have no choice but to jump his bones. She needed a fantasy that wouldn't overwhelm her completely.

Continuing to trace along her thong, she shook her hair out of her face and looked in the mirror. Her full breasts swayed heavily with each panting breath as her fingertips stroked over soaked satin. With one hand she pulled aside the material and pushed the middle finger of her other hand into her opening. Because of her position, she couldn't go deep, but it was far enough to feel her slick heat. Quickly she wiggled her finger in and out and back and forth until she was panting and her cunt was starting to contract on the edge of climax.

She pulled back, wanting more than a quick orgasm. Tonight she needed a release intense enough to burn off all the sexual tension fogging her brain. It was making her far too vulnerable to Connyn's pull on her body. Around him, she was beginning to feel like a pile of metal shavings trying to stay away from a powerful magnet.

Reversing the direction of her fingers, she traced her thong back up and over her hip, straightening as she did. She watched in the mirror as her fingers rested over her sex, feeling her swollen labia and the throbbing heat of her clit through her panties. Her mind threaded its way through a maze of her favorite sexual daydreams, looking for the one that felt right and that she could plug her "fantasy" Connyn into.

She smiled at her reflection as she selected an old favorite. It had been spawned years ago when she was a teenager reading Johanna Lindsey's *A Pirate's Love* instead of studying for her calculus exam. The idea of being taken as an innocent by a handsome and extraordinarily sensual pirate lover had inspired numerous variations on that theme in her sexual daydreams ever since.

After pulling the shower curtain closed and starting the shower to let the noise cover any indication that she wasn't simply cleaning up after a long day, she scooted up on the vanity and leaned back into the corner against the wall and mirror. Propping one foot up on the counter next to the sink, she let her head fall back and closed her eyes.

Oh yes. Connyn would definitely fit this scenario. With his swaggering primeval attitude and maxed-out testosterone levels, he might be a real-life pain in the ass but he made a *perfect* fantasy pirate. She grazed her fingernails very lightly over her panties, circling her clit. Tonight she'd be Phoebe, a young woman who had been kidnapped as she was sailing across the ocean to be married off to a suitable match her uncle had chosen for her. She licked her lips and visualized Connyn in tight leather breeches and a billowing white shirt opened to the waist and let a shiver of anticipation thrill through her.

The heavy wooden door to the captain's quarters swung open. Captain Kilth strode in with his normal predatory arrogance. At least some things had become predictable in the days since she'd been abducted and forced onto this vessel. Unfortunately, her reaction to his presence was also becoming predictable. His long brown hair was tied back at the nape of his neck, revealing a silver earring that matched the silver glint in his eyes as they swept over her. She couldn't stop her nipples from pebbling or the heat beginning to swirl low in her belly. She couldn't control her body's reaction, but she could use it to fuel her anger.

"I demand you release me."

His eyebrows lifted in amusement. They had this same conversation every night. Every night, he ignored her demand and tossed her onto the bed. He'd hold her next to him, his arm around her waist and his heavy leg thrown over both of hers, keeping her in place and completely trapped. He'd fall asleep within minutes, which drove her crazy since it took her hours to accomplish the same task. In the morning, he was always gone by the time she woke up.

"Now," she said.

A corner of his mouth quirked up as he crossed his arms over his massive chest. He tilted his head toward the door. "Be my guest."

The deep, accented voice sent the heat fluttering in her belly straight south and nearly made her knees buckle. From the way he was looking at her, she thought his invitation was meant to imply something entirely different than her release. Curling her hands into fists, she set her shoulders back and marched toward the door. Her hand was on the doorknob when his next words stopped her.

"However, there's a crew out there who'd be counting their blessings that you'd decided you'd rather bunk with them than with me."

She dropped her hand and turned to face him. "Those are my two options? Sleep with you or sleep with them?"

He nodded.

"I choose neither. I demand you return me to my uncle. I'm sure the law will be more lenient on you if your actions are voluntary."

His smile vanished. "No."

Phoebe's temper flared. First her uncle had tossed her at the highest bidder for her hand in marriage and given her no choice or warning in the matter before shipping her off to a country she'd never heard of. Then she'd nearly been shot by the captain of the merchant vessel during her kidnapping by this egotistical beast while the other women on board had been merely locked away in the hold.

"You are nothing more than an arrogant, brutish, unspeakable, repulsive ogre!" She'd advanced on him during her tirade and swung her hand out to strike him with the last word.

He snatched her hand by the wrist before she could connect and used it to spin her around, trapping her against him and unable to move with her back to his chest. The hand she'd lashed out with was still in his grip, pinned between them. His other arm wrapped around her front, just below her breasts, immobilizing her further. When he spoke, his breath was warm on her skin and his lips brushed the side of her neck.

"Arrogant, yes. Brutish, at times. Unspeakable, possibly. Repulsive? Hard to believe considering the women who've fallen willingly into my bed. And ogre? Obviously you were running low on other more appropriate terms. Perhaps your vocabulary is as lacking as your instruction on pleasing a man."

She stiffened at his final comment, but before she could form a retort, he bit down lightly on what apparently was a very sensitive spot on her neck. The fluttering sensation that had been spreading through her body was abruptly replaced by a streaming fire that momentarily stole her ability to stand. His low laughter brought her quickly back to her senses.

"Looks like you're a quick learner, Miss Ballantine. That's exactly the response that would please any man."

"I...I didn't mean it."

He kissed her neck and moved his hand to cup her breast. She gasped. He covered her breast with his palm and squeezed.

"Oh no. Please..."

His hand slowly rotated and her nipple tightened and began to ache, echoing the unfamiliar sensation between her legs.

"I am pleasing you." He gently pinched her protruding nipple and she started to tremble. "And you are certainly pleasing me."

When he molded her breast into his palm once again, her back arched and the hand he still held behind her pressed against something hard and hot. Instinctively she curled her fingers around it. Too late she realized she'd just fondled him quite intimately. His groan was the sound of pure male need and she'd never in her life expected something that uncivilized directed at her. It surprised her and jerked her past the rioting sensations in her body. With renewed determination she pushed out of his embrace and rushed to put the table between them.

He didn't give chase, but a dark look had settled in his eyes. Deep lines bracketed his mouth as his hands slowly flexed at his sides. Power radiated out from his presence. His look suggested that he wasn't thwarted often. She wasn't naïve enough to believe that he had been put off all this time by her youth, innocence or anything she'd said or done. He was waiting, wanting something. He'd not touched her and kept her from his crew for a reason. But obviously he'd nearly reached his limit or was second guessing his decision.

"Whatever it is you want, I'll make sure you get it in return for my freedom," she blurted.

A look of surprise replaced his frown. "What?"

"Whatever amount you were planning on selling me for or whatever it would cost to...satisfy your men or whatever reason you kidnapped me I'll double it."

"And how do you presume to pay for your freedom?"

"I have some inheritance to be released to me upon my next birthday. Within the month."

An amused look of indulgence cleared the anger from his expression. "I see."

Relief flowed through Phoebe like melted wax. The man could be reasoned with after all. "Good. Name your price and upon my release at the next port, I will see that you receive it."

He walked around the table and she automatically skittered to the other side. Not quite the picture of confidence she'd been meaning to portray. "My price for your freedom..." he started as he followed her around the table in measured steps.

She had to force herself to stand still and look him in the eyes. "Yes?"

"Is your body."

Phoebe's mouth fell open. Her eyes rounded in shock. "My body?"

With a lift of his chin he stared down at her. "That's your choice. Give me your body willingly and when we reach port, you will be released. Refuse and I'll have you anyway but will retain your services for as long as I desire."

"That's not a choice! That's – "

"This offer will expire in three seconds," he said, crossing his arms over his chest. "It is the only one you will receive. If you do not accept it, you will fall into the terms of refusal."

"It is outrageous! I cannot be expected – "

"One."

"There has to be something else I have or could get that you – "

"Two."

"But I can pay you enough to buy a dozen women who would gladly – "

"Thr – "

"Yes!" Phoebe's heart hammered so hard against her ribs she thought it would burst out of her chest any second.

"Yes?" One eyebrow arched.

She nodded. "For my freedom, I – " Her breath caught and she had to close her eyes before continuing. "I will willingly give you my body."

"Take off your clothes."

His abrupt command had her eyes flying open. He had stepped closer and was looming over her. His silver eyes, serious and hot, burned into her. When she didn't move, he repeated the command and then added, "Willingly, Miss Ballantine."

Assuring herself that a life stabled in a brothel would be much worse than a moment of shame, she set herself to the task of attending to his demand. She took her time with her shoes and stockings before starting on her dress. It was some time before the final undergarment was loosened and slipping down the slopes of her breasts. Abruptly she caught it against her chest.

"What guarantee do I have of my freedom once we dock?"

"My word as captain."

"Pirate. Not captain."

Tilting his head slightly to one side, he gave her an indulgent grin and waved away her barb. "Semantics."

"Truth."

"You have no option but to take me at my word."

Meeting his superior look with a glare, she refused to flinch, cower or stoop as the last shred of material covering her body pooled on the floor around her feet. For long minutes, he held her gaze and something akin to approval moved through his eyes. At first she'd been too enraged to feel embarrassed, but once his eyes began their slow, thorough inspection of her body, heat rose with a furious burning up her neck and into her face until she felt like she was running a deathly fever. The thought that she might actually die in the next few moments from mortification was not unwelcome. Then both his hands closed over her bare breasts and embarrassment fled before the novel sensations of having her body so intimately touched by a man.

His hands were large and covered her breasts. Strong as she knew him to be, he touched her with a surprising gentleness. Lifting her breasts until they pressed together he circled the sensitive tips with his thumbs.

The fleeting guilt that she might actually be enjoying the ravishment of her body was banished by the practical thought that she had no real choice. As such, she absolved herself of any further penalty of attempting discipline over her body when she obviously had no experience with which to do so. The novelty of this encounter would no doubt steel her against his future seductions, should there be such. Therefore –

He took one of her nipples into his mouth. With a startled gasp, she clutched his head with her hands. He sucked harder and his tongue rolled her nipple against the top of his mouth. Lightning jolted in jagged spurts down to her very core where it circled and then leapt outward until her fingers and toes tingled with it.

She started to fall but he caught her. Wrapping an arm around her back, he went down on one knee and continued to fondle her breasts with his mouth and hand. Teasing nips, fiery licks, caresses that became increasingly demanding yet shockingly wanted had her spinning in a world of carnal ecstasy she'd never known.

When his hand left her breast, she started to protest until it moved over her belly, down her thigh and back up to squeeze her bottom. He switched breasts and pulled her other nipple hard into his mouth. A throbbing started between her legs and she moved against him restlessly, not knowing how to stop or complete the need he was driving in her. His hand cupped her mons and then pushed further between her legs. Startled, she jumped and clamped her thighs together.

He looked up at her, his eyes dark with lust and his face sharpened by a need etched on it that hadn't been there before. A darkly erotic tremor spun through her at the sight of his face at her fully rounded breasts peaked with arousal. They sported a rosy flush from his attentions and her hands fisted in his gloriously long hair she had pulled loose from its tie.

"Open for me." His voice was low and rough. His left hand stayed splayed over her back, supporting and confining as the fingers from his other hand insistently pressed between her legs to emphasize his meaning. She knew he could feel her trembling under his hands.

He waited. Licking her lips nervously, she unclenched her thighs and moved her feet apart slightly.

"More."

She did as he commanded and fought for breath when all four fingers of his began exploring her most private flesh. Biting down on her lower lip, she tried to prepare for the pain she'd always been warned that the touch of a man there would bring, but instead her body reacted with

rolling waves of pleasure that intensified with every stroke he pressed on her. The throbbing engulfed her entire body as a desperate need pulsed louder and harder through her veins with each second.

The heat inside turned liquid and covered his fingers. She searched his face for any sign of revulsion, but the wetter she became, the more pleased he looked. Breaths turned to pants and she closed her eyes as the sensations began to rise in force within her.

"Look at me."

Opening her eyes, she tried to focus on the man controlling her body. His fingers were firm as they stroked and circled her clit, teased at her opening, made her want him to keep touching her, made her want him.

One finger nudged gently inside her as his thumb continued to flick back and forth over her clit. She could feel the tightness of her body around his slight invasion. He twisted his finger and pushed deeper. The snug fit magnified the sensations of such an intimate touch and a quaking started deep in her belly.

He pulled his finger partially out, pushed it in further. Turning it and making her lose her sense of reason to wild emotions. Still lavishing attention on her clitoris with his thumb, he stroked the swollen nub unrelentingly back and forth, concentrating on a spot that made her suck in air the first time he passed over it.

The fire in her body raged out of control. The sensations crashed through her like a bull elephant on a wild rampage, crushing and destroying everything in its path. Fear of the unrestrained passion storming through her and tearing at the civilizing restraints tying her to all known propriety had Phoebe trying to push away even as her body arched into his touch.

She cried out his name and twisted in his grip. His arm tightened around her back and he took her breast in his mouth again. He pressed his thumb against her roughly over and over, his touch sure, fast and hard. His finger pushed in yet deeper.

Phoebe screamed as her world burst apart and –

Oh god! Aurora's entire body went rigid as she thrust two fingers deep and high inside herself. Her cunt spasmed in the ecstasy of release as she imagined Connyn, Pirate Connyn, holding her tightly as she came apart in his arms.

Her muscles relaxed and she slumped against the mirror. She'd wound herself so tightly and held herself from coming for longer than usual. It had definitely paid off. The climax had been hard and draining.

Taking a deep breath, she inhaled the steam from the running shower and blinked against the bathroom's bright vanity light over the sink as she pulled her fingers out. She shivered at the sensation. Her pussy was still incredibly sensitive and throbbing. Jesus. If Connyn was half the lover in real life as he was in her fantasy, the next several weeks could be interesting.

After they got to Ilyria.

Right. Sliding off the sink, Aurora pulled off her remaining clothes and dropped them on the floor. She smiled to herself as she thought about the lust-filled look of Connyn's that had driven her into the bathroom. The man could try any come-on he

wanted but it just wouldn't work on a comatose woman. She was exhausted, sated and soon to be showered. Sleep would be no problem even if she were lying next to a sex god.

Chapter Three

Connyn shifted his position on the bed, torn between cursing and thanking the gods for the gift they'd granted him. Aurora lay on her stomach next to him, dead to the world and completely at peace. Every time she moved, no matter how slightly, he was immediately aware of the change in her position, the sound of her altered breath, the shush of the sheet against her soft skin. And every time his body surged under the demanding need to take his mate.

He glanced at the red glowing numbers on the bedside clock. 4:52. He'd been lying here for nearly four hours, wide awake. A better option than closing his eyes since every time he did, he saw his mate stripped down to black lace and bringing herself to orgasm. Her hands sliding over her ass, her fingers –

Shit. Connyn's eyes flew open. If he couldn't get his thoughts under control, sleep wasn't going to happen. Ever.

Or at least until he fucked his mate.

It was Aurora's fault. He hadn't planned on invading her privacy. The supernatural gifts the gods so sparingly doled out to the royal male heirs of the Five Houses were never to be abused, used for personal gain or taken for granted. The abuse of their powers by his ancestors caused the gods to curse Ilyria in the first place. But Aurora had been in the bathroom for a while and he hadn't heard the shower.

After the trouble they'd had that day, he'd been concerned she might have gone into shock or become ill. It was his duty and his right as her mate to make sure she was feeling well. Knowing that if he asked through the door he'd most likely receive a flippant answer and not the full truth, he naturally used the power the gods had given and simply adjusted his vision to look through the door.

His heart thumped hard at the memory. The sight he'd caught had nearly brought him to his knees. His woman was bent over, still in her heels and stockings, legs spread and ass high. She was wearing a black thong and a belt that held her stockings up with straps running over her ass. Because of how she was standing, the panties were pulled tight between her ass cheeks and over her clit. Her pussy lips pillowed out around the slice of material and he could see the little bulge of her clit trapped underneath.

When she moved her hands up the back of her legs to her ass, his eyes had started to burn from not blinking. Her fingers dented her flesh as she squeezed and pulled her ass cheeks apart, revealing more of her thong and the puckered sides of her anus. He wasn't sure when he'd unzipped his pants, but as she kneaded her cheeks and circled the material over her asshole with her finger, his cock was in his hands, hard and ready to finish what she had started.

He had to put his hands on the doorframe to keep himself from coming when Aurora shook her thick black mane out of her face and looked up at her reflection in the mirror while she was touching herself. From the way she was positioned facing the mirror, he could see her ass, her cunt and her breasts, which looked close to spilling out of her bra any second. And then she moved her fingers down and started to stroke herself. Slow and steady. His fingernails had dug shallow half-moons into the wood of the doorframe when she pushed her fingers into her cunt.

"Fuck," he hissed as he glanced down at the tented sheet over his cock. The possibility of sleep tonight had just become an impossibility. By the time she'd finally gotten into the shower, he'd had a raging hard-on and a raging headache from holding the vision through the door at a high level of clarity for such a long time. Aspirin had only relieved one pain.

It didn't help that he'd expected to have his woman tonight since he'd explained her place in his world, but she'd taken care of her needs by herself and then gone straight to sleep. Her actions puzzled him, but he was a Kilth and the Kilth never forced their women. The way she'd reacted to his kiss in the parking lot proved that she wanted him. And once they'd reached the room she'd been ready. His desire was obvious and she had teased him, wanting him. When she finally met his gaze, her desire had shone in her eyes and flushed her cheeks.

And then the damn woman had turned around and run into the bathroom. Why the hell had she done that? And why the hell hadn't the gods granted him the full scope of telepathic powers if they had chosen such a confusing mate for him? How was he supposed to meet her needs if he couldn't figure them out? Once they completed the Mating Rite, there would be a mind connection between them, but he wasn't sure how deep it would go. It seemed that with his cousins, it started with a strong empathic link initially and deepened from there. At this point, he'd take whatever he could get. In more ways than one.

Aurora murmured softly and rolled onto her side. He turned his head toward her and that need, swift and biting, sliced through him again. Light from the motel's sign outside the window sliced through a slit in the curtains and splashed over her face in an unvaried pattern of neon flares. Even in the garish flashes of pink and green, the woman was beautiful, no question. Her black hair splayed over her pillow and her eyelashes lay in thick, shadowed half-moons on her cheeks. Slightly parted, her lips were soft in sleep and the desire to hear his name whisper past them as she climaxed in his arms cut like a double-sided blade.

She was beautiful, but what drew him most and surprised him most was her courage. It flowed through everything she did. Fighting a Predator or standing her ground in an argument, Aurora didn't run. The fear of gaining a weak mate that had murmured in the recesses of his mind since he'd begun the search was finally silenced. Any Kilth mate, but especially those chosen to stand beside an eldest heir and imminent head of household, must be able to withstand the dangers and strain inherent in the sovereignty she would occupy immediately once they returned to Ilyria.

His mate. The truth drummed through him with the same certainty as when he had vowed to return to Ilyria with his mate or die trying. No wonder his cousins ran around acting like total idiotic madmen once they found their mates. The culmination of years of hopes and dreams and promises was fulfilled with their mates in their arms. Even the brief embrace he'd shared with Aurora in the parking lot had made that abundantly clear to him. And when she had melted into his kiss, he felt the very purpose of his existence down through the darkest, most secret corners of doubt hidden in his soul.

Shifting to his side to fully face her, Connyn traced the angle of her cheek with the tips of his fingers. Even her features were bold, sharp and startling. Her eyes and hair were dark against her pale skin. Her high cheekbones, pointed chin and full mouth would overwhelm a more petite woman. On Aurora, they fit. They not only fit, they charged every sexual fantasy he had.

He trailed his fingers over her lips and she murmured again, his cock hardening as her breath fanned over his skin. She reached for him, scooted close to him in her sleep, her silky sleep shirt the only barrier between his chest and her breasts. Wrapping his arms around her, he gathered her more firmly against him. Her legs slid against his and he buried his face against her neck, inhaling her clean warm scent.

"Connyn?"

Her voice was barely audible above the rattle of the room's heater. He kissed his way up her neck, stopping to swirl his tongue at the corner of her jaw when she hummed and arched under him. He slid his hand under her shirt, gliding over the smooth skin of her waist to cup her breast. Her nipple beaded as he thumbed gently back and forth over it.

"I want you," he said, brushing his lips over hers.

"Mmmhmm." Her sleepy response purred into his mouth as he covered her lips in a softly questing kiss. She opened for him and his tongue delved for more of her taste before pulling back. In a few quick seconds, he'd removed both her sleep shirt and panties. Covering her body with his own, he groaned at how absolutely incredible she felt underneath him. Her hands slid over his shoulders as she mumbled something about a pirate.

He lifted his head to look down at her face. Her eyes were still closed. He kissed the corner of her mouth and she turned her head to find his lips. When he moved his lips away from her advances, her legs shifted restlessly under him.

Finger-combing her hair back, he kissed the other corner of her mouth. Immediately she turned her face to follow. He let her catch him. Her kiss was soft and languid, her tongue stroking his as one of her long legs curled around his hip. The movement opened her cunt, hot and wet, against his cock. Something deep and possessive stirred through him.

"You're mine," he whispered against her cheek. "My mate."

"Mate?" Her voice was as soft as her lips.

He removed his hand from her breast, ignored her quiet mumble of protest and pulled the intricately fashioned ring from his little finger. It was a perfect duplicate in design of the larger ring he wore on the middle finger of his left hand. A Matching Ritual ring. Placing the smaller one on the middle finger of her left hand, he pressed her hand flat on the mattress under his, aligning the two rings.

"You are my mate, Aurora. Forever to be kept, held and protected as such by me and all that is mine."

Aurora stilled. Blinked her eyes open but closed them when the green light flashed to pink over her face. "Kept?"

Connyn rocked his hips and the head of his cock pushed against her entrance. She gasped and then let out a low moan as he pushed inside. Liquid heat welcomed him, enveloped him. The slick friction of their joining had his entire body straining with the need to fuck his woman. *His* woman. *His* mate. He pushed in deeper, stomach to stomach and chest to breasts.

"Oh..." Both of Aurora's legs wound around his thighs and she lifted her pelvis up to grind against him. "God you feel good," she whispered.

Light was starting to explode behind his eyeballs and lust roared through his veins. She squeezed him with her thighs and the inner walls of her cunt causing him to instinctively thrust deeper. Pleasure swirled at the base of his skull and then spiked down his spine.

His tongue swept past her lips, stroking inside her mouth as he thrust with his hips to stroke inside her body. Bringing her feet up to rest flat on the mattress, she gained the traction she needed to move with him, meeting him. With a low curse, he lowered his weight on her, holding her captive beneath him.

"Aurora." His voice was tight, the word harsh with warning. She ignored him and wiggled her hips to take him in further. He lowered further until his weight completely stopped her movement. When she tried to pull her hand from his grip, he held it more tightly.

"You are my mate," he said.

"I...what?"

"I take you as my mate. Now and forever. With all that is within me and mine, I willingly bind to you as yours." Lightning burned up his arm from where his ring touched hers and circled through his chest. He'd once overheard his cousins Rordyc and Wyc speaking about the jolt that came when they'd spoken their mating vows, but even so, he wasn't expecting the depth of feeling the words unleashed both in his body and his soul.

He believed that his cousins had unnecessarily risked the success of the prophecy in allowing their mates to take so long in finishing the Mating Rite. Of course, they'd already been matched as children before the women had been swept away into this world, a convenience the gods hadn't found fit to accord to him before the daughters' disappearance.

Pure-blooded Mystics were less than rare after decades of being hunted first by the warring clans of the five brothers from whom the royal households were descended and now more recently, by the Sleht. Their enemy's attempts to capture or kill Ilyrian women with the Mystic bloodline had risen in frequency and brutality every year. They, like the heirs to the Houses, felt the crunch of time as the final generation approached that would either fulfill or fail the prophecy determining the future of Ilyria. Full power to rule their world would either be returned to the Ilyrian Royals or the royal line would be destroyed forever and the people would fall to the Sleht.

Connyn looked down at Aurora, her dark eyes gazing up at him in confusion. An unfamiliar emotion slithered through his soul like thin tendrils of smoke, circling and wisping away from his groping reason when he tried to identify it. He shrugged it away and focused on what he knew.

"I've taken you as my mate." When she didn't reply, he glared at her pointedly.

She frowned. Blinked the final cobwebs of sleep from her gaze. "Uhhh...okay?"

"Take me as yours."

"As my mate? Like a husband?" Her nervous shifting sent a small shockwave of pleasure skimming under his skin.

"A shallow comparison but appropriate for this world."

"Since we only met last night, don't you think a *mating* might be rushing things? Maybe you should recant or something until you know my middle name or what flavor ice cream I like or how I feel about global warming or —"

"It's too late."

She stilled underneath him. "What do you mean, it's too late?"

"I've taken you as my mate. I made the vow and I choose no other."

"But what if you find someone else who fits your prophecy? What if I'm all wrong for you? What if it turns out I'm not the one you're looking for? Where's the out clause in this agreement?"

"Out clause?" His rising temper at her questions was tempered by the knowledge that both Wyc's and Rordyc's mates had had the same reservations. Even with the Matching Ritual Guardian tattooed on their inner thighs as proof, Bethany and Brooke had needed time to accept that they belonged to their mates. It was understandable for Aurora to go through a phase of uncertainty as well.

His first impulse was to tell her to trust him and leave it at that. But so far there was nothing he'd learned about Aurora to indicate she would submit to her mate's commands simply because it was the right and expected thing to do. Something they would have to work on.

"There is no out clause to what the gods and stars have ordered," he said instead.

"But what if this is a case of mistaken identity or the whole thing turns out to be a huge, galactic-sized *oops*?"

An edge of panic had thinned her voice to a rasp. After years of waiting for this moment he wanted to, *needed* to, hold her so close he'd never lose her again. But suddenly he felt as if he were holding a tiny, fluttering bird in the palm of his hand. One primed for flight at the slightest provocation but a creature too delicate to hold tightly without crushing it.

"No mistake, my *vystra*," he whispered, his voice low and soothing. He used the ancient Ilyrian term of endearment, infusing it with intent that loosed the magic of the word on his intended. "The moment I saw you, Aurora, I knew you as the one I'd been meant for." Her eyes widened as he began a slow, deliberate rocking in and out of her sweet cunt. As beautiful as her deep brown eyes were, he was tired of seeing fear swimming in their depths and the urge to erase it completely from her mind was overwhelming.

"I can't remember a day I haven't looked for you, needed you. You've been a promise written on my soul since the day I was born." He pushed into her deeper, knowing the truth of the words even as he spoke them.

"But what about love?"

Connyn could tell she was trying hard to concentrate, to push back the sensations he was pressing on her. Even as passion glazed her eyes, she continued to fight.

He'd had enough. He met her struggle with a long, dominating kiss. Riding her body with the same hard intensity he filled the kiss with, he didn't let up until Aurora was writhing against him and moaning into his mouth. Her nails scored his shoulders as she clung to him.

"There is no one else, Aurora, now or ever. Whether you call it love, need, want, fate or destiny, it's the same. You *are* my mate."

Aurora's eyes were half closed but only desire and anticipation shimmered in them now. That he'd been able to wipe away her fear and replace it with a need for the ecstasy he was bringing her filled him with a soul-searing contentment.

"You believe in destiny? In fate?" Her words were soft, passion slurred as she arched to take him in as far as her body would allow.

"Believe it?" Connyn shook his head in wonder that she could even ask that question. His hair fell around them at his movement, curtaining them in an intimate world of their own. "No, I don't believe in it, my sweet *vystra*. I depend on it."

He took her ring hand in his and once more aligned them so that the two intricately woven bands touched. "You were born to fulfill me, as I was you. To secure the future of our world. Created by the gods to be given to each other and guided by the stars to this moment." When she didn't respond, he dipped his head to brush a gentle kiss across her lips. "Take me as your mate, Aurora."

"Yes." The answer whispered over her lips before her thoughts had a chance to form any sort of coherent thought. It was instinctive and instantaneous. As she looked into his eyes, it was impossible *not* to believe that everything he said was true. Who'd

have thought the man had such poetry in him? Lord knows she'd never have guessed. His words, his touch, they wrapped her around and caught her, held her completely.

Her belief in fate and the depth of the unseen world around her had always been a comfort and a reality in her life. The magic that ran so deeply through her demanded it. Though her beliefs had never been put to this kind of blind faith test, it all felt right. It wasn't something she spoke about often, but ever since she was just a little girl, she'd had this strong belief in destiny, that things happened for a reason that might not always be clear at first. And now that she'd just taken a running leap off the side of a cliff with the wild expectation for fate and Connyn to catch her, she felt a freedom that hadn't been there since she'd lost her mother.

She *knew* she was an emotionally driven woman, understood this about herself and had worked very hard to curb that tendency. And she'd managed to suppress it admirably, until Connyn. He could piss her off with a word, turn her on with a look and was doing a damn good job of blasting through every barrier she'd constructed to hold her emotions in check.

Relief and triumph mixed on his face. Propping himself up on his left arm to lift some of his weight off her, he kissed the corner of her mouth. "Say it," he growled. "Say it all."

"I take you as my mate, Connyn Kilth, for here and now and into Ilyria." She jerked as a shock shot from her finger through her body. "What was that?"

"Part of the Mating Rite. A confirmation of the vows."

"Vows?" Aurora didn't get any more clarification as Connyn took the opportunity of having her mouth open to fill it with his tongue in a wet, highly erotic kiss. Two seconds later she no longer cared that she'd reacted before her brain had weighed and measured her decision and sounded the all-clear. She'd gone solely on impulse and a gut-wrenching feeling of *right*. All thinking had been abandoned as sensation and emotion rolled through her with the force and speed of a tidal wave.

Connyn gave her no chance to catch her breath or her wits as he took her fast and hard. Keeping his hold on her left hand, he caught her right hand as well and pinned both to the mattress above her head, interlacing his fingers with hers. His kisses were a ruthless plundering of her mouth, constant and demanding as he moved inside her. She wound her legs around him and locked her ankles together behind his back to hold on while he pounded into her, filling her and stretching her with every powerful thrust of his cock.

Sensation heightened as heat built and spiraled through her, intensified by the inner power that she normally had a much better control of. Right now, her lack of control ceased to matter. Closing her eyes, she flung herself into the world of ecstasy her body had become. She squeezed her thighs around his waist, arched to press her breasts harder against his chest and licked frantically into his mouth, an unbridled need for more of his taste driving her. That same wild spice smell of him she'd noticed in the parking lot blazed through her blood, like incense laced with kerosene. Her fingers

curled around his, her muscles tightened and her breath hitched as she shook on the sharp edge of climax.

Suddenly he lifted off her, taking his weight, warmth and cock with him. "No!" She struggled to sit up and hold him in place with her legs at the same time. He pushed her thighs apart and nipped her hip hard enough to startle her.

"Be still," he said and then slid down the bed until his head was between her legs.

"Be still?" Her voice cracked loud in the dark room. "You've got to be kidding me!"

She reached for him with the intention of tugging him back up her body, but he caught her hands and flattened them high on her inner thighs. He pushed her thumbs over her pussy lips and when they brushed the sides of her clit, she gasped. With his thumbs guiding hers, he spread her folds until her cunt was fully exposed.

"Hold yourself just like that." The intensity of his demand knifed a shuddering thrill through her.

She didn't move her fingers from where he had placed them as he released his hands and slid them under her ass. He started to lift her toward his mouth and she bent her knees and drew them up to tilt her cunt toward him for easier access. A fierce lust lit his eyes as his gaze moved from her open sex, up her body to her face.

"Beautiful," he whispered. Keeping his eyes locked with hers, he turned slightly to skim a soft kiss over her inner thigh. His eyes shone with the certainty that she was and always had been his to claim. The force of his belief hit her with a soul-shaking impact, rolling over her with the feeling of being wanted and taken completely.

"You are mine, Aurora. No mistake." His eyes narrowed and his voice deepened. "No. Going. Back." The reality of his all-or-nothing position shocked her.

She opened her mouth to dispute his all-encompassing claim, but only a breathy rush of air came out as he pushed two long fingers deep inside her. He twisted them, rubbing the pads of his fingertips against the front wall of her vagina.

"Oh my god oh my god oh my god," Aurora panted. When he licked her clit, she closed her eyes, dropped her head back and moaned.

His fingers stopped moving, his mouth left her. Aurora's head snapped back up. "What?" She started to pull her hands away to sit up but he pressed them back in place.

"No, keep your hands here."

She did and he lifted her with his arm under her shoulders to prop her up with the pillows on the bed so she was halfway sitting. Up on his knees between her spread thighs, he brushed her hair off her face and then slowly, seductively ran his thumb over her lower lip.

"I want you to watch me pleasure you, Aurora." With a gentle touch he traced the top slopes of her breasts, around her nipples and down her stomach.

The deep shadows of the room broken by the flashes of green and pink neon added a surreal dimension to her seduction, making her feel like she was starring in an erotic and strangely psychedelic film noir. Then there was her leading man, and good god, the

man was *beautiful*. His hair streamed over broad shoulders and amazing arms. Heaven help her but tight, muscled biceps on a man who bunched with strength whenever he moved curled her toes with wanting quicker than a handsome face or a promising package. Connyn's arms were amazing. She glanced down and her heart skipped a beat. His stomach was hard and ripped and his package was far past promising. She blinked. Oh yeah. *Far* past promising.

He circled her navel with his fingertip before tracing a path through her curls. When he finally reached the top of her slit, he added extra pressure, letting her know that he'd stopped there on purpose. The heel of his hand hovered over her pussy, making her clit throb to be touched. Her lips parted on a needy breath as her gaze moved back up to meet his. Flint-edged lust sharpened his features and cut through the few remaining threads of apprehension holding her back from totally surrendering to his demands.

"I don't—*ohhhhh*," she moaned as he pushed two fingers deep into her cunt.

Taking a deep breath, she licked her lips and decided talking was unnecessary when he started to pull her juices out of her on his fingers to spread them around her pussy. He took his time stroking her and the intensity with which he watched her was as erotic as his touch on her body. Being the single, absolute focus of a man intent on making her body submit to the deepest pleasure that he could press on it had Aurora's mind spinning like an old-fashioned child's top. The kind that whirled so fast the colors and design blurred together into a single dizzying rainbow moving too fast to catch.

Connyn thrust his fingers in deep again, his expression bordering on arrogance. Harsh pleasure and triumph etched his face. She wanted to challenge that superior attitude, bring the man down a notch or—"Oh god! Oh god!" she cried as he pulled his fingers out and immediately eased one into her anus. Suddenly his attitude wasn't important.

His finger pushed in deeper as he lowered himself down to rest on his elbows and then with his other hand slid two fingers into her pussy. Propped up as she was, she had an amazingly sensual view of what he was doing to her. She was still holding herself open for him, an erotically blatant invitation for him to do as he would which he was taking full advantage of. With his mouth just inches above her clit while his fingers twisted and stroked both inside her cunt and ass, Aurora could hardly breathe.

When he licked her clit, a bolt of pleasure cut through her and she jammed her heels into the bed and arched her back. It was a slight movement given how she was propped up, but it lifted her pussy up in offering and entreaty so obviously needy she'd have been embarrassed had she not been pushed past the point of caring. His eyes narrowed at her action, his fingers stilling. He blew a soft, cool stream of air over her clit as he pressed the fingers from both hands toward each other deep inside her separate passages. A stuttering whimper worked out of her throat.

"The two of us together, Aurora, is *not* a mistake. You are mine." For a world-stopping moment, he held Aurora's gaze and she felt it to her core. Whatever came

after, she knew that his words and the belief behind them had driven deep into her heart. And then he took her fully into his mouth.

"Connyn!" The muscles in her thighs and stomach clenched, coiled tight with ecstasy-building tension. Connyn twisted his fingers in deep while his tongue flicked and laved. A roaring rush of sensation flamed through her body, bringing her to the violent edge of an unimagined ecstasy and making her want *him* above anything else in this life.

She let go of her thighs and curled over to tunnel her fingers through his hair at his temples, trying to pull him back. This amount of pleasure was too intense. It drew her too close to a staggering blaze that held the ability to melt her soul into his. A mating was one thing. Losing herself within this man to the point she'd forget her true purpose of being with him in the first place – that was unacceptable. She couldn't let him sink so far into her soul that he'd be able to wield enough power to ruin the plans she and her sisters were depending on so desperately.

She tugged on his hair again and he growled. The low sound vibrated through her cunt and pulled her deeper into the blaze of her own desire. When she didn't let go of his hair, he turned his face just enough to bite her thigh. A sharp slice of pain that showed his displeasure and had her releasing her hold almost immediately. His high-handed use of her body also had the disturbing effect of heightening her sexual arousal. Like a drugging aphrodisiac, his insistence on bringing her pleasure had her body willingly yielding to his demands. But there was something pressing through the carnal thrill, a claiming touch closing in on her heart.

If he wouldn't release her, she'd find a different way to stop his advance into her soul. Instead of struggling against her rising desire, she flung herself toward it. Soaking in the sight of his head between her thighs, she focused the streams of magic loosed by Connyn's touch and concentrated on the feel of his tongue swirling around her clit, and the way his finger pressed deep into her ass. She squeezed hard with the inner muscles of her cunt around his two fingers as they pushed in hard.

The fire erupted so suddenly it cut off the scream that had been building at the back of her throat. Aurora could only gasp as the ecstasy tore through her body like a flame leaping to engulf the very oxygen that feeds it. Her back arched off the bed as molten pleasure swept through her. A wave of liquid heat rolled under her skin, rippling from her cunt outward to her toes and fingertips and carrying her to the peak of pleasure. Her orgasm threw her against the night sky, pinning her to the stars with the ecstasy. Connyn continued to spin out with his fingers and tongue working her body like a master.

Another wave of pleasure wove through her body as Connyn withdrew his fingers and blew a cooling stream of air over her clit. "Fucking wow," she murmured as the swirling heat finally began to fade and her body sank heavily into the bed. She floated on the undulating warmth as the sensations continued to crest before receding and then shallowly, softly cresting again.

Pushing her hair back from her face, she blinked hard up at the ceiling, trying to bring the room back into focus. "Oh my god," she moaned. "Oh my *god*." Her arms dropped to the bed and she took a deep breath. "Jesus," she hissed. "This is so not good."

"No?" Connyn asked, the smug confidence in his voice unmistakable.

"Never mind," she muttered as the mattress dipped at her shoulders, taking Connyn's weight as he positioned himself above her, pushing her legs wider apart with his knees. She peered up at him, her eyes heavy with the stupor of complete sexual satiation.

Tension still bridled his features. His storm-cloud-gray eyes glowed with a restless desire and an arrogance at her satisfaction that once she regained her mental capacities, she was sure to have issues with. But at the moment, the will to fight had been temporarily incinerated with the conflagration he'd just pushed her through and she felt as moldable as a potter's clay.

She let out a deep breath, her eyes fell closed as her body relaxed further, her muscles lax and heavy. The gentle kisses he placed on her eyelids jumpstarted a delicate fluttering in her belly and she hummed softly. Arms flung to the side and palms down on the cool, white sheet, she allowed the full-body contentment of a post oh-my-god-*yes* orgasm that made her feel like glittering golden fairy dust sifted through her veins. Fairy dust that started to spark and flash as his lips brushed hers, more and more demanding with each pass.

Chapter Four

At Aurora's soft moan, Connyn lifted his head and stared down at his woman, marveling at the intensity of emotion that roiled through him. He'd lived for the moment he would be able to claim his mate and begin to fulfill his place in his people's history. Even before he'd been born, the expectation had been there. As soon as his mother had suspected she was pregnant, she'd run to the High Priestess for a reading of omens and stars for her unborn child. She'd returned to the Priestess the day of his birth and taken him back every year on his birthday.

Every visit had left his devout mother distraught as each prophecy failed to produce the clear vision she hoped and prayed for to ensure her son's safety and success in a very troubled time. The visions, though couched in different words and images, always held the same message. Two disparate futures, each tied intrinsically to Magdalyne's daughters. Either he would find his true mate, live long surrounded by his children and fulfill his family's honor bound to the prophecy his world hinged on or he would fail.

Fail to find her. Fail to keep her safe. Fail to carry out his family's duty to their people and fulfill the destiny he was born to. His father would be shamed as a distant relative ascended to the throne in his son's place. The bloodlines required to complete the prophecy would be weakened and his failure would endanger his entire world.

He was the last full Heir to the Third House. His birth had been difficult and his parents had been unable to conceive again. Paired with the fact that the lands of the Third House held the longest border along Sleht-held territory, his people had sustained the largest casualties, suffered the deepest losses. He had been brought up to stop at nothing to ensure the successful continuance of his ancestors' lineage and his people's survival.

Now for the first time, with his mate soft and open beneath him, the bonds of fear that had been locked around his heart since childhood began to loosen. From his earliest memories, he'd felt pitted against Destiny. A heartless bitch that showed no mercy in judging and measuring him, testing him to see if he could carry her weight and still stand as a man.

His parents had been indefatigable in the search to find his true mate, a pure-blooded Mystic the stars and Elders would approve. It had been his family that had uncovered Magdalyne's lineage while she was still pregnant with Ellyna. They had brought her to the capital in full expectation of having the Matching Ritual executed on his behalf and securing his place in history.

But the gods and prophets had denied them not once, but three times. Aligning his cousins, heirs to the First, Second and Fourth House of Ilyria with Magdalyne's

daughters. Time and again, Destiny had withdrawn her hand of blessing from his head, leaving his family shocked and shamed. His father had been furious, but his mother had been unwavering in her faith.

Then one morning the High Priestess had simply arrived with a new message from the stars. The next Mystic-born child, Magdalyne's fourth, would unlock Connyn's destiny. Though the news brought a welcome joy after years of bitter disappointment, it came with a stern warning to heed the direction of the immortal gods when walking through a mortal land.

He'd been holding himself motionless above her for several minutes, looking down into the face of his future when Aurora's eyes slowly opened. Her dark eyes were still slightly glazed as she reached up and feathered light fingertips down the sides of his face and neck, whisper-soft caresses from his chest to his abdomen, continuing a direct descent to his cock. Gently wrapping both hands around it, she stroked her pussy with its head, her heat and wetness pressing against him and focusing every thought and need within him to the taking of his mate.

His jaw tensed and his eyes narrowed as she guided him in lowering his hips and positioned his cock at her entrance. Her lips tilted up in a sorceress' smile, an allurements so powerful he could do nothing but sink into her body and offer his soul up for the pleasure.

"Oh god," she murmured as he slid further into the silky tight grip of her cunt. Still swollen and slick from her climax, her body responded to his every move with a heightened sensitivity that was reflected in her moans, her flushed skin, the way she pulled her bottom lip through her teeth. He pushed in deeper and watched sated desires ignite with new lust in her eyes.

She wrapped her arms around his torso and her long legs around his hips, tilting her pelvis up to allow him in as deeply as their bodies would allow. Holding her in his arms he held the manifestation of a hope that had evaded his grasp for years. With a rumbling growl, he slid his arms under her shoulders and kissed her, letting the emotions, the possessiveness, the want and demand for her roil through him.

Hugging him tightly, she moved against him, her mouth becoming urgent against his. He rocked into her, thrusting deep, pulling back and thrusting deep again, savoring the frantic seizing of her body around his cock. He swallowed her seductive purring as he continued to kiss her mouth, press against the cushioned fullness of her breasts with his chest and fuck her cunt. She was writhing beneath him, her need turned frenzied as he continued to bait the primal lusts driving them both.

Aurora's fingernails grazed down his back as she turned her head from the kiss and gasped raggedly for breath. She unlocked her legs from around him, dug her heels into the mattress and used the leverage to buck against him, slamming their bodies together.

Immediately, his world burst apart with a mind-blinding explosion. He pinned her heavily to the bed and drove into her as his orgasm unleashed its fiery lashes to whip through his body as he pumped deep inside his mate's cunt.

Her body clutched his and Aurora's hoarse cry bounced off the neon-lit walls of the small room, her pussy milking his cock as she came hard after him. She looked up at him, her eyes so wide, her heart so revealed. She was his. Belonged to him.

"Aurora." Her name on his lips was more than a promise. It was a bond, a commitment so consuming it drew up from the deepest, most sacred parts of his soul. It lanced through him, driving his body into hers again, relentless and demanding.

Pressing her head backward into the mattress, she cried out. Her arms, legs and cunt all wrapping around him again and convulsively tightening as he rode her with a violent passion that bordered the edge of his control. He pounded into her sweet, receiving body, controlled by a primitive force that reduced the universe down to this one moment in time where the only thing that mattered, the only thing that existed, was the two of them together.

"Mine," he stated. The harsh and demanding claim remained unsoftened by the low whisper of his words. "You are mine."

Her body began to tremble, her inner walls quickening in their contractions. Abruptly her entire body tensed as she gasped out his name and a fresh rush of liquid heat flowed over his cock, gushing out of her with his next thrust and coating his balls as he slammed into her.

Another sudden and fierce climax tore through him. Ecstasy had claws and those claws carved the pleasure of having, *truly* having his mate deep into his bones. His seed poured into Aurora, swirling with the evidence of her release and branding her as his to her very core.

His cousins might think he was an arrogant asshole, but it didn't matter. He'd done what had been needed to find his mate. He'd fought and stopped at nothing. And he'd found his mate and made her his. Against the odds, through multiple worlds, years and unbelievable obstacles, he'd taken on Destiny and won. Marked his woman and within days would see her safely delivered to their homeworld and enthroned by his side. Destiny could go fuck herself.

* * * * *

Aurora lay on her side, still curled up under the blankets, and watched Connyn stare out the motel window. He'd opened the curtains and had been standing motionless with his back to the bed since she'd blinked her eyes open several minutes ago. She didn't mind. It gave her a good chance to adjust to his presence in daylight and realign her world after the wild night of sex they'd shared. Her thigh muscles were actually sore.

A small smile tugged on the corners of her mouth. She hadn't had sex that good in, well, in longer than she could remember. Even with the whole weird vow thing he threw in the middle of it, the night had been right up there past fantasy-worthy and probably edging on once-in-a-lifetime, though she refused to go that far because she hoped it wasn't. After all, she'd be sleeping with him until he got her to Ilyria.

His hair hung unbound and nearly reached his waist. That much hair would dwarf a normal man, but with his hands on his hips, the powerful muscles of his shoulders and arms were only emphasized more. Her gaze wandered down to his jeans-covered ass. Damn, the man had an A-1, top-of-the-line ass. As a lingerie model, she knew of at least a dozen designers whom she'd bet would give their right arm and morning lattes in exchange for an exclusive modeling contract with him. Until they gave him a direction and expected him to follow it, then mayhem on the shoot would be a certainty.

He looked at her over his shoulder, catching her blatantly ogling his ass. His eyes narrowed and she bit back a smile. The morning light struck his eyes, making them appear more a smoky blue than gray. Her pulse skipped as the intensity that always seemed to haunt his expression skittered a sensual awareness awake inside her. God, her body could hardly move this morning and yet a tiny look and she was starting to purr.

"Are you hungry?" His question, as normal as it was, was said with such a deep, sexy rumble, her inner muscles clenched.

She looked past him, through to the sunlit parking lot beyond and pushed herself up on one elbow, keeping the sheet modestly over her as she moved. "Just coffee for breakfast is fine." His gaze had slid to her breasts as she shifted position and she glanced down to make sure the sheet was still in place.

A warm tingling started to swirl low in her belly and she shifted her legs. The tingling switched to an achy twinge, reminding her of a question she had had last night but was too blissed out to follow up on. "So, about last night," she began and then hesitated, not exactly sure about the best way to ask.

He turned and crossed his arms over his chest, a frown replacing his own look of hunger that had nothing to do with bacon and eggs. Not good. She hadn't even asked the question and already his body language was defensive.

"I was just wondering about something," she said.

"Yes?" His eyebrows rose slightly as he waited, his demeanor darkening with an unspoken threat.

"Do you always come twice?" She blurted out the question before she could let his intimidation tactics get to her. Connyn looked visibly relieved and she wondered what he'd been expecting her to ask about.

"No," he answered. "Once the vows to the Mating Rite are completed, the first time a Royal takes his mate his body responds by attempting to ensure the lineage by implanting his seed twice. It's a normal part of the Rite, but not repeated after the first time as far as I understand."

Aurora's mind blanked for a moment, shock replacing normal brain synapses that could carry logical thought. She slid her hand under the sheet and brushed the edges of her birth control patch. The feel of the firmly adhered patch cleared her mind. What

Connyn didn't know couldn't hurt her and would keep him a lot more manageable for the trip to Ilyria if he thought all his rites and rituals were working.

Ensuring lineages. Holy crap. Her breath eased out and now she was the one relieved. No lineage had been ensured last night, Mating Rite or no Mating Rite.

Before the conversation could continue down this dangerous and no-way-in-hell path, she changed the subject. "You said something about breakfast?"

He reached for his shirt that had been slung across the back of a chair. "I'll see what I can find."

"Wait," she said, throwing the covers off and sitting up on the edge of the bed, "I'll go with you." The sudden burst of panic at the possibility of his disappearing on her easily overrode her sense of modesty as she reached for her panties.

Abruptly Connyn spun around and whipped the curtains closed. Just as quickly, he turned back around and glared at her.

"What?" she asked.

"What do you mean *what*? You are not to parade naked in front of open windows."

"Parade?" Dear god, the man's over-reactive machismo was even running on full-force first thing in the morning. "I was *not* going to *parade* anywhere. I was simply going to put on my clothes." His frown automatically had her back stiffening in defiance. "There's nobody around. Besides, a quick flash never hurt anyone."

He took a threatening step toward her and she stood to lessen her disadvantage. "You need to get over this whole barbaric male thing. Tell me, is every man in Ilyria so primitive?"

Advancing until he was close enough for her to feel the heat of his body he said, "Every man is not your concern. All you need to know is that I don't share. Ever." His eyes scanned hotly over her body. "Even a quick flash."

She couldn't tell if his possessiveness turned her on or infuriated her. Both, unfortunately. "I just bet you were a real joy on the playground when you were a child. Hopefully your sons will grow up a little more enlightened."

Something soft and powerful sifted through his eyes as he gazed down at her. This time his words were quiet but firm. "Hopefully, our sons will grow up in a country that will finally know peace."

His gaze settled on her hip and he frowned. "Are you hurt?"

She looked down to where he was staring at her birth-control patch. "Oh. No. I mean not anymore. It was just a...scrape that started to get infected. My doctor told me to keep the bandage on until it fell off by itself and it would be fine." She shrugged. "No big deal. It hasn't bothered me at all."

Not looking wholly convinced, he turned and picked up her bag and then handed it to her. "Go ahead and get dressed. Don't worry, I won't leave without you."

His insight was a little unnerving. Aurora opened her suitcase and tossed her sleep shirt and panties from last night into the bag. After a quick examination of her options,

she pulled out a matching bra and panty set, a pair of black, slim-fitting jeans and a bright pink sweater that complimented her complexion and accented her dark hair and eyes. "So what exactly happens with these mating vows you were so serious about last night?"

"Not *were*." He had finished dressing and was watching her fasten the hooks of her lacy cream demi-bra. After last night, she needed to do what she could to keep as much control as possible. If he was distracted, perhaps his obsessive need for control would fade.

Hooking her bra behind her back thrust out her full and firm D-cup breasts, nearly pressing them over the edge of lace that came up just enough to conceal her nipples. A demi-bra wasn't meant for full coverage or solid support. But it was sexy as hell and the tops of her breasts would softly jiggle under the thin material of her sweater every time she moved.

"Okay." She reached for her matching panties and stepped into them. "Present tense on the importance of these vows."

"They are the foundation of the prophecy our people are depending on to return our world to peace and release it from the threat of the Sleht."

"That I know. Ellen explained about those with the Mystic bloodline being matched with the Royal Ilyrian heirs to return your full powers that were lost by the original five ruling brothers."

He nodded. "Though our powers weren't lost. The gods had decreed from the beginning that these powers were given to guard and defend our people. When the Original Five began abusing their powers and using them in their civil war, the gods removed most of them. Our entire race would most likely have been destroyed by our own people had the gods not stepped in."

"So the gods saved you from yourselves? That's good, right?"

"Yes, but it also weakened our ability to defend ourselves from outside enemies as well. If the curse isn't broken, we will not be able to survive continuing attacks by the Sleht."

"So what does this exactly mean now? I mean personally. You and me and what happened last night."

"Our bond allows children to be born who will eventually fulfill the prophecy as the seventeenth generation. Also an unbreakable telepathic link is formed between us."

Aurora clutched her sweater to her chest. "*What?*" she shrieked. The shock of his words crashed over her like an arctic wave. She sucked in air, trying to calm down and control her thoughts. The next second, she instinctively slapped the birth control patch on her hip. It was still there. Great. Now all she had to worry about was having this sex-god Neanderthal walking around inside her mind.

"You're inside my head? Right this minute?"

Connyn's gaze snapped up from her bare legs to her face. He looked at her for a long, concentrated moment, his frown deepening. "No. We must not be fully mated yet."

Aurora quickly pulled the sweater on over her head. "Why is that?" she asked, trying to sound concerned instead of incredibly relieved.

"I'm not sure. Perhaps it is because the Elders and Prophets haven't blessed our match."

"You mean the ritual that is supposed to take place at a Mystic's first birthday?" She slid her jeans up her long legs, watching Connyn's expression, trying to figure out if he was a breast, leg or ass man for future reference. So far, he seemed equally interested in all parts of her body.

He crossed his arms over his chest and continued to watch her as she sat on the end of the bed to pull her boots on. "Ellyna seems to have spoken with you at length regarding our homeworld."

Aurora shrugged. "She told us what she could."

"Us?" Connyn's voice was sharp, the look in his eyes predatory.

Shit. Aurora bent over, tugging unnecessarily hard on her boot to pull it over her heel. "Brooke and I," she managed without missing a beat. "She told me that Brooke tracked her down and about their conversation. I'd known Ellen for a while, but it was Brooke's visit that made her decide to tell me about Ilyria."

"She hadn't told you of your heritage before that?" he asked skeptically.

"Until Brooke showed up and warned Ellen that you guys had come back, she didn't think we'd ever have to know about the born-in-another-world thing."

He was still watching her closely when she looked up. His eyes didn't stray from her face. "You seem to have adjusted to the news well."

She smiled. "Believe it or not, I've been told stranger things. Besides, when I heard the truth, it just seemed to fit. I can't really explain it any other way."

He nodded and seemed to relax a little. She stood, placing her hands on her hips. "So what now?"

Connyn glanced over her outfit. "We get you some decent clothes."

* * * * *

Apparently, decent clothes to Connyn meant sensible running shoes and pants and sweatshirts that concealed her figure as much as possible. She agreed on the shoes but left him fuming in the aisle to find some more fashionable and flattering tops and pants that would still be easy to run in since that seemed to be such a high priority on his "acceptable" list. To her considerable pile on the checkout stand, Connyn added a coat, gloves and a hat for her and also a duffle bag with some spare clothes for himself. Once they were finished with the outdoor sporting goods store, he insisted on putting a couple hundred miles behind them before they stopped for lunch.

The farther north they drove, the more Aurora was glad for the warmer clothing. At the store, she had switched her sexy but thin sweater for a zip-up fleecy top. Though her home state of Texas was still experiencing mild weather, Old Man Winter had been making himself right at home in Oklahoma. By the time they stopped for lunch in Boise City, she was even considering thanking Connyn for insisting on supplementing her wardrobe, regardless of his reasons.

She didn't of course. The man had enough ego to sustain a revival of Sparta without her adding strokes to it. She eyed Connyn over the top of her cheeseburger and wondered just how closely an Ilyrian could be compared to that ancient civilization. Were they all merciless warriors who considered themselves unbeatable and the gods' gift to all things military?

Connyn's right eyebrow arched. "Yes?"

"I was wondering about your world."

"Our world."

"Right. Exactly my point."

"You haven't stated a point my comment could either support or negate. And I have been tutoring you in our traditions, lore and history for the past several hours."

True. He'd been lecturing her in the car since Lubbock and would have made a great professor. He had the arrogant didacticism down stone cold. She appreciated the information, just not the delivery. However, at this point, she would take what she could get. Aurora put down her cheeseburger. "Are you the norm for Ilyria?"

"Excuse me?"

"The norm. Usual. Are all the men and women like you?"

"Your question is too vague to be answered adequately. What exactly are you referring to?"

Aurora picked up a french fry and waved it around in an exasperated circle. "Just like that. The way you talk—"

"What's wrong with the way I speak?"

She bit the fry in two. She had his complete, if irritated, attention. "It's very...*royal*."

He sat back against the booth and crossed his arms over his chest. "Of course. I am a Royal. Heir to the Third House of Kith."

"I mean you tend to be condescending."

"I do not."

Forgetting the other half of the fry she had just stuffed into her mouth, she snorted and nearly choked herself. Connyn started to rise, but she gestured him down and eased her coughing fit with a drink of Diet Coke. When she could breathe again, she nodded her head. "Yes, you do. For example, you assume you're always right."

"Being right is not the same as being condescending."

"No one is *always* right."

He simply responded by smugly raising his eyebrows.

"See? Right now. You're doing it."

He frowned, but it cleared as quickly as it had come. "Ah."

"Ah? What the hell is *Ah*?"

"You're obviously upset because you've been wrong about nearly everything since we've met and are feeling embarrassed about it. So your typical feminine response is to try to find fault with me."

Aurora's jaw dropped.

"Don't worry," he continued when she couldn't force sound past her indignation. "I am well able to handle your emotional variability and occasional irrational outburst."

"Emotional var—feminine re—*embarrassed*?!" Slowly she lowered her hands to lie flat on the table and leaned toward him. "Listen here you arrogant son of a—"

He cut her off by standing abruptly. "We can continue this conversation in the car. You are drawing attention to us with the rising tone of your voice." Before she could say another word, he turned and walked out of the fast food restaurant, leaving her staring at his back, completely furious and completely stunned. Mentally groping for a word beyond supercilious, and asshole, and bastard, and...well hell. The English language didn't have one that she knew of that did him justice. Perhaps she'd find a new word in Ilyria.

She glanced around the restaurant. A couple of other patrons were giving her curious glances. Grabbing her jacket and jerking it on, she stalked outside and opened the car door. She didn't get in. "You left me."

"No. I left the restaurant. Get in."

The freezing wind cut through her pants and whipped her hair into her eyes as she struggled with the desire to slam the door and leave the bastard forever. But he was in her car and he was her ticket to Ilyria and to her family. Not to mention away from the Predators they had fled from at the Riverwalk. *Shit*.

She got in the car and closed the door. After snapping the seatbelt in place, she rested her head back against the seat and closed her eyes. With a few deep, cleansing breaths she forced herself into her happy place. A peaceful, sunny meadow. Spring flowers, warm breeze, bright blue sky. Fluffy white clouds slowly drifting overhead. Birds chirping sweetly next to a bubbling, sparkling brook *whose crystal-clear water she held Connyn's head under until his eyes bulged*.

"You don't need to fear that I would have left you."

She opened her eyes and stared at him. "What?"

"Regardless of how unreasonable you might get, I will never leave you. Ever."

Closing her eyes again, she let her head thump back against the headrest. "Hmph. If I were you, I'd worry about me leaving you."

Suddenly she was thrown forward, stopped from flying through the windshield by the seatbelt.

"What the hell are you doing?" she yelled, grateful that she'd made sure to buckle the goddamn safety harness into place. Connyn brought the car to an abrupt stop on the road's shoulder, the small roadster fishtailing a little on the snow-covered asphalt. After slamming the car into park, he gripped the steering wheel tight enough to make his knuckles pop white. He glared straight ahead, ignoring her question and the cars and trucks whipping past them on the highway fast enough to rock the little car with wind tremors.

"No." A flat, bit-out harsh word. And still he didn't face her.

"No?" she asked. "No what? Are you saying, no, I didn't just try to kill you by throwing you head-first through the windshield? Or no, I shouldn't have walked out on you in the restaurant? Maybe, no, I promise to quit being such an asshole."

When he finally turned to look at her, she wished he hadn't. His eyes were a penetrating, dark silvered gray, flashing with a hard brightness like flames off polished slate.

"No. You will not leave me. You are my mate. You completed the vow." He picked up her hand. Held it upright. "You wear my ring." He set it back down and put the car into drive. "We will not have this discussion again."

Chapter Five

The trip had not been fun. Aurora had calmed down enough to think and sort through her options. There weren't many. Not if she wanted to get to Ilyria. She comforted herself with the hope that once she did get to Ilyria, her options would expand.

They had stopped for a silent dinner before continuing the trip into Colorado. About ten hours after they had started that morning, they pulled into the outskirts of Denver. It had begun to snow about twenty minutes earlier and now the heavy flakes swirled in a frenetic dance before them in the dark.

Connyn veered off the highway onto an exit ramp and Aurora twisted around to see the name of the exit's road. She missed it. "Are we here? I thought you were staying somewhere more rural. Ellen mentioned a farm."

"We're still about two hours from there."

"So are we stopping for dinner?" She glanced out the side window. "If so, you're passing up a lot of good restaurants."

"We're stopping for the night."

"Why? It'd only be around nine or ten if we kept on going. Are you getting tired of driving, because I am completely capable of driving my own car."

"You don't know where you're going and the portal doesn't open until tomorrow."

"Tomorrow?" That her plan would so suddenly manifest sent a jolting shock through her. "But what about Ellen and Am—" Aurora snapped her mouth shut to cut off her incredibly stupid blunder.

"Amdyn?" Connyn asked.

Aurora nodded, glad his attention had been on the road rather than on her face.

"What about them?"

"Don't we have to wait for them? All do the leaping world thing together?"

"Of course not. If they're there, they'll go. If not, we'll leave without them. They'd do the same if the situation was reversed. Our primary objective is returning our mates back to our homeworld safely and immediately. Together or separate is no matter."

"But —"

"Don't worry. Your other two sisters are already there. And," he said, pulling into a parking lot, "we're here." He pulled under the hotel's portico and put the car into park. "I'll check us in and then we can get something to eat."

"Leave the car running," she said when he reached for the keys. "It's too cold to sit out here without the heat on."

He gave her a hard stare. "Don't go anywhere."

"Jesus," she said, looking out into the swirling snow. "Where would I go?"

"Nowhere I wouldn't find you," he stated flatly as he got out of the car.

"Royal," Aurora mumbled under her breath, perversely welcoming the brief rush of irritation at his blatant egotism that pushed her nervousness off center stage. "Royal pain in the ass, you mean." Things were happening a lot faster than any of them had planned. The wild, spinning feeling of being so out of control left her chilled as she watched the hotel's automatic doors slide shut behind Connyn.

There was one thing she could take control of right now. She could at least drive her own damn car. Unclipping her seatbelt, she maneuvered herself into the driver's seat. Not such an easy thing in a little sports car when being nearly all legs of a five-foot eleven-inch frame. She couldn't remember the last time she'd scrambled over car seats when it didn't involve getting at least partially naked.

By the time Connyn returned she had soothed her doubts with a focused, deep-breathing chant, adjusted the seat and mirror and securely rebuckled herself. She had also made sure that only the passenger side door remained unlocked. She smiled sweetly into his glare, wondering if he would refuse to get in and knowing if he did, she'd go to dinner alone.

"Even if you don't have the same eye color," he growled as he got in the passenger side, "you definitely share with your sisters the same ability to drive a reasonable man insane."

Though her smile deepened, Aurora didn't comment as she headed for a steakhouse they had passed earlier. Dinner was civil without any major verbal clashes and when they came out of the restaurant, he didn't even ask for the keys. Aurora enjoyed a tiny thrill at her small victory as she purposefully raced the engine and took the first corner fast enough to spin the tires a bit, but was in no way convinced there'd been any lasting ground gained. Yet.

He directed her to the left side of the hotel and then carried their bags up to a room on the second floor. Though expecting that he'd chosen a room with a single bed, seeing the solitary, king-sized proof dominating the room's space sent a nervous shiver through her stomach. She closed the door behind her but stopped at the open closet beside the door to hang up her coat. Not sure of how the next part of the evening should or would play out, she took her time arranging her coat on the hanger. Out of the corner of her eye she watched Connyn set their bags on the end of the bed, flip on a table lamp and then turn to stare at her.

When she still didn't move further into the bedroom, Connyn asked, "Are you still angry with me?"

"No," she said, facing him. Surprising herself to find it was the truth. "More like exasperated or irritated." And really starting to get turned on watching you advance on me with the focus of a hunter intent on his target.

"Because I walked out of the restaurant without you or because you think I think I'm always right?"

The intensity of his gray eyes reminded her of several early adolescent experiments with a magnifying glass borrowed from the science lab. She had spent a lazy afternoon with Lucas Rojo seeing if a fire really could be started by zeroing the sun's rays in on different objects. It could.

Sliding her fingers into the back pockets of her jeans, she leaned her shoulders against the door as he took a couple of steps toward her. The door felt cool and solid behind her. A balancing comfort to the swirling heat in her body. "Both, now that you mention it. But when a person thinks they're always right, it tends to get very annoying."

"Would it help if I told you that I know I'm not always right?"

She eyed him warily. "Is that an admission or a fishing expedition to see what it's going to take to get me in bed with you tonight?"

A quick, half smile curled up the left side of his mouth. "My mother is going to love you."

"That's not an answer to my question."

"I've been wrong. Occasionally." Moving in closer, he blocked her back against the door. "About some minor things." He reached for the tab of her shirt's zipper. "Never when it's important."

The soft clacking of the zipper moving down its plastic teeth underscored his last words. As her shirt parted, his gaze focused on her breasts pushed up in her lacy demi-bra. "Too many lives depend on me being right." His words were solemn but had begun to roughen with the lust she recognized. It roused her own from beneath the shield of anger she'd worn most of the day.

He settled his hands on her waist. They weren't gentle, holding her. Catching her eyes with his own, he stepped close. And closer. Until she was breathing in the warmth of his body and she had to tilt her head back to keep his gaze.

"I'm right about us, Aurora." He kissed her with a kiss dramatically different from how he held her. His kiss was soft, a tender summons that let her come to him.

Before her mind could react, instinct took over and lifted the barrier caging in her desire. She arched up to press her lips harder to his and wound her arms around his neck, searching to satiate the craving he ignited in her with such little effort. Her full-body yearning was prodded by the sheer necessity to silence the panic his earlier announcement had generated. It terrified her to think that this far into their plan, she might lose her nerve or do something that jeopardized everything.

She needed this. Him and what he could do to her. Needed him to consume her body in his lust and make the questions, uncertainty and fear all go away. Needed him to be right about this one thing even when she knew he was so very wrong.

Twisting her fingers in his hair, she tugged his head down further, took command of the kiss and drove them toward a passion both frantic and consuming. Her tongue plunged into his mouth, swirling and tasting as her body undulated in blatant invitation. Her breasts and hips rubbed against him and when she felt the hard length of his cock, the sexual heat rolling through her rushed to her center. With a moan, she wrapped her leg around him and squeezed.

His hands gripped her ass and lifted her off the floor. Following his direction, she brought her other leg up and encircled his waist, locking her ankles together behind his lower back. Her writhing turned wild yet the ache building inside her was only teased to a higher level. When he pressed her more solidly against the door, the hardness of all that man pinning her in place had her digging her nails into his shoulders and struggling to get impossibly closer.

Connyn lifted her higher, breaking the kiss. She gasped and tried to wiggle back down, but he had other plans. Supporting her ass with one arm, he reached up with his free hand to yank one side of her bra down and expose her breast. Immediately his mouth covered her nipple, sucking it in deep. Sensation streaked through her. Fiery bands snapped under her skin, sensitizing it until every last inch of her body throbbed to the rhythm of her rapidly beating heart.

“Oh my god, Connyn. I need—” she sucked in air so sharply, so suddenly, her head spun as Connyn turned his attention to her other breast.

Her nipple, scrunched up tight from both arousal and the cold hotel room, had been trying to poke its way through her lacy bra since he first started kissing her. He didn’t move the bra aside this time. His mouth came down hard and scorching hot as he laved her nipple through the thin material, using the lace to add extra friction as his tongue pressed and circled. By the time Aurora had found her breath, she was moving, spinning through the air with her head falling back and her hair flying around her shoulders in dark waves. She opened her eyes to find Connyn walking toward the bed with her still wrapped around him.

Anticipation thrilled through her as she saw the raw lust cutting across his face. It was a harsh emotion, stripped of polite pretenses. As elemental in its ferocity as the original volcanic eruptions spraying the sea with molten lava and changing the face of earth forever. So lost in the moment, she was taken by surprise when he abruptly set her on her feet, still a distance from the bed.

“Wait. Aren’t we going to—”

“Yes.”

The gruffness of his answer shot a new burst of need through her. Connyn unbuttoned and unzipped her jeans and then yanked them down to her knees. Straightening, he took her in another mind-melting kiss. He used one hand to hold her head in place while he ravaged her mouth. The other hand moved down to her ass, squeezing and pulling her to him. The texture of his jeans and shirt felt rough against the bare skin of her stomach and thighs.

She wanted him naked. Now. She tried to push a hand between their bodies to reach the fly of his jeans, but he held her too close. She wanted to protest, her thoughts were abruptly scattered as his fingers slipped intimately between her buttocks.

Her mind froze as the erotic tension in her body instantly dominated all else. Some women's nipples or inner thighs served as their sexual hotspots. Hers was right where his fingers were grazing at the moment.

Connyn continued kissing her, stroking his fingers downward until he reached her cunt. With shallow movements in and out, he spread her juices around her pussy and drove the need inside her to almost begging level. She'd felt the dampness on her panties when he'd pulled them down and now each second he played with her she got wetter and hotter.

She was close to coming when he drew his fingers completely out to spread her cream up to her anus. She couldn't catch her breath and dug her fingers into his shoulders, breathing again only when he slid his fingers back down and into her. But then he repeated the process, and again a third time. Her knees started to tremble as her own juices cooled over her heated skin. The fourth time, he pressed his fingers deep into her swollen pussy and her inner walls started to contract. Immediately he pulled them back out.

Frustration running high at her denied climax, she tore her mouth from the kiss. "Damn it!" she hissed. "Fuck me! God damn it, just fuck me!"

He spun her around. Though thinking he'd been short of his mark when he'd put her down a minute ago, she realized he had her exactly where he wanted her when she saw the back of the overstuffed chair right in front of her. She heard his zipper being lowered and felt the pressure of his hand in the middle of her back, guiding her in bending over the chair. Instinctively she cushioned her head on her arms, keeping her face from being pressed into the chair's nubby brown fabric.

She held her breath as his cock pressed against her entrance. The air in her lungs rushed out on a moan when he thrust deep and fast inside her. Long and large, his cock had filled her before, but in this position it stretched her to her limit.

Her cunt contracted sharply around his cock and she quaked at the onset of an orgasm that started deep and rolled through her like a giant wave. Suddenly it spiked to explosive heights when Connyn pushed a finger into her ass and began a hard driving rhythm, thrusting his cock into her.

Glinting like sun-drenched gold, her magic whirled through her mind as her need became a clawing, fighting demand and sensation after sensation whipped through her body. His finger twisted deeper into her ass and Aurora arched up, crying out as ecstasy tore through her. Connyn's free hand landed firmly on her hip, holding her in place as he kept up the pressure, pounding into her and prodding her unrelentingly higher. Her body flashed white hot as living fire coursed through her, racing through her veins and sparking every nerve ending. Her release broke apart inside her like a New Year's fireworks finale. With an explosion of light and color inside her that easily

eclipsed all previous displays, Aurora fractured into the incandescent bliss as Connyn pushed in and held himself hard against her.

Connyn's jaw clenched as Aurora's cunt squeezed his cock. With a low groan he ground in deeper and let his orgasm roll through him. When her cunt contracted hard again he nearly lost his breath with the incredible pleasure of coming deep inside Aurora while she climaxed around him. Each time he pushed into her body he felt as if he'd been created to live for that moment.

The sheer rightness of having her, entering her, taking her made all the previous difficulty of locating her seem as nothing. The years of searching shrank down to a trivial price for the treasure of finding.

He ran his hands over her gorgeous ass as she came down from her climax and his own breathing returned to normal. From the moment he saw her, he'd been surprised at how easily his control slipped at least around her. He knew how important it was to stay focused and alert. Nothing could be allowed to hinder their return, yet in the last two days he'd been too often distracted, his thoughts circling Aurora. Their lovemaking, instead of blunting his need as he'd expected, simply sharpened the hunger he had for her.

Regaining the lock on his control wasn't helped by the view of her naked and bent over in front of him with his cock still deep inside her. A fine sheen of sweat highlighted the sexy curve of her back and her long black hair was splayed around her head and over the seat of the chair in a wild tangle. He felt the warm stirrings of lust buzz through the base of his cock and he pulled out of her slowly. As much as he'd love to have her again, she was exhausted and she was going to have a lot to deal with tomorrow with the portal opening at noon.

Though she moaned in protest when he completely withdrew, her body reacted to his caresses and her trembling began to slowly subside. He hadn't meant to take her so fast. In fact he'd been looking forward to drawing out her pleasure, laying her out on the bed and learning and enjoying her body. Ever since she put on that lacy lingerie set this morning, he'd been thinking about all the different ways it could slowly be removed. Ways that would tantalize himself and tease Aurora.

Then when they'd gotten to the room, she'd wrapped her leg around him and kissed him like her next breath depended on it. His entire plan changed in a moment and all he wanted to do was to get inside her. After the tension between them all day, he needed the release as much as she did.

Knowing that it would take time for her to understand her place, to accept it and adjust to new ways and traditions, he'd held on to the hope that she would be a quick learner and not nearly as stubborn as her sisters. Today however had irrevocably proven that she'd gotten more rather than less of her mother's legendary stubbornness. The knowledge gave him a sense of perverse pride while simultaneously pricking at his refusal to be crossed by anyone, let alone his mate.

Aurora struggled to right herself, but her expression was dazed and her movements weak and flailing. He gently helped her straighten. Accepting his help, she leaned heavily against him, her head falling back on his shoulder. When he scooped her up into his arms, she let out a startled squeak and her hands flew up to grab his shoulders.

"I have you," he reassured as he cradled her against his chest for the short walk to the bed. In a matter of minutes he had stripped her completely and she was curled up under the covers watching him undress. He was pleased by the interest and lack of self-consciousness evident in her gaze.

Suddenly her eyes widened, focused on his cock and she popped up on one elbow. "No way can you be ready to go again so fast."

He tossed his jeans over the chair and climbed in bed beside her. "You're surprised after I just ran my hands over your body, took off all your clothes and have you naked in bed next to me?"

A slow, sensual smile spread across her face as she snuggled into his embrace, letting him adjust her body next to his. "Well," she said with a sleepy yawn, "when you put it like that..."

He kissed her temple and tucked the blanket in closely around her. "When I put it like that doesn't change the fact that you need some sleep." Resting his hand possessively over her hip for a moment, he fought the urge to slide it between her legs. Instead, he moved it up to her waist and closed his eyes. "We both do."

A moment later, his eyes flew open and his entire body tensed. He'd left the table lamp by the TV switched on and it had just turned off.

"What's wrong?" whispered Aurora.

Listening to the silence beyond their breathing, reaching out with all of his senses to detect danger, he found nothing. Heard nothing but the night and traffic outside their window. He pulled her tighter against him before willing the tension from his muscles. "Nothing." He could feel her heart beating faster beneath his hand. "A bulb burned out, that's all. Go to sleep."

After awhile, Aurora's sleep-heavy body sank against his and her breathing turned deep and steady. But rest didn't come for Connyn for a very long time.

* * * * *

"Tonight, my sweet captive, I am going to teach you a new way to please a man."

Phoebe's hand froze around the goblet of wine she'd been about to lift to her mouth as she stared across the small table at Captain Kilth. After she'd accepted her terms for her freedom two nights ago, she'd learned more about the ecstasies her body was capable of than she'd ever thought possible. And aside from the sharp pain that had marked the end of her virginity, nothing her jailer had done had in any way physically hurt her.

The look in his deep gray eyes sent a riot of shivers down her spine. She wouldn't even try to fool herself into pretending that the shivers were from fear rather than instinctive anticipation.

She was a practical woman and could live with the choice she had made. Even before the deal he had offered, she had known that the possibility of making a good match with a respectable gentleman would be quite impossible after being abducted by a pirate, regardless of whether she had been molested or not. The moment she was carried away, her reputation was sure to have suffered irreparable damage.

Her best hope was to survive, escape and live a quiet life as a spinster tucked away in the country. An option that she had previously settled on anyway once she had discovered just exactly whom she had been sold to by her uncle for her dowry. She just hadn't been able to inform her fiancé before having her life interrupted by a pirate.

Picking up the heavy goblet, she took a long drink that drained the remaining wine. She would not offer any encouragement. The rogue already found enough pleasure in her unwilling but uncontrollable responses to his handling of her body. After replacing the cup on the table, she folded her hands demurely in her lap, returned his gaze without flinching and waited.

Something akin to irritation passed through his eyes but was quickly extinguished. He gestured with his hand for her to stand before him. "Remove your clothes," he ordered.

Whether to remind her of his dominance or of her "willing" acceptance of the deal she had made, every night started with the same command. Repetition had made the act of disrobing before him slightly less difficult, but the flush of embarrassment still flooded her cheeks as her final piece of clothing slipped to the floor. She was intensely aware of the rasp of her own breath since the only other sounds in the cabin were the normal creaking of the ship's timbers and the soft brush of fabric against fabric as the layers of her clothes fell.

He watched her in silence, his stony expression unchanging. Sprawled out in his chair with one hand resting on the table and one on his thigh, Captain Kilth had not moved as she completed the commanded task. In this position, she stood taller than the height of his head and could keep her gaze level without directly avoiding his eyes. She focused on the top deadbolt he was always careful to lock once he retired for the night.

"Kneel."

Phoebe blinked at the sudden order. She frowned, unsure. This wasn't the way he had begun the previous nights. "What?"

He pointed to a spot in front of him. "Kneel. Fold your dress to cushion your knees."

Licking her lips nervously, she lowered herself to the floor as she followed his directions. When she was kneeling before him, he unfolded his large frame from the chair and stood before her, his groin directly in her line of vision. With his feet spread shoulder-length apart and his arms crossed over his chest, he towered menacingly over her.

"Release me," he ordered, his voice rough and low.

Her heart thudded in her chest and her mouth went dry as her brain finally processed what it was he expected her to do. Reaching for the front of his breeches, her fingers trembled as she struggled to untie the leather laces. In her inexperienced fumbling, she kept bumping his erection though she was doing her best to avoid the hard swelling beneath the fabric. He didn't offer to help, even though it became obvious she was becoming flustered. Suddenly the laces slid free, the leather parted and his cock sprang free. She gasped and jerked her head back.

"Touch me," he growled.

She glanced up to see the muscles of his jaw bunch tight as he watched her. Determined to make it through this night as she had the others, she took a deep breath and returned her gaze back to his erection. She'd never seen a cock up this close before and although she'd felt it inside her, she hadn't realized how large it truly was. Tentatively she ran her fingers from the base to the head, surprised by the softness of the skin that covered such hard flesh. She traced around the head and up and over the small slit in the middle, then back down. The musky scent of his sex teased her closer, and in spite of her awkwardness, she found her curiosity piqued.

Tracing a vein from the head to the base of his cock, she was intrigued by the combination of silky smoothness and solid heat under her fingers. She feathered her fingers around the skin stretched tightly over the head of his cock before skimming them down to the springy dark hair at the base, so different from the texture of the long hair he kept tied behind his neck.

Kilth's groan startled her. She dropped her hands to her sides. "I'm sorry," she said. "I didn't mean to hurt you."

"You're doing fine," he rumbled. "Just killing me is all."

She narrowed her eyes and glared up at him. "If you were expecting the expertise of a courtesan, you were bound to be disappointed."

"Give me your hands," he said, holding his out for hers. After she placed her hands in his, he wrapped one around the base of his cock and slid the fingers of her other hand under his balls. "Cradle and stroke them gently," he instructed. "With this hand, stroke like this," he said guiding the hand on his cock up and down. His hands loosened over hers as she gained confidence and found a rhythm that appeared to please him. "Yes. Like that."

Amazingly, his cock seemed to grow longer, harder and hotter under her hands. His balls started to pull up and she ran her index finger over the seam that separated them. When a groan rumbled out of his chest again, she repeated the action, feeling especially pleased that she was able to affect him in some small manner in which he had been affecting her since the bargain she'd struck with him.

"Take me into your mouth," he ground out.

She froze. "What?"

His hands tightened around hers and guided them back into action. "Your mouth. Put it on my cock." The words were harsh, hissing out into the quiet cabin.

"But I don't know – I've never – I just can't –"

"Are you rescinding your part of the deal?" His gray eyes had darkened to the color of fierce thunderheads rolling before the fury of a late summer storm, the angles of his face cut sharp by lust and shadows cast by the flickering candles.

"No."

"Then put your mouth on my cock."

Nervously, she licked her lips and opened her mouth. Leaning forward, she took the head partway into her mouth and was stunned by the heat of his cock against her lips. Instinctively, she swallowed and her tongue pressed over the slit, enhancing the musky scent with a salty tang.

Captain Kilth growled low in his throat and his long fingers slid gently into her hair at the temples to hold her head steady. She looked up to find him watching her with an intensity that

released a surge of desire inside her. The way he stared down at her, with such a blatant hunger and arrogant superiority, made her feel simultaneously powerful and vulnerable. It amazed her that naked and on her knees, she could so fiercely feel the strength of her femininity. She closed her eyes and focused, experimenting with a sucking motion while swirling her tongue around the head. Trying to find a rhythm she could hold with both hands and her mouth. She had finally settled on one when his testicles pulled up and tightened in her hand.

She glanced up to see if her explorations were suitable to his requirements, but the expression on his face left her no doubt that for once in this game of his, she wielded the reins of control. A sensual power surged through her and she allowed it to goad her actions as she leaned forward to take him deeper into her mouth. His fingers tightened on her head and his desperate groan was as sweet as a victory chant in her ears. But she wanted more –

Aurora's eyes flew open, her heart beating fast and her body warm and flushed from her dream. The dim light of early morning slunk in through the bottom of the drapes and washed the room in a cold gray rinse. They had shifted during the night and Connyn now lay sleeping on his back with her head on his chest. He had one arm thrown over her shoulders and she had her arm wrapped around his waist. A sudden craving to complete her dream pushed all remaining vestiges of sleep from her mind.

Carefully, she pushed the blanket down Connyn's body until she could see his cock. It was semi-hard already and resting against his thigh. Gently and very slowly, she wrapped her hand around it but stopped as Connyn stirred beneath her. She didn't want him waking and trying to take control just yet. Listening to his heart beat under her ear, she waited until it had slowed before continuing.

Shadows fell thickly over the bed and made it difficult to see more than rough outlines and shapes. Aurora wasn't satisfied just to feel—she wanted to see as well. Lifting her head from Connyn's chest, she turned to study his face, being careful not to increase the pressure on his cock. His features were relaxed and his breathing even. Glancing at the lamp that had so concerned Connyn last night, she reached out with her magic, smiling as it clicked on.

Connyn's head jerked off the pillow, his eyes open and instantly alert. When Aurora turned to look at him, his gaze was darting from the lamp to the window and door. She squeezed his cock to get his mind back to where she wanted it to be. His eyes narrowed on her.

"What are you doing?"

She dragged the tip of her tongue along her top lip as the corners of her mouth tilted upward. "Guess." Heat flared in his eyes and his cock throbbed and hardened in her hand. Turning back to her original intent, she propped herself higher on one arm to be able to reach his cock with her mouth. "But I have to warn you," she said, "I'll be very disappointed," she paused to run her tongue around the head of his cock, "if you guess wrong."

Chapter Six

Satisfaction rose through Aurora on a slow, warming tide at the look on Connyn's face as she hovered over his cock. With light, quick licks, she teased the sensitive skin around the small slit at its head until one of Connyn's hands slid into her hair and the other skimmed over her waist to settle on her hip. His fingers flexed and tightened on her skin. "Aurora."

The sound of her name riding that deep sexy voice of his dispelled any remaining desire to prolong her teasing. He could make her name sound all at once like a prayer, a wish and a command.

Sliding her hand down his cock, she followed it with her mouth, taking him in to the back of her throat in one smooth motion before pulling back and pressing her tongue firmly along the shaft as she lifted up. Connyn let out a low hiss and twisted his fingers in her hair.

She experimented with different types of licks, strokes and pressures until she found the combination that generated the reaction she wanted from Connyn. Tugging gently down on his balls as she swirled her tongue around the head of his cock had him gripping her hip hard and whispering her name. She shifted her position to free up her other hand and began sliding it up and down his shaft, keeping up the friction there as her mouth continued to work the head.

Again and again she ran her tongue in circles as she moved her mouth and hand up and down his erection, sliding and squeezing and sucking so that his entire cock was continually either in her hand or mouth.

She knew that a lot of men wanted a woman to moan while blowing them. They'd say they liked it because it was easier to come and lose yourself in the moment if the woman was enjoying it too, but she'd had enough men admit that it also sent an amazing extra buzzing sensation through their cock that helped them come faster and harder. Both reasons were fine, but she'd never been one to fake anything during sex including a phony moan to pacify or please a partner. When Connyn groaned and arched his back, pushing his cock deeper, her moan had nothing to do with trying to get him off faster and everything to do with the pleasure of driving Connyn to the edge of his control.

"Aurora?"

The rasp and need in his voice sent a heated thrill through her. She could feel him struggle to hold himself back from his orgasm. But she wanted his release, his surrender. With an encouraging "mmm" that hummed around his cock, she concentrated on keeping the rhythm of licking and stroking and tugging constant, finally pushing him past his control.

With a low growl, Connyn's hands flexed on her and his body tensed to a whipcord tightness. She tilted her head, took him in deeper and sucked gently as cum shot to the back of her throat in hot, streaming pulses. The musky tang, an earthy, deeply sensual taste, filled her mouth as she swallowed. As his grip loosened on her head and hip, she tenderly ran her tongue around his cock, licking him clean and letting his taste and scent settle into her senses.

The same sensation as when she'd first agreed to mate him swelled through her. It swirled around her, wrapping her in a profound awareness of destiny drawing her, enticing her past her fears and into her future. Closing her eyes, she pulled back and let his cock slip free from between her lips, enjoying the truly carnal pleasure of the thick slide of heated flesh from her mouth.

Connyn's hand moved from the back of her head to cradle her jaw. He turned her to face him. With languid ease, she opened her eyes and allowed a small smile to ghost over her lips at the sated heat simmering in his gaze.

"So..." she purred, "did you correctly interpret my intent?"

Connyn's lashes lowered but did nothing to dim the scorching intensity of his look as his gaze dropped to her lips. "Come here," he said.

The command was potently laced with such erotic intimation that Aurora's stomach quivered. As she made her way up his body, his hands skimmed down her sides and guided her into a kiss that instantly consumed her, igniting in her a sudden and intensely visceral need. Not just for the pleasure each caress of his released, but for the blinding ecstasy and shattering fulfillment her soul now craved at his touch.

Connyn held his *vystra* to him, feeling the softness of her curves ride against the much harder planes of his muscled body. Every sense focused on her as he listened to her soft gasp as his fingers swept up the back of her thigh and dipped slightly to graze the swelling nub of her clit. He inhaled the mingled scent of her arousal and his release, and watched the long waves of her hair fall like silky waves of midnight across her soft ivory shoulders.

This woman was more important than air to his existence at this point. Probably always had been, but until she was actually in his arms and finally in his world, the idea of *mate* had been an ideal, not a reality. She'd been nothing more than a vision and a hope, not a flesh and blood woman who could argue and love and laugh and drive him out of his mind with a look that set his soul and body on fire before he could blink. And he wanted her. All of her, not just her body or her spoken vow or her willingness to return to her homeland. There was something more that she was holding back from him, but if pressed, he wouldn't be able to say exactly what. She'd given him all he'd demanded but yet...

His hands held her loosely to him while he stroked her body and kissed her deeply. As Aurora responded to his caresses with a passion that was at once aggressive and

yielding, he wondered if what he craved from his mate couldn't be commanded but had to be given freely and without compunction.

The thought shook loose a fear deep inside him, and to counter it, he forced all his energies toward their mental connection, something that should be a given since they had exchanged vows. Once again, he came flat against a shimmering wall that kept him from her thoughts and feelings. It was unlike anything he'd ever encountered. Every other mind block he'd ever experienced was rigid and cold, a solid force of will set purposefully in place either by habit or choice.

He pushed in harder, more forcefully with his mind. And again there was nothing he could feel, no thought he could read, no feeling he could grasp.

It was as if he had been wrapped in a heavy golden mist too insubstantial to grasp and remove yet too thick to see past. No matter the tactic he employed to reach Aurora's mind, each was as futile as the rest.

Withdrawing from the kiss, he brushed the back of his fingers over her cheek. A slight frown pulled her beautiful face into a sexy pout as her gaze fixed on his mouth, desire still flaming hot in her eyes. He swept his thumb over her bottom lip, swollen and red from their kisses.

"Are you blocking me on purpose, Aurora?"

Her frown deepened and she glanced down at her body sprawled over the top of his. "What?"

"Your mind. Are you blocking me from your mind?"

"I don't know what you're talking about." She shifted and the soft fullness of her breasts lifted briefly and then settled back on his chest, distracting him for a moment. "Are you telepathic?" she asked. "I was told that was rare in Ilyria."

His gaze returned to her face. The last traces of passion had cleared from her expression and she started to push herself off him. He slid an arm around her waist to pin her back in place.

"Full telepathic ability is rare, though it runs more strongly in the Royal bloodlines than in others. I'm not a true telepath, but all Ilyrians have the ability to connect at some level to others in certain relationships such as along family bloodlines for one." Though he held her tightly to him, her body was stiff in his embrace. He could feel fear spread like ice under her skin.

"And between mates?" Her voice had lost its previous sensual purr and the sharpened edges of her words sliced into the intimacy of the moment.

He gently finger-combed through the thick, midnight mass of hair at the base of her nape, instinctively wanting to soothe her worries. "It is the strongest bond in our world. All Ilyrian mates form a mental connection once the Mating Rite has been completed —"

"But I can't read your mind."

"I'd have been more surprised if you could. You've lived nearly all your life away from your homeworld, so your training is expected to be lacking in certain areas." He

tucked a strand of hair that had fallen forward back behind her ear. "It's nothing to be ashamed of. We can always hire you a tutor."

Aurora's eyes narrowed and the frisson of heat that raced to replace the coolness in her body wasn't from passion. "Do you think I'm lacking?" Her question was asked calmly, but in her eyes he could see anger flash like a streak of sun glinting off a newly honed blade.

His hand dropped to her shoulder where tension strained her muscles into tight cords. "You're my mate."

"That's not an answer to my question."

Caution aligned itself with his growing irritation, but he ignored it. "It's a foolish question."

Aurora pushed off him so suddenly he didn't have a chance to stop her. Wrapping the sheet around her as she sat up, she glared down at him. "I'm lacking *and* foolish?"

Connyn sighed, regret mingling with resignation as he repositioned himself to sit up as well, his back against the headboard. Since she had jerked the sheet away, he stretched out on the bed fully exposed to her sight. Lacing his fingers together behind his head, he looked at his woman who for some unfathomable reason seemed to harbor a need to challenge him on every little thing. Temper had her cheeks flushed and her hair streamed over her shoulders in wild dark ribbons of disarray. The twisted sheet she was holding in place spurred rather than hindered his imagination since it left her legs and one hip bare and was thin enough for her nipples to be seen through. The sight had his cock growing hard again, an effect he did nothing to hide.

"I never said you were foolish, only your question. A question which I did answer."

The line along her jaw grew tighter as she lifted her chin a fraction. "No, you said I was your mate. That isn't what I asked."

Connyn sat up straighter and crossed his arms over his chest. Shaking his head at her stubborn unwillingness to understand he said flatly, "That is your answer. To everything. No matter what, you are my mate. No matter what you may or may not be lacking, or needing, or wanting. You are my mate and it is my responsibility to guard and keep you."

"That's a little medieval-lock-a-damsel-in-a-tower-ish to work in the real world."

"It does and will work. It has worked for centuries. You will learn to obey and trust me for your own good."

Aurora's jaw dropped and her eyes rounded in shock. Her entire body tensed and she tightened the sheet about her, the mounds of her breasts pressing tightly against the top edge as she took a deep breath and narrowed her eyes to mere slits of fury. "If you think for one fucking minute that you—"

Something snapped inside Connyn's brain. Without thinking, he reached for her, took her by her arms and dragged her to him. With the way she had twisted the sheet around herself and had been holding it with her arms folded together, it left her trussed

up securely and unable to push away from him. She writhed and kicked, further entangling her legs in the covers.

She hissed at him and he kissed her hard on the mouth before loosening his hold enough to look into her face. "I don't think—I know. And I will not allow the contravention of my orders when it comes to your safety."

Aurora opened her mouth. Closed it. Blinked. "Safety? Those chauvinist caveman comments were about my safety?"

Connyn didn't try to mask the growl that couched his answer. "What else?"

Aurora's slight shrug slid the sheet down her chest until the edge was just above her nipples. "Everything else." She wiggled, making his pulse kick, but he didn't let her go.

"Like what?"

"Like what I wear —"

"It wasn't practical for our trip."

"Who I talk to on my own phone —"

"An undeniable safety issue since you are unaware of all the threats."

"You walked out on me during an argument and left —"

"You were drawing unwanted attention. It was time to move the discussion to a safer place."

"That's just it!" Her voice had been rising until now she was practically yelling. "You don't discuss! You just make a statement and then *poof!* That's it. No more questions, no more discussion."

"Why discuss something that's decided?"

"Decided by whom?" Aurora's eyes snapped out an angry, dark fire.

"It's irrelevant if it's right."

"So just because you say it, that's supposed to be the end of it?"

He suddenly remembered seeing the expressions of both Wyc and Rordyc at different times after having an argument with their mates and thinking that his cousins simply needed to gain better control of their women. Trying to make sense out of Aurora's angry retorts had about drawn him to the end of his patience. It made him wonder if what he saw in his cousins' faces hadn't been anger as much as the same frustration he was feeling now. "The end of what? Your statements aren't reasonable."

As soon as the words were out of his mouth, the look on her face informed him that he had just made a misstep in the conversation.

"*Reasonable?*" Her struggle began again with renewed vigor. "Oh my god! You are the most—" she jerked on her arms, trying to pull them out of the confining sheet, "Most—oh my god! I don't even have the words to—let go of me!"

He readjusted his arms to make her more comfortable, but held her just as tightly. "No." Rolling to his side, he halted her thrashing by throwing his leg over her thighs

and then propped himself up on one elbow to look down at her. "We're having a discussion."

"This is not a discussion. This is me *trying* to discuss and you using your brute strength to substitute for an intelligent reply. A typical male response." She arched her back in an attempt to break free and her thigh pressed against his erection. For a moment, she froze. And then a decidedly haughty expression settled on her face. "Another typical male response."

Connyn brushed her hair out of her eyes. Watched the ebony strands fall softly back into place. He found himself smiling down at her for no good reason he could think of.

"It's not funny," she said.

He forced the smile away. "I'm not laughing." Looking into those endlessly deep eyes, he saw emotion flicker beneath the anger. Fear or uncertainty. He couldn't be sure as she refused to hold his gaze but instead turned her head to the side. It surprised him because since the moment he met her, she'd never swerved from a challenge.

Replaying the conversation in his mind, he searched for the moment when he'd first heard worry underscore her words and found it when he'd asked her if she was blocking him from her mind. Suddenly her outbursts made sense to him. Whenever something frightened her, she reacted by lashing out. He looked down at her beautiful face set in anger as she refused to look at him and instead was apparently trying to glare burning holes through his chest.

He was glad for one thing. At least she hadn't run, unlike his cousins' mates. He might have to tame a wildcat, but at least he didn't have to chase one across the country.

A peace feathered through him. Now he understood her emotional eruptions. They had all been rooted in her insecurity regarding different facets involved in being the mate of a Royal, the challenges her new life proposed and the possibility that he might consider her lacking and unable to fulfill her position by his side.

With two fingers gently but firmly on her chin, he tipped her face up to his.

"Don't worry about the telepathic bonding. I'm sure it will happen. Your sisters had been through the official Matching Ritual before your mother took you away. Perhaps there's something in the ceremony that looses the telepathy ability. Or perhaps you just need to learn to unlock whatever it is that is keeping me out."

Her scowl darkened. "Maybe I don't want you in."

If he didn't know it would set off another outraged barrage, he'd have laughed. Knowing what was behind her anger, he felt confident in deflecting it and working on reassuring her of the absolute rightness of her place in his world.

She was still wrapped in the sheet, arms and legs tangled, though she had stopped struggling and was contenting herself to glare at him.

"Then I'll change your mind," he whispered as he leaned down to kiss her lips. She twisted her head to the side and he chuckled. Ran his mouth down her throat and licked at the pulse beating at the base of her neck.

Aurora shivered but then jerked her shoulder to push him away. "I doubt it."

He nipped her shoulder and made her gasp. "I accept that challenge." He sat up and rolled her over his thighs.

"What? No! That wasn't a challenge." The mattress muffled her last words as he adjusted her to lie face down on the bed with her sheet-clad ass bent over his lap. Redoubling her effort to break free, she succeeded in kicking her legs out of the covers, but by that time he'd tightened the material around her upper torso which kept her hands and arms out of play. After that, it was an easy thing to hold her in place with one hand splayed over her lower back while he pulled up the extra blanket and wound it around her lower legs.

"God damn you, Connyn!" She twisted her head around to see him, but her hair had fallen in a thick curtain over her face. Shaking her head furiously only served to shift more layers over her eyes.

Connyn didn't bother to brush it away this time. Instead, he shoved the rucked-up sheet at her thighs to her waist, exposing her ass.

"What the hell do you think you're doing? I swear if you so much as —"

Aurora's rant cut off with a gasp when Connyn thrust two fingers deep and fast into her cunt. She wasn't as wet as he'd like, but she was hot and slick enough to accept his fingers. After her initial tensing, her body immediately softened and then gripped him.

"If I so much as what?" he asked, sliding his fingers out and then back in deeper. Pulled out, thrust in again. "Do this?" He twisted his wrist, found the soft, little spongy spot at the front of her vagina and pressed.

"God!" Though Aurora hissed in anger, her liquid heat quickly coated his fingers.

Scissoring his fingers inside her cunt, he tapped and rubbed the little spot that drove her wild until her pussy was swollen and dripping and she was moaning her curses at him instead of hissing them through clenched teeth.

He withdrew his fingers and inserted his thumb. "Or this?" he asked, parting her folds with fingers slick with her cream as he caressed her clit, rubbing tight circles around it. Spreading her pussy lips wide, he exposed the dark pink nub of her clit and blew a cool stream of air over it. Her body jolted and her cunt contracted around his thumb.

She arched her back and her ass rose higher into the air, an invitation he wasn't about to deny. While he continued to tease her clit with his fingers, he slid his other thumb into her pussy and worked it in tandem with the other, in and out until she was hot, soaking wet and writhing. He wanted her mindless to everything but cresting the carnal cliff of ecstasy he'd driven her up so quickly. That she was an incredibly responsive woman was just one of the many things he appreciated about his mate.

She started rocking with the rhythm of his thumbs pressing in and out of her pussy. Heat built under her skin until she was fever hot, murmuring his name and gasping for air. He pulled one thumb out of her cunt and pushed it into her anus, twisting it in deep. At the same time he pressed and rubbed her inner walls with his other thumb while squeezing her clit between two fingers.

Her body bucked wildly though her scream was muffled by the blanket. He continued to twist, rub and squeeze until she collapsed into a shuddering boneless heap across his legs while a series of orgasmic aftershocks echoed through her muscles. Slowly he unwound the sheet from her body and pulled her upright to cradle her against his chest. Without protest she sank against him, with her eyes closed and her long lashes lying in two thick fringed half-moons against her fair skin.

Brushing the damp strands of hair from her flushed cheek, he skimmed his fingers over her shoulder. "You never finished your threat. If I so much as what?"

Her eyelashes didn't so much as flutter. "Shut up and let me breathe."

Connyn held his woman in his arms, in his gaze, in his heart. Held her closer as he smiled and rested his cheek on the top her head, inhaling the sweet scent of his sated mate.

* * * * *

Ellen was standing on the front porch when they arrived. Connyn had assured Aurora that Amdyn would most likely have her there in time for the transfer, but until she saw the sharp winter sunlight of the Colorado morning glancing off Ellen's short golden spiky curls, belief had held her at arms' length. From the moment Ellen, Amy and she had decided to put their plan into action a knot of tension had been steadily tightening in her stomach. Seeing with her own eyes that Ellen had arrived unharmed began to finally unravel that knot. A tiny bit.

Aurora had nearly come unglued in the hotel when Connyn had mentioned that the portal was opening at noon. After showering and packing in record time, she had not been able to get Connyn to speed up his timetable by more than an hour. On the way here Connyn had explained how the schedules for the intra-world portals had become a well-guarded secret, kept even from the auxiliary members of the retrieval team. A precaution put in place after the recent Predator attacks on Bethany and Brooke. Only the five heirs to the thrones knew the exact time and location of the portals to be used and Connyn was unwilling to tip their hand with their arrival any sooner than necessary.

As the car pulled in front of what appeared to be a renovated farmhouse, Ellen was joined on the porch by Amdyn. When Ellen moved toward the stairs, Amdyn put a hand on her arm to stop her. She hadn't known Ellen well or for very long, but her immediate concession to his unspoken command surprised Aurora and contradicted all the sides of Ellen she's seen so far.

Aurora glanced at Connyn and then back to Amdyn. In size and build, they looked to be a close match, but in all other ways they'd never be confused. Connyn's darker coloring and changeable gray eyes looked more like a Midwestern thunderstorm about to break while Amdyn's fair-haired good looks might have reminded her of a sun-bleached surfer boy, but there was nothing less than "manly" about any of the Ilyrian males she'd met so far.

She'd just shaken the idea that they didn't have much in common after all when Ellen said something that drew a look from Amdyn that she'd regularly seen on Connyn's face in the last couple of days. The I'm-right-woman-don't-mess-with-me look that poked her patience like a pin to an overinflated balloon. Immediately a cold detachment settled over Ellen's features. Even without knowing the words that had passed between them, Aurora knew just how Ellen felt.

The automatic locks popping up with a loud click in the silent car jerked her attention away from the interchange on the porch.

"I'll get the bags," Connyn said. "You go straight inside."

Aurora gave him a mock salute. "Yes, sir!" Ignoring his glare, she pushed the door open and took a moment to stretch stiff muscles in the fresh mountain air. The very *cold* mountain air she discovered a second later as a frigid rush of winter wind spun errant snowflakes through her hair and pressed them to her exposed skin in tiny, biting pricks.

After turning back to the car just long enough to grab her purse, she bolted up the steps. Ellen's hug was hard, fierce and quick. Though nearly as tall as Aurora, Ellen's curves were much more elegant and understated in her slender form. Her beauty was the exotic hothouse flower kind, providing the hothouse flower had a core of steel.

"Been here long?" Aurora asked.

Ellen shook her head. "Just since this morning."

"Have you heard —"

"Come on. It's freezing out here," Ellen interrupted. She grabbed Aurora's arm and pressed her toward the front door, past a large, sexy, scowling alien that looked none too pleased with his mate. But Ellen passed Amdyn without so much as a glance in his direction, giving the covered porch a much colder atmosphere than out in the unprotected yard.

Chapter Seven

Aurora found herself being ushered through an entryway, past a living room, down a hall and into the kitchen. Though she preferred the clean lines of modern design, the warmth of the kitchen was calming and welcoming. The deep red and dark wood of the cabinets and large, informal table that dominated the space seemed more fitting for a spread in a decorating magazine defining the best elements of country style rather than the cafeteria for an alien outpost.

A petite woman wearing an old fashioned flour-sack apron and pulling a cake from the oven only added to the weirdness of the situation for Aurora, though the smell of cinnamon and apples made her mouth water. When the woman glanced up and saw them entering, a beaming smile lit up her face.

"Aurora," Ellen said, "I'd like you to meet Kirry, Amdyn's chief household administrator. Kirry, this is my sister, Aurora."

With a quick toss of her head that sent her dark curls bobbing Kirry said, "Such impressive titles in this world for someone who keeps food on the table." After setting the cake on the counter, she closed the oven and pulled the oven mitt off her hand. "Welcome," she said as she wrapped Aurora in a firm, grandmotherly embrace.

Taking a step back, Kirry held on to Aurora's hands and tilted her head to one side and regarded Aurora with a deep, penetrating gaze, giving Aurora the distinct feeling of being peeled and inspected layer by layer. But Kirry's smile remained warm as she released her hands and said, "Connyn has been waiting for you for a long time. I'm sure his parents are beside themselves with joy."

"His parents?" Aurora glanced at Ellen nervously for an explanation.

"Shyrana, one of Amdyn and Connyn's cousins here with the retrieval team, is an intra-world telepath." Ellen's eyebrows rose slightly. "Apparently, we are big news in Ilyria."

"The discovery of another unmated Mystic is not big news," Kirry said. "It's the *best* news." She turned to attend to a teapot that had begun its shrill whistle from the stove. "And it comes at a very needed time for our people. Many were losing hope that Magdalayne's daughters could be found. Worse, they were starting to lose faith in the prophecy."

Ellen's voice was tight with scorn when she asked, "And would that be so bad? For people to live in the real world instead of spending their days hoping for some promised land based on myths and fairytales?"

Setting the steaming kettle aside, Kirry switched the flame off before she turned back to Ellen, her voice soft in spite of Ellen's sarcasm. "In my experience, it's hope and

faith that keep love strong." Her voice softened. "And love makes the real world, and its pain and disappointment, worth it."

Ellen's expression remained cool and outwardly composed, but Aurora guessed there was more going on under her comments from the emotion that flickered hot and deep in her dark jade eyes.

Kirry laid her hand on Ellen's arm. Ellen jerked at the touch but she didn't move away. "You hurt only as deeply as your love has already gone. And love returns the favor to hope and faith. It gives us hope for a better world for those we love and the faith that what we do for them won't be in vain."

Aurora stared at first one and then the other, feeling like she had just stepped in the middle of a long, ongoing debate. The kitchen was silent for a drawn out moment as Ellen glared at the older woman. Kirry smiled in patient tolerance, unoffended and waiting. The hard shell of Ellen's demeanor cracked slightly.

"How can you be sure?" Ellen's strained whisper could barely be heard above the ticking of the cooling teakettle.

Kirry's bittersweet smile was gently bestowed on Ellen. "The only thing I'm sure of is that I don't want to live in *any* world without love. Real or not." She patted Ellen's arm. "Follow your heart, child, to its own place. That's all any of us can do."

With a final pat, she turned back to the stove. "But for now, you two sit and rest for a moment while I fix your tea. Neither of you look like you've had a decent night's sleep in a week or more."

Feeling like an extra on the set of *The Twilight Zone*, Aurora followed Ellen to the table and took a seat across from her. Kirry pulled two stoneware mugs from the upper cabinet next to the kitchen sink. Looking over her shoulder at Aurora, she asked, "Unless you'd prefer coffee or hot chocolate?"

Aurora shook her head, feeling the strong under currents of Ellen's emotions still swirling in the room. "No. Tea is fine. Thank you."

Nothing more was said during the few minutes it took Kirry to finish the tea preparation. Throughout the soft-sounding process going on behind her, Ellen sat stiffly in the old oak chair, staring at the wall over Aurora's left shoulder. Her gaze didn't waver as Kirry placed the full cups on the table in front of them.

"Is there anything else I can get for you?" Though the question was directed at both, Kirry looked at Aurora.

"No, this is perfect," Aurora answered, curling her fingers around the heavy cup.

Kirry turned her attention to Ellen, putting a kind hand on her shoulder. "Even as a small child, you had a very willful way of following your own heart. Don't stop now."

Aurora was surprised to see Ellen, still rigid in the chair, blink back a rush of sudden tears.

"And if I'm unsure as to which direction my heart is leading?"

Kirry squeezed her shoulder and straightened. "You will know, child. When it comes to it, you'll know. You always have."

She untied her apron and pulled it off. Hanging it on a hook beside the pantry she said, "If you'll excuse me, I'll leave you two alone to chat while I find someone to run me to town for supplies. These boys eat like they haven't been fed in a week and might not get another meal in a month."

Aurora smiled at Kirry referring to the Kilth heirs as boys, but figured if anyone could pull it off without repercussions, Kirry would be the one.

After the older woman had bustled out of the kitchen Aurora asked, "She's their housekeeper?"

Ellen frowned and refocused on Aurora. "What? Oh. Yes and no. She's much more than that." A slight flush rose in her cheeks. "As you can probably tell."

Taking a deep breath, Ellen picked up her cup and took a tentative sip. Mentally, she seemed to set aside whatever she had been struggling with as she turned to glance out the kitchen windows. Turning back to Aurora, she set down her cup and leaned in over the table. "I can't say much. I've been keeping Amdyn out of my mind for the most part. It's not easy, so I avoid thinking about you and Amy to avoid any slip-ups. But so you know, things are fine and going as intended. Amdyn's and Connyn's actions have been as expected. I have not met Siriyn."

"Siriyn?"

"The other heir to the five thrones. He's the eldest son of the Fifth House. I haven't met him yet. Amdyn said he's on his way back from Israel but I doubt he'll arrive before the portal opens."

"What was he doing in Israel?"

A hint of a smile teased Ellen's lips for a moment before disappearing. "When I realized there were no good guys coming to our rescue all those years ago, I also came to the frightening conclusion that *someone* knew where we had landed. That much was obvious from the Predator attack in the cave. Anyway, as I got older I worked hard at making it extremely difficult for anyone to track us down in any way I could. My computer degree was for that very reason. To learn how to seed false leads, incorporate inaccurate information into databases. To throw up smoke screens where we were concerned."

"You're an antique-shop-owning hacker?"

"Something like that."

"Does Amy know this?"

Ellen shook her head. "That's not something a person brags about unless they are really curious about what life is like in a federal penitentiary. Besides, we were all safer not knowing each other still existed."

"But you knew."

Looking down at her cup, Ellen circled the edge with her finger. "I had to know. Had to make sure everyone was kept safe."

"So what happened?"

"Wyc found Bethany." She let out a deep sigh and looked up from her cup. "Call it fate, serendipity, luck or a miracle. Whatever. It worked for Brooke and Bethany. For the rest of us...I don't know." There was something almost tortured twisting in the depths of Ellen's green eyes. "Are you sure you still want to do this?"

Aurora nodded. They'd been through this before. Long days and nights talking about the implications and options. "Yes. I'm sure." She picked up her cup and rested her elbows on the table, taking a sip of her tea as she did so. As she cradled her mug, she hoped she'd be as sure once she'd jumped through a portal into a different dimension and new world. She found no reassurance in the clear brown liquid filling her cup.

Looking back up when Ellen's cup clicked on the tabletop, Aurora found Ellen's bright green eyes studying the ring on her middle finger.

"How are you and Connyn getting along?" she asked.

A wry smile twisted the right side of Aurora's mouth. "Getting along might be a bit optimistic." She shrugged. "But he's accepted me as his mate so I guess—"

"What?" Ellen's face paled and her knuckles whitened with her grip on her cup's handle. "What exactly do you mean?"

Aurora licked her lips. "One time when we were...umm...you know. These men are sexual fantasies incarnate."

Ellen nodded, a grim smile on her face. "Yes, I know."

"Well, during that, he put this ring on me," she lifted her hand and wiggled her fingers, "and gave a short speech about us being mates."

"I had no idea he'd move so fast with the Mating Rite. Wyc and Rordyc took much longer." Ellen clicked her short fingernails on the side of her cup. "Did he claim you? Did you accept him as your mate?"

"For now."

"For now?" Ellen blinked. "Really? And he was okay with that?"

"Not exactly. But I wasn't sure what else to do. Just going with the flow until we all get to Ilyria, right?"

A long moment passed. Ellen seemed to withdraw into herself while she finished her tea in silence. She stood and placed the empty cup in the sink. Crossing her arms under her breasts she leaned back against the counter and nodded. "Yes. That is exactly what we need to do."

Amdyn stepped into the kitchen with Connyn close behind. "What exactly do we need to do?" he asked.

Ellen tilted her head to the side and, without missing a beat, replied, "Whatever it takes to all arrive in Ilyria safely."

Though Amdyn looked at his mate with a slight suspicion that creased the corners of his eyes, he didn't question her further. Instead he turned to Connyn. "If you —"

The front door banged open and both men moved between the women and the front of the house.

"It's Shyrana," Connyn said.

Aurora turned to look at him, then back toward the front of the house. There were at least three walls between where he stood and the front door. "How —"

"What's going on here?" A beautiful, petite woman with long black hair and flashing blue eyes burst into the kitchen like a whirling dervish. Even though she was nearly shouting, the sound of her voice reminded Aurora of lacy curtains blowing on a summer breeze.

"Well?" the woman demanded.

Make that a *stiff* summer breeze.

Amdyn stepped sideways and indicated Aurora. "Shy, meet Aurora, Connyn's mate. Aurora, this is Wyc's sister. She keeps us connected to our homeworld through her telepathic gift."

Briefly, Shy turned to Aurora. "Hello." A quick lift of her lips softened the abruptness of her greeting but disappeared again as her attention returned to Amdyn. She scowled up at him. "So?"

Amdyn's brows rose slightly. "So what?"

"Why wasn't I told Ellyna and Esraina had arrived? Kirry said Ellyna's been here for hours, yet no one felt it important to notify me? Are you hiding her from everyone, the Elders and Prophets, or just me?"

Standing behind Connyn, Aurora could feel the irritation radiate from him as he settled his shoulders back and crossed his arms over his chest. Amdyn affected a similar stance, but she doubted Connyn's expression was as accommodating as his cousin's.

"You know we are only sharing necessary information since the last attacks on Bethany and Brooke," Amdyn explained.

The fists Shy had balled up on her hips dropped. She jolted back as her blue eyes rounded widely. "You don't trust me?"

"It's not a matter of trust."

"How am I to keep the Elders informed if you don't let me know what's going on?"

"The Elders will know we've returned when we show up at Council," said Amdyn.

"Council?" Aurora asked in surprise.

Connyn turned to Aurora. "We'll talk later."

Before Aurora could respond, Connyn turned back to Shy, who was ignoring everyone but Amdyn. Her hands were back on her hips and she hissed, "It is my *job* to keep the Elders informed."

Tension in the kitchen rose as Amdyn took a threatening step toward Shy. Aurora decided that if she were Shy, she'd probably be intimidated as hell at the solid mass of muscle advancing on her.

"And these are our mates." Amdyn's accommodating nature apparently had a limit judging by the harsh edges of his words. But if Shy was unsettled by Amdyn at all, the only outward sign she gave was a glare that heated her eyes to blue fire as he continued. "The Elders' opinion over whether you're doing your job well or not means nothing to me where Ellyna is concerned."

Aurora glanced at Ellen. She was standing stone still, her expression cold and closed.

A man who looked extraordinarily like Amdyn sauntered into the kitchen. Except for the cleft in his chin and the slight but definite difference in age he could have been the oldest cousin's twin. His blond hair was cut short and his clear, ice blue eyes held a calculating arrogance that contrasted the casual manner in which he surveyed the situation. "So...Shy," he said, leaning against the counter, "having a problem with the Perfect One?"

Shy glanced at him, narrowed her eyes in warning before returning her gaze to Amdyn. "Shut up, Kayn. This isn't any of your—" Suddenly Shyrana's eyes widened and her mouth dropped open as she sucked in her breath. She spun on Kayn, her hair whipping around her shoulders. "You!"

Kayn's eyebrows rose as he crossed his arms and leaned back against the counter. "Me?"

"You knew Ellyna had arrived with Amdyn this morning. That's why you—" She stopped abruptly as color rose in her cheeks. Then, slowly, she straightened, tucked her hair behind her ears and turned her back on Kayn. "What are your plans from here? Do you wish me to ask the Elders for an emergency portal or reinforcements?" She directed all her questions to Amdyn.

"No, that's not necessary. Everything has been taken care of."

"But—"

"This conversation is over." The authority in Amdyn's voice was heavy with dismissal.

The sudden imperious demeanor he effortlessly cloaked himself in brutally and ruthlessly disallowed any argument. There was no remnant left of the laid-back, sun-worshipping beach boy Aurora had been reminded of earlier in the day. Covertly, she stole a quick glance at Ellen but she appeared unsurprised by Amdyn's abrupt transformation.

Emotion cleared from Shyrana's expression as she nodded at Aurora and Ellen. "Nice to meet you. If you'll excuse me, I have a job to do. The Council needs to know of the final two sisters' safe arrival."

When she started to walk out of the kitchen, Kayn grabbed her arm to stop her as she passed him. "Amdyn said that it's not necessary to contact the Elders."

Shy looked down at his hand and then glared up at him. "Don't. Touch. Me. Again."

Kayn didn't move immediately. Instead, he stared down into Shyrana's face and something passed between them, a current so strong Aurora could feel the ripples of electricity from where she stood.

"Shy." Kayn's voice rumbled in a low warning but Shy jerked her arm out of his hold.

"Ever," she hissed, "again." She didn't look back as she left.

The kitchen was quiet as Kayn glared at Shyrana's retreating form and everyone else stared at Kayn.

"Anything you want to tell me?" Amdyn asked Kayn.

Pushing himself away from the counter, Kayn returned Amdyn's look. "No." The icy condescension he carried in his eyes echoed the sharp disdain of his answer. He stepped around Amdyn and toward Aurora, his eyes still hard though his tone softened. "We haven't met. I'm Kayn Kilth. Second Heir to the First House." He reached toward her but Connyn grabbed him by the wrist.

Connyn's sinister growl surprised Aurora. "She's mated," he said.

Fury, instant and intense, branded Kayn's gorgeous face as he shook off Connyn's grip. "I was welcoming her into the fold, *cousin*, not trying to fuck her on the kitchen table." He turned his attention back to Aurora. "Welcome to the Royal family." His smile was grim and faintly threatening. "You have my condolences." He nodded to include Ellen. "Both of you."

Turning, he stalked out of the kitchen, leaving Aurora and Ellen alone with Amdyn and Connyn once more.

"What the hell was that?" Aurora glared up at the man who had claimed her.

Connyn frowned at her. "What are you talking about?"

"The way you overreacted when he offered to shake my hand. Is that kind of reaction normal for you? Because if it is, we're going to have a serious talk about acceptable social interaction."

With a short laugh, Amdyn shook his head. "Acceptable social interaction has never been high on Connyn's priority list. But to be fair, my brother is a special case. He's a bigger pain in the ass than our younger cousin Rordyc."

Connyn snorted and exchanged a look with Amdyn.

"Normally," Amdyn amended. "But your lecture will have to wait. We have a portal to catch."

* * * * *

Connyn led the way across the frozen floor of the Colorado forest that surrounded the farmhouse. They'd been walking for nearly thirty minutes and wherever Aurora's

body was covered with coat, hat, gloves or boots, she was warm enough to start sweating. Her nose and cheeks, however, felt like they were about to break off in the cold and the occasional gust that whipped snow into her eyes made it difficult to take anything more than quick, stinging breaths too shallow to easily keep up with Connyn's pace.

Not that Connyn had a pace she could keep up with on her best days. She was *definitely* not the outdoorsy type. "Damn portal," she muttered. "What's wrong with crossing over in Laguna Beach or Tucson?"

Connyn glanced over his shoulder. "What?"

"Nothing. Just mumbling." She took a couple hurried steps to keep from falling too far back and having Amdyn growl at her again from behind. "So what's the deal with these portals?" she asked. "Are you the only one who knows when they open?"

"No. Once a home base is established, each heir is given the coordinates and time table for a rotating portal."

"So why was Shy upset if you all know the time and place?"

Connyn had stopped and was looking at her. She came to a grateful stop next to him and covered her nose with her gloved hand, trying to make sure it was still there. It was so numb from the cold she could barely feel the pressure of her palm.

"What's wrong with your nose?" Connyn asked as Ellen and Amdyn came up from behind them.

"It's frozen. And," she said testing her bottom lip with her teeth, "my lips are going numb."

For a second Connyn's eyes heated as he stared at her mouth, but then he turned and pointed at a small clearing to their left beside a creek that was iced over. "There's where the portal will open."

Amdyn nodded and took Ellen's hand to guide her over several large boulders separating them from the clearing.

"You didn't answer my question," Aurora said when Connyn reached for her hand to give her an assist up as well.

"The times and coordinates are coded. Each heir has his own. Although anyone can use the portals as long as they arrive in the right place at the right time and are willing to go through, we don't share the information. A precaution suggested by Wyc's captain after several attacks on Bethany. This portal will open in my family's section of the main palace in Vystral, the central city of our world. If we were using Amdyn's coordinates and time, the portal would open in his family's sector."

"But how do —"

"Later. We need to be ready for the portal when it opens. They don't last long." He put his hands around her waist, picked her up and set her up on the boulder. "Follow Amdyn."

Her boots crunched over the ice-crusting snow as she stepped carefully around and over rocks. Ellen was quiet and stood with her arms crossed, staring out over the frozen creek. Aurora rubbed her nose again trying to bring back some feeling to its tip. It didn't work.

"So what does a portal look like?" she asked scanning the area.

Connyn pointed toward Ellen. "Like that."

A small, shimmering circle appeared in the air to Ellen's left, just on the edge of the brook. It grew and wavered like the mirage on an overheated southern highway in the middle of summer. She could still see the other side of the creek through it, but it was as if she were looking through a pane of old-fashioned rippled plate glass that distorted the images.

"Oh." *Holy shit!* It was really happening. She couldn't stop staring at the shimmering circle of air. She couldn't breathe. Couldn't pick up her foot to step closer. The whole of her reality suddenly telescoped into that one spot of wavy light. World jumping. *Holy fucking shit!*

"Aurora?" Connyn put his hand on her back. His touch was firm and steady and didn't help her nerves one little bit. "Just step through. I'll be right behind you."

She really wanted to make a smartass remark, but her heart was beating so loudly the drumming drowned out all coherent thoughts. Twisting to look over her shoulder, she found Ellen watching her.

Nodding, Ellen said, "Go ahead. It will be all right." Her lips lifted in a brief, poignantly wry smile. "Have hope."

Aurora stepped around Amdyn to give her a quick, hard hug. "Have faith," she whispered back.

Ellen nodded. "See you on the other side."

Turning back to Connyn, Aurora took a deep breath. "Okay, so what do I do?"

"Just step into it. You'll be stepping onto the floor on the other side but won't be able to see in that dimension until you're completely through."

Moving toward the bank of the creek, she took the hand Connyn extended to help her balance. It looked as if she were getting ready to step onto the ice. But when she stuck her foot into the shimmering air, it disappeared from view though she could still see the other side of the brook, its wavering image where her foot should be. "That's just damn freaky," she muttered under her breath.

Shutting her eyes and half praying she wasn't stepping into the last and biggest mistake of her life, she threw herself forward. The scream that she had managed to keep quiet was pulled from her throat, flash-frozen into brittle shards and flung into the void sucking her body forward. In the moment it took to step from one world to another, she felt like she'd been melted down to thought and sieved through the fine mesh of time before being sewn together again by lightning.

The moment both feet landed on the other side of the portal, a surge of electricity streaked a path from the core of her being to the edge of her skin. The sparking sensation was not unfamiliar, but up until this moment, had only happened when she was extremely angry or when she was choosing to use her gift. And never had it felt so powerful. It vibrated through her in a steady pulse and looking down at her hands, she half expected them to be glowing.

Suddenly her stomach lurched and she felt sick. Like she had just stepped out of an amusement park ride that did nothing but spin so fast you were plastered to the side. She'd ridden one like it only once and had been so violently ill afterward she'd never attempted anything like it again.

Forcing herself to breathe slowly, in through her nose and out through her mouth, she tried to take her mind off her stomach and did her best not to vomit by glancing around at the place she had landed in. It was a small, triangular room with its floor, ceiling and all three walls carved out of the same black rock, cleanly cut and polished to a near mirror shine. A soft light spilled from bowls set up on three pedestals positioned one per corner and a steep stairway led up and around the wall opposite from the portal.

Nervously, she flexed her fingers and then pointed to the closest bowl. "Brighter," she commanded. Covering her eyes with a startled shriek as a blinding white light exploded from the bowl, she came close to stumbling back into the portal. With a quick wave toward the light, she hissed, "Return." The bowl immediately left off its supernova blast and once again the room was bathed in a soft glow.

"Oh my god," Aurora whispered as she tried blinking the huge floating spot from her vision. "What the hell have I done?"

She turned to look back from where she had come. On this side of the portal, she could see Connyn moving through the dimensional doorway with the watery images of Amdyn and Ellen behind him. The dimension jump didn't seem to unsettle Connyn at all as he stepped into the room.

He immediately looked around and frowned when his eyes settled on her. With the tips of his fingers, he tilted her chin up and scanned her face. "You've gone deathly pale. Are you going to be sick?"

Still blinking and with her stomach pitching, she shook her head. "Just my first time world-hopping, that's all."

"It's just new to you. You'll get used to it." Gently, he took her arm and guided her a couple steps away from the portal. They both turned to watch the undulating forms of Amdyn and Ellen, waiting for them to step through. Neither did. They were arguing, or rather, Amdyn seemed to be arguing. Ellen was simply staring up at him with her arms crossed over her chest. Then she turned away from the portal and walked out of sight.

"What is she doing?" Connyn asked, absently unzipping his coat.

"I don't know."

Amdyn turned and stared into the portal. It was beginning to flicker, sputtering and then fading around the edges. Though Aurora was fairly certain Amdyn couldn't see them, he seemed to be looking straight at Connyn.

"Amdyn said that Ellyna is refusing to go through the portal but won't tell him why," he said. "She's blocking his mind and he wants to know what she said to you."

"Nothing. Just to have hope and that she'd meet me here."

"That's it? Are you sure?" The portal was definitely shrinking now.

She gazed at the dimming image of Amdyn. With a ray of winter sun lighting up his white-blond hair, the haze of blinding snow behind him and his blue eyes glowing bright with anger, he looked like one really pissed off archangel. Aurora didn't envy Ellen the fight she was facing. "I'm positive."

The portal opening began to flicker erratically for a couple of seconds and then completely disappeared. Aurora waved her hand where it had been, but there was nothing there. She had done it. She had stepped into another world. Another life.

A sharp pang of excitement and loss seized her, making her shiver and feel light-headed. Suddenly she was enveloped by two strong arms, pulled close against a warm, muscled chest. Sliding her arms under his jacket, she held on tightly for a moment, keeping her eyes firmly closed and pressing her cheek into the softness of the cotton knit jersey he wore. The absolute reality of the solid mass of his body next to hers calmed the jitters that had started a mind-blasting campaign for control.

Connyn's hands moved up and down her back, soothing and reassuring. "Everything will be all right," he said. "I'm sure your sister will make the next portal."

His words, another proof that she wasn't dreaming, had her looking up. In the dim light of the room, his eyes swept over her face. There was something in the way he held her, in the way he gazed at her. Tender, but possessive. Watchful, but triumphant.

"Welcome home," he whispered. His kiss echoed what she had seen in his eyes. The tender taking of her mouth didn't mask the entitlement he presumed over her body. Every sweep of his hand over her back and ass, each stroke of his tongue in her mouth furthered his claim on her. Even the way he tilted her head, twisting her hair in his fist to hold her in at an angle that gave her maximum pleasure and him unimpeded and unchallenged access, declared the innate assumption of his rule.

When he released her, she was panting and more than a little breathless. He smiled arrogantly down at her. "Come," he said, pulling her by the hand toward the set of stone steps. "My mother is probably racing down from her rooms to meet us at this very moment."

Aurora stopped and yanked her hand out of his. "Your mother?" She smoothed down her hair and tried to ignore the rising clamor of the jitters set free again. "I thought no one knew we were coming."

"My mother always knows when I reenter Ilyria. Intuition, she claims."

Touching her lips, Aurora could tell they were swollen and tender from the kiss. She'd bet a week's salary they were bright red too. It would be obvious to anyone seeing her right now that she had just nearly been kissed senseless. "You did that on purpose."

Connyn's grin turned wolfish. "I did. And I'd have done a lot more if I didn't know we'd be interrupted by my parents."

"I find your need to mark me and make your claim on me evident before others barbaric."

He laughed and pulled her to him, pinning her arms to her sides as he held her and nuzzled the side of her neck. "Get used to it," he said. Then his teeth clamped down over the curve of her neck and he sucked her skin into his mouth hard.

This time when he released her, she pushed past him and darted up the stairs. "You are such a jackass," she hissed over her shoulder. She hadn't gone up four steps before he overtook her, stopped her and moved in front of her.

"This is one of the five guarded portals in the palace. If you go through before me, you might be hurt by an overzealous soldier posted outside."

He led her to the top of the stairs and stopped on a shallow landing, another bowl spilling its light out onto a door that looked to be made of the same stone as the walls. There was no handle on this side of the door, just a square red stone the size of a matchbook set in the middle. Connyn placed his hand over this stone and the door slid silently back into the wall.

"Impressive," Aurora whispered as they stepped out of the darkened stairway and into a long hallway with a soaring ceiling and twin balconies on either side running the length of it. Further comment froze in her throat as her eyes adjusted to the light and she saw what filled the balconies and hall before them. Lined up rank on rank were soldiers unified by four specific things. They all had black armbands around their right biceps with a red stone sewn into it, each wore their hair long and tied back in the same manner as Connyn, every soldier was *huge* with a violence of expression scary enough to terrify and most importantly, each and every one was brandishing their weapons directly at *them*.

Chapter Eight

The full readiness to do violence revealed in their eyes cleared in the one moment it took for them to recognize Connyn. A command, loud and low, brought the entire company to one knee. Though all of the soldiers, men and women, had their eyes fixed on Connyn, he only looked at one in the front. Aurora had become used to his typical arrogance, but she could no longer believe the man standing before her was just simply full of himself. The regal weight of authority that settled on his shoulders was a sure and perfect fit and the attitude of the company before him proved him to be worthy of its burden.

Connyn stepped sideways, drew her forward with his arm around her waist until she was even with him and said, "My mate, Aurora Kilth." At once, every head bowed in deference. Turning toward her, he said, "Every one of my soldiers will defend and protect you with their life down to their last breath, hope and strength. As they would do for me. As I will do for you."

At the end of the hall, a door crashed open. Instantly all were on their feet and Aurora found herself backed against the wall with Connyn directly in front of her and a barricade of hard muscle and brutal purpose beyond him.

Almost as quickly as the barrier of soldiers had been formed, it began to melt away from the center, leaving an open pathway between Connyn and a couple rushing down the length of the passage. Connyn brought Aurora back to his side. Though his hand rested lightly on her hip, she could feel the rigidity of his stance, sense the pride bound by nervous expectancy in the set of his expression.

As the final soldiers standing between them shifted to the sides of the hall, she got her first look at the man and woman approaching. Without any doubt, she knew them to be his parents. Both were tall and Connyn looked to be a near perfect, though younger, version of the man. Except, Aurora noticed, for the eyes. His father's eyes were such a dark brown they looked almost black. Connyn's eyes were a match to his mother's.

The joy on the woman's face was undeniable as she flung her arms around Connyn's neck and hugged him. The words she whispered against his neck sounded like a prayer and Connyn wrapped his free arm around her for a moment to return her embrace. When she stepped back to look in his face, there were tears standing in her eyes and Connyn's expression gentled. "I'm well," he whispered. The woman smiled and her husband moved to her side.

"Welcome home, son," he said.

Connyn nodded in acknowledgement. "It is good to be here. Mother, Father, I'd like to introduce my mate, Aurora." He turned to Aurora. "My father and mother, Cynn and Kaia Kilth, reigning sovereigns of the Third Royal House of Kilth."

"It is a great pleasure to meet you," she said.

"The pleasure is ours," Cynn replied. He gestured toward the outer door. "Shall we?" When his wife nodded, he took her arm and escorted her out.

Before following, Connyn stopped in front of the soldier he'd maintained eye contact with previously. "I will call for your report soon."

"At your request," the soldier replied.

Once they exited the hall, Aurora found herself in a large atrium with a domed roof several stories high that showered a rose-colored light down on them through its many faceted windows. Connyn saw her looking up and said, "The dawn is just breaking here. Time-wise, Ilyria is about seven hours behind Colorado."

"You must want some time to adjust and change," Kaia said. "We will meet you for lunch in our quarters if that suits." The comment was made to Aurora with barely a glance to her son.

"That's fine with me," she said and turned to Connyn. "Unless you have any objections?"

Connyn shook his head. "No. We will be there." With a hand on her back, he guided her toward a set of spiraling stairs on the left. By the time they neared the landing, Aurora was ready to get out of the winter clothes she'd dressed in for the hike through the woods to the portal. Connyn had already shed his jacket and left it hanging over the railing at the bottom of the stairs. However at this point, Aurora didn't feel comfortable enough to sling her clothes haphazardly around the palace and settled on simply unzipping her coat.

"There are other entrances to our private quarters, but the stairway through the center atrium is the main one. Other stairs lead to my parents' quarters, a formal reception and dining area and the raised gardens."

He stepped out on a large landing whose floor was a mosaic of the same glossy black stone as the portal room, white marble and the diamond-cut red gems. An archway flanked by two guards opened up off the landing and led into a courtyard-like room with its roof open to the sky and a door identical to the one in the portal room. There were two guards stationed at this door as well. Other than the floor and the red stone on the door, there was no separate adornment. Nothing to remove attention from the design centered on the floor of the room.

Unlike the other room, these walls and floor gleamed a pristine white so bright that when the sun was directly overhead, it must be blinding to anyone crossing through. Centered in the white polished stone floor was a large circle of the red stones. Within the circle was a black, abstract-looking lion rearing up on its hind legs, the claws on its front legs extended and ready to strike. The image was both frightening and awesome.

The lion wore a collar around its neck with five diamond-cut places set in relief and the third one filled by another of the bright red gems.

"That is the royal symbol of the Kilth. The *Kyltar*. Each house is represented by a different colored gem unique to its specific territory. The red *rythra* stone is found only in the mountains of the Third House."

He stepped forward and placed his hand over the stone centered in the door. As the heavy door slid sideways, Aurora watched the guards for any change of expression. They stood immobile, the slight rise and fall of their chests the only indication that they weren't made of stone as well.

Connyn gestured her through the entranceway and immediately all but the place she found herself in was forgotten. The room was circular with doors leading off the back half in several directions. This roof was domed as well with faceted skylights allowing in the soft morning light which seemed to make the walls and floor glow. They in turn were made of a muted golden stone that was roughly hewn with thin veins of red running through it, sparkling in tones of light rose to deep crimson.

Under the apex of the dome was a tall fountain carved from a single piece of *rythra* that sent splashing water into a circular pool whose tributaries wound through the entire space. Lush flowering plants and trees perfumed the air and lavishly adorned the garden. There were benches set randomly throughout along the pathways and shallow stone bridges that crossed the fountain's stream and ended in front of the archways leading from this entry. All were open entries except for one, which was blocked by an identical door to the one they'd just come through.

"Oh my god, Connyn. It's beautiful."

"It's your home now," he said. "One of them."

Emotion rushed through her. Happiness, disbelief, a streak of fear. "One of them?"

"Of course we have other places in our ruling territory, but for now, this is the safest place for you to be. And there are things that must be completed here in Vystral before we can leave."

She turned to look up at him. "Besides lunch with your parents, what kind of things?"

Pushing his hands between her sweater and coat at her shoulders, he slid the heavy jacket down her arms and let it drop to the ground. "Some House duties need to be seen to." He started to pull her sweater up, but she yanked it back down.

"There are guards on the other side of this door," she hissed.

Backing her against the door, he whipped off her sweater and bra in a matter of seconds regardless of her struggle to keep them on. "The stone is soundproof. They aren't going to hear anything." He bent down and untied her laces. When she tried to shove him away, he leaned into her and pinned her against the door while he removed her boots.

"You're crazy if you think —"

He popped open the snap to her pants, unzipped them and pushed them and her panties down over her hips.

"Stop that! We're supposed to be getting ready to meet your parents. I'm not about to let you – *ooof!*" Aurora lost her words as her breath rushed out when he picked her up by bending her over one of his shoulders to let her legs hang down. At first she thought he was getting ready to carry her into the bedroom, but after he pulled her jeans and panties off, he set her back down.

Now completely naked, she pushed against his chest with both hands. "Damn it, Connyn, I'm not –"

Taking her by the forearms and pushing them up, he pinned her arms to the door above her head. Shackling both her wrists in one hand, he moved his other hand down to grab her ass, his fingers sliding intimately between the globes of her bottom. His face had the harsh expression of a conquering warrior bent on the total subjugation of one of his own.

"You are," he said, "completely and wholly mine." His mouth came down on hers in a possessing kiss as two fingers pushed into her cunt.

She sucked in a sharp breath at the invasion and pressed back against the door, its cold stone a shock against the heat of her skin. Before she'd regained her balance from the kiss, Connyn had removed his hand and unzipped his pants. She'd barely registered the hot press of his cock against her stomach before he was wedging her legs apart with his knee and lifting her with his arm around her waist.

"I –"

Her breath caught and her body jerked. He was at her entrance and then completely lodged inside her in one thrust. She'd only been slightly wet and not nearly slick enough to allow his fully erect cock easy entry. She'd felt every inch of him enter her, still felt every inch of his massive erection as her body struggled to accommodate him.

He bent his head to her breast, delivering a rough kiss there before scraping his teeth over the top swell. Then he sucked the nipple deep into his mouth and laved it hard against the top of his mouth. Finally he nipped it sharply and released it to repeat the same action on her other breast.

With her arms still restrained above her head, his arm wrapped like a band of iron around her waist and her own weight pinning her down on his cock, she felt taken, impaled and fiercely wanted. And more than a little angry at his proprietary handling of her body.

"You can't just –"

Connyn rocked against her and bit the top of her left breast hard enough to make her gasp and leave a bright red mark.

"I won't ever hurt you, Aurora," he said. "But I will have you when and where I want you. As is my right. As is your right with me." He released her wrists but captured the hand that wore his ring. Lacing his fingers through hers, he continued to hold it pressed to the door.

"And every time you walk through this door to the rest of the world, I want you to remember this." He thrust up into her hard and deep. "Remember whose you are and to whom you belong." He withdrew nearly completely only to thrust in deep and hard again. "Remember me inside you. Taking you. Having you."

He thrust with the pounding of his words into her body which was now fully accepting and open. The harsh rhythm was eased by her own body's softening and the wetness of a desire she couldn't deny or deflect. She could hardly breathe. Even when her magic was running high and hot, sex had never even gotten close to being as intense as it was with Connyn every time. With every powerful stroke of his cock driving into her she was pulled further into the maelstrom of furious passion and unbroken possession.

Fire lanced through her blood and she grabbed his shoulder with her free hand, dug her nails into his sweater to hold on. Brought her legs up and tightened them around his waist. He shifted so that the next time he thrust, he ground up against her clit. She cried out and arched her back, her breasts flattening against his chest and her nipples sensitively scraping over the thick woven cotton of his sweater.

"Remember this," he whispered next to her ear. Leaning in, he pressed her harder against the door and drove into her again and again. "Remember coming apart in my arms with me deeper inside you than any other man has been or ever will be."

Suddenly the streams of fire that had been chasing sparks of sensation throughout her body coalesced into a single explosion. It rocketed through her in a pulsating rush and she cried out, clutched at him. Clung to him as she rode the raging flames he'd set loose. He thrust deep one last time and then went rigid against her. His release flowed hot inside her, leaving her flushed and gasping for breath.

Once she could think again she tried to convince herself that orgasms weren't worth putting up with his arrogance. But with her body still tingling and his cock still lodged inside her, it wasn't a battle easily won.

The after-amazing-sex lethargy held her limbs limp as Connyn pulled out of her and refastened his jeans. She leaned against the door with her eyes closed, afraid that if she tried to walk at the moment, she'd wind up face down in the stream.

But she needn't have worried. Connyn picked her up and carried her into one of the adjoining rooms, laying her down in the middle of a soft bed that sank beneath her weight in a very comforting manner. The bedding was cool and silky against her skin as she stretched out on it.

Connyn ran his hands down the length of her body, cupping her curves with his large hands in a way that declared complete and irrefutable ownership before pulling a soft, lightweight blanket over her body and kissing her gently on the lips. "I'll be back to collect you for lunch," he said.

Aurora murmured an *okay* into the kiss, her muscles heavy and unresponsive. The trip between worlds must have a fatiguing effect on a person's body.

Struggling to open her eyes, she found Connyn still leaning over her, watching her. He skimmed his fingertips over her cheek. "Remember," he whispered as her eyes closed again. "Remember that no matter how deep I am inside you, that's not the half of how deep you are in me."

* * * * *

"Your Majesty?"

Aurora yawned and stretched, struggling to wake up and respond to whomever was speaking. "Oh..." she moaned as several muscle groups protested the movement. Until she met Connyn, she'd thought she was in pretty decent shape. Not hiking-up-a-mountain-in-the-middle-of-winter-and-enjoying-it good shape, but for god's sake, she'd been a lingerie model and her body had been her livelihood. You *had* to keep in good form for the camera.

She shifted again and her inner thighs added their two cents into the aching chorus her body had become. What the hell kind of exercises was she going to have to add to her regimen to keep her in fucking-with-Connyn form?

There was a polite throat-clearing noise. "Would you like a hot bath?"

Aurora's eyes flew open. Above her was an ornate canopy of sheer, creamy white fabric whose sides were wafting gently in the cool breeze. Turning her head, she found a young woman waiting expectantly for an answer. "Who are you?"

The young woman's smile lit up her face making her brown eyes sparkle. "Cait. Queen Kaia assigned me to you to help you get adjusted, find your way around and answer your questions." She paused, her smile disappearing. "If that is agreeable to you."

Aurora sat up, holding the blanket over her breasts. Sunlight streamed through the curved bank of open windows at one end of the room. It was another beautiful room, though surprisingly feminine considering what she knew about Connyn. The walls were made of the same muted golden stone as the outer room had been, though the *rythra* veins throughout it were of the palest rose. White, cream and pink flowers were spilling out of at least a dozen large vases and urns set around the room. The curtains, bedding, rugs and cushions were fashioned from soft, creamy whites that gave her the feeling of sitting on a cloud.

By the time her eyes came back around to the girl standing beside the bed, Cait was looking worried and had begun to fidget with the side of her dress.

"Yes," Aurora said. "I would love your help." Cait's face radiated joy. "But," she continued, "please call me Aurora, at least in private. *Your Majesty* is going to take a lot of getting used to."

"As you wish. First, I'll prepare your bath and then call in the seamstresses to finalize the measurements for your clothes."

"What clothes?"

"A full set for all your needs. Of course you could not have been expected to bring a wardrobe with you, especially any of the formal attire with the *rythra* stones set in. Those will have to be finished quickly. The Council is meeting in three days and it is rumored that His Majesty is presenting you then since all the Elders and Prophets will be in attendance."

Cait stepped back as Aurora made her way out of the tangle of bedding and floating canopy. Not an easy feat to do gracefully while keeping a blanket covering all vital areas. Looking Aurora up and down contemplatively Cait said, "It's a good thing they left the hems undone. You're a lot taller than your two sisters."

"You know about us? All of us?"

Cait had started across the room but stopped and turned around to answer. "Everyone knows. You and your sisters are legends. If the Heirs hadn't been able to find you..." Cait's voice trailed off. She shook her head and offered Aurora a smile, though it wasn't as bright as before. "Well, it doesn't matter now. You've all been found and only Ellyna has not arrived. But we're all sure she'll be here soon."

She turned back toward the archway she'd been heading to before Aurora's questions had stopped her. "If you're hungry, I can have a meal sent up for you since it will be a bit of time before lunch and we have a lot to do."

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"I just think it would be better to wait until Ellen is here as well before I go parading in front of the entire council of bigwigs."

Connyn rubbed his hand over his eyes, ignoring Aurora's continuing rant. Fortunately, lunch had gone much better than any of the other meetings he'd been in all morning. If he'd been concerned about Aurora's ability to uphold her social duties as required of a Royal, she had put all fears to rest this afternoon. Though it hadn't been a fully formal occasion, his mother had nonetheless *not* set out a simple, intimate lunch as he had hoped. Several officials from their home territory had been invited and interest in his mate had been high and the questions constant. He'd been extremely proud of Aurora and the way she had effortlessly and artfully handled the polite inquisition, enchanting all with not just her beauty, but her intelligence and charm. Something she wasn't remotely trying to employ now.

He watched her pace the small private garden off the walkway between his parents' quarters and their own. The Ilyrian style of dress she'd chosen complimented her figure magnificently. The soft, flowing fabric of the gown clung to her body in a gentle caress that hid nothing and yet remained completely modest. When he'd returned to take her to lunch, she had stolen his breath. If it had been anyone other than his parents who'd requested their presence, he'd have kept her in their bedroom all afternoon. Her hips swayed and the fabric brushed her thighs, molding to their shape one moment and the next floating away.

"Are you listening to me?"

Connyn's gaze traveled up to Aurora's face. "No."

Aurora blinked in surprise. "You're at least supposed to *say* you are, even if you're not."

"Why would I do that? Besides, you are arguing over something that has been set, so there is no purpose to this conversation." Her furious reaction was immediate and he was surprised and impressed to see how quickly she tamped it down. His mate might finally be learning not to contest his words. Turning, he took her by the hand and began walking up the path back toward their quarters. "Come. Cait said that your clothes would be ready for final fittings once we returned."

Digging her heels into the tiny pebbles that marked the path, Aurora took a deep breath and spoke in a voice one used when explaining something to a child. "There is no reason to rush things with the Council. I'm already here and we've already done the Matching Rite—"

"Mating Rite," he corrected brusquely as he dropped her hand and turned to face her. "The Matching Ritual is done when the female is a year old. Your mother left before you were of age."

"Whatever. The point is—"

Anger flashed in Connyn's mind, fueled by the fear that he was missing something or had done something wrong. "The point is," he ground out, "that I can't connect with your mind."

Aurora raised her eyebrows. "So? You're not the first male to wish he could read a woman's mind and not be able to."

"Not just any woman's. *Yours*. My mate's. And it's more than just reading your thoughts. It's a vital connection between us. The only reason I can find that it has not been established is because our union wasn't blessed by the Council."

"Why do we need the Council's permission? Why can't we just leave things as they are? It's working out."

"Working out?" He advanced on her, emotion hot and pushing through his blood. The reports that morning he'd pored over with his father and captain rolled through his memory. Lately the Sleht had gained new ground in all territories of the Five Houses, but some of the most severe losses had been in their own lands. Again. The prophecy had to be fulfilled. *Had to be*. "It's not enough for it to work out. It has to be completely *right*. For us and our people. For our son and—"

"Whoa! Wait just a damn minute." Aurora's face blanched to a ghostly white and her hands waved in front of her, as if warding him off. "I am *not* getting pregnant. Not for a long time. Maybe not ever. But certainly not *now*. That was not part of the deal."

"What *deal*?" Anger colored to rage and pounded inside his skull. "You are my *mate*. We have claimed each other." He grabbed her hand, held it so that the ring flashed in front of her face. "You wear my ring and sleep in my bed." He lowered her hand but still kept it locked firmly in his own. "Together we bear the burden and privilege of securing the future for our people."

The shock and panic that flooded Aurora's face only increased his temper. For a moment, she stood motionless, staring up at him in stark, unblinking disbelief. Her voice was hoarse when she finally said, "No one said anything about children."

A tremor ran through the hand he was holding and his anger dimmed. She looked away from him and bit her lower lip. Another telltale tremor coursed through her body as she took a deep breath. "I mean, we barely know each other —"

"I know you very well," he interrupted, his low whisper relaying the intimate meaning of his words. He lifted her hand to his lips and kissed the back of it. "And even if you were to conceive right this moment, we'd still have the better part of a year to learn more of each other."

Aurora glared up at him. "Like any woman wants a man to get to know her when she's a raving, swelling, hormonal lunatic."

Impassively, he raised his brows and countered her glare. "And I've told you before that I am well able to handle your emotional variability and irrational outbursts. Something you should well know by now." Her jaw tensed and the hand he was not holding curled into a fist. He was quite sure she wanted to fly at him and her only hesitation was deciding on the best form of attack.

Stepping close to her, he cradled her head against his chest and dropped a soft kiss onto her hair. He knew she hadn't been expecting his sudden gentleness. But regardless of how she infuriated him, he was surprised to discover that more than winning an argument or making a point, he wanted her to be happy. Not angry. Not afraid.

She was as supple as a block of stone in his arms but she didn't try to pull away from him as he'd thought she'd might. Unreasonably pleased at that, he brushed his lips over her hair again and glanced around the garden wondering if it was private enough.

"I need to talk to Ellen," she said, interrupting his thoughts.

"She will be here eventually." He ran his hand down her back, cupped her ass.

"I need to talk to her now. Today. Or tomorrow. I could return through the portal and —"

"No. It's too dangerous."

Stepping out of his embrace, she looked up at him. "But it is possible."

"Whether it is or not does not matter because it is *not* possible to keep you safer there than here." He knew it was too much to ask for instant acquiescence on her part, but the determination swimming in the depths of her dark eyes sent a chill down his spine. An irrational fear he banished with the knowledge that all portals to earth were guarded heavily.

"You promised to meet all my needs. I *need* to talk to Ellen."

His muscles tensed at the accusation in her tone. "My promises are not broken by ensuring that you are alive to see them fulfilled. In due time."

Before she could launch into her next protest, he closed the gap she had created between them and wrapped both of his arms around her. "I understand your desire to see your sister again. I promise it will be soon. But you have no reason to fear even without her here. You are my mate, Aurora." He tightened his embrace. "Nothing will happen that I will not support and protect you in. Through life and death."

* * * * *

Aurora remained silent the entire way back to their rooms, even when Connyn slowed down and quit half dragging her behind him. By the time they'd reached the inner courtyard, the numbing shock had receded and she could hear the calming splashing of the fountain. A great improvement over the throbbing pulse of terror that had consumed her for much of the trip up here despite all his assurances.

A large crowd of servants was waiting to attend her once they entered and Connyn left her in their capable hands with an abrupt nod. She did not protest, but neither did she acknowledge his leaving with so much as a blink.

The throng waiting for her in the room she had awakened in had been talking quite animatedly when they arrived. Their sudden silence and their surprised expressions filled the room with an awkwardness that Aurora had no hopes of alleviating in her present frame of mind.

Cait separated herself from the group and rushed over. "Perhaps you would prefer to rest after lunch. There is nothing that needs to be done now that can't be accomplished later." She turned and gestured for the servants to gather up the items they had brought, but Aurora put a hand on her arm to stop her.

"No, wait."

Halting in the middle of the orders she was rolling out, Cait turned. "It's not a problem, Your Majesty. It is entirely my fault for pushing too many things at you before you have had time to adjust to your new life here."

Her concern was so sincere and her words so wrong. It certainly was *not* her fault she felt close to a breakdown. Aurora found herself smiling and realized she was quickly beginning to rely on Cait for far more than help picking out the right clothes for occasions she'd never dreamed of before. "Actually, I think having an entirely new wardrobe fitted just to me is *exactly* what I need."

Suddenly the air was filled with a joyful energy as all the women burst into lively motion and excited chatter. For the next several hours she allowed herself to be fitted with first one type of garment and then another, voicing her preferences as asked for on everything from fabric color, type and weight to jewelry and perfume. Through the entire process, Cait advised and laughed with her, relating news and information about her new home Cait thought might be helpful or interesting.

But the most relaxing part of all was looking down at her hip and finding her birth control patch still firmly in place. She still had four days effectively left and Ellen should be here before then. She *had* to be here before then.

Chapter Nine

Time rolled by swiftly and soon the sunlight was fading from the windows. As the final scraps of cloth, beading and thread were being gathered up, Connyn's mother arrived. From Connyn's age alone Aurora guessed her to be at least in her fifties, but her regal bearing seemed to defy age and her beauty, though mature, was still breathtaking.

Cait, who had been sitting beside Aurora asking her about fashion in her world and finding it impossible to believe anyone would want to wear shoes that lifted their heels off the ground, jumped to her feet and nodded deferentially. After an entire afternoon of *Your Majesty's*, it still took her by surprise to hear it again. Aurora stood and inclined her head. "Your Majesty. Welcome."

Kaia returned the greeting with thanks, several long thin braids of silvery gold interwoven with deep red threads falling over her shoulder as she nodded at them both. "I came by with dinner," she said, motioning a line of servants in who quickly set up a small feast on a small table they had carried in. "Cynn and Connyn will be engrossed in their duties until late and after such a long day, I thought you might be ready for something to eat."

Since Cait had kept all sorts of foodstuffs from the chef flowing through the quarters for Aurora to "taste and approve or banish from the kitchens forever," hunger was not a problem. But she was grateful that Kaia had thought of her.

Cait had helped set up the food and when all was readied, turned to Kaia and Aurora. "Do you wish for me to serve Your Majesties?"

Surprised at the sudden formality, Aurora waited for Kaia to answer.

"No. Thank you, Cait. I think we can manage from here."

Cait turned fully to Aurora. "Is there anything else I may do for you?"

"I can't think of a single thing. You've been a wonderful help."

"Would you like me to return later to help you to bed?"

Aurora nearly laughed out loud. One glance at Kaia made her realize Cait's question had been expected. "No." The young woman's face fell slightly. "But I'm sure I'll have another long list of questions to ask you tomorrow. If you don't mind returning?"

The smile that Aurora had come to appreciate broke over Cait's face. "It would be my pleasure."

Kaia waved toward the door. "Now go on, child. I do believe I saw a certain impatient young man pacing outside the eastern gate earlier."

Cait's flush of joy was unmistakable as she excused herself. After her footsteps faded, Kaia smiled and turned to Aurora. "I'm impressed. She managed not to rush until after the door closed behind her." She sighed and rose to pick up one of the plates that had been laid out. "I am going to miss her when she goes. She's been one of my favorites for years."

"Goes? Where is she going?" The news of Cait's imminent departure removed the awkwardness of formality. It was as if she'd been thrown a lifeline in the middle of an endless ocean and then suddenly someone had cut it with a *just kidding*. Aurora was shaken enough that she just barely remembered to add, "Your Majesty," to the end of her question.

"No *Your Majesty's* in private please. Formality is for public assurance. Out there, it's part of what gives our people hope. That the royal houses have prevailed and flourish in spite of everything is an incredibly unifying factor that gives them strength to do what must be done. Their belief in us is tied to their belief in the prophecy and that's something we can never contradict. But here," she waved her hand to include not just the single room but the entire private domain of the Third House of Kith, "we can be who we really are."

For the briefest of moments, Aurora flashed back to old science-fiction movies where the aliens stripped away their human facades and turned into flesh-eating mutants. Against her will, Aurora felt her face blanch.

Though the corners of her mouth twitched up, Kaia's smile shone mostly in her eyes. "Which is to say, men and women with weaknesses as well as strengths." She held out a hand of invitation toward the feast. "Come, help yourself. I know Cait must have kept you from starving, but the chef will be very disappointed if you don't at least try some of his signature entrees."

Aurora did as instructed. The food did look amazing and the wonderful smells teased her into putting a little of everything onto her dish. "When is Cait leaving?" she asked once they had settled onto the divan positioned by the center window, their full plates and cups placed on a low table in front of them.

"Whenever she chooses. Her young man is very much in love and I'm sure she will accept him as her mate eventually."

"So married women aren't allowed to help in the palace?"

"Of course they are. But they are not bound to their work here. Most choose to stay home once they have children, at least while the children are young. Some stay part time, some return once the children enter school. It's something that is decided individually."

"It seems to be a very enlightened world you live in," Aurora commented.

A small smile played around Kaia's mouth. "In some ways. In others, I fear we fall greatly behind not only the world you grew up in, but many others as well."

"The men do seem to be a little barbaric in their attitudes at times."

Kaia laughed. A musical sound that reminded Aurora in part of that mystical quality Shyrana seemed to have had when she spoke. "What a very diplomatic way to sum up their most frustrating characteristic. That, I'm afraid, is something that runs through the very central makeup of who they are and will never be changed. Occasionally shaped and guided perhaps to a certain extent, but never changed."

She set down the piece of fruit she'd just picked up and gazed out at the sky through the window. "It's what has kept our people alive for so long. The unwillingness to weaken in the face of our enemies and the absolute willingness to do whatever it takes to hold and protect our own." She turned to look at Aurora. "Once you understand, truly understand, what motivates Connyn's actions, perhaps you won't find it so difficult to be here. To take your place by Connyn's side."

A lump caught in Aurora's throat, making it impossible to swallow for several seconds. Kaia noticed and reached over to squeeze her hand. Her eyes were knowing and caring.

"One thing you need to know about the Third House," Kaia said, still holding her hand, "is that, if it's possible, we feel an even greater obligation to see the prophecy fulfilled. Out of the Five Brothers, it is our ancestor who started the civil war that eventually brought about the gods' curse."

Aurora frowned. "No one's said anything that would lay a greater portion of guilt to any one house, let alone the Third House."

A sad smile graced Kaia's face. "No, I don't suppose anyone would. It's true that all brothers share the fault. None tried to stop it once the idea had been brought to light. The very fact that the other four found the idea of ruling single-handedly at the cost of their own brothers' lives so easily acceptable I think proves that they had all been entertaining the idea of civil war for some time." She shook her head. "All broke the bond of peace between the houses and declared a unanimous act of war. But be that as it may, it was still *our* ancestor who first drew up an army and invaded a brother's land."

"Well, that certainly explains Connyn's Captain America demeanor," Aurora muttered as she picked up a thin triangular bit of dark bread spread with what she thought was some kind of cheese since it was white and creamy.

Kaia's eyebrows lifted, her expression a mix of amusement and bewilderment. "Excuse me? Oh be careful. That's very spicy."

Aurora eyed her chosen morsel warily before tasting a corner. It had a serious bite to it with a garlic-like aftertaste. Not bad. "Sorry. An earth term. It just means very gung-ho." When Kaia's confusion didn't lift, Aurora said, "Captain America was a superhero with amazing military abilities."

The smile on the older woman's face lit up. "I see."

Keeping any further comments about her nickname for Connyn to herself, Aurora finished off the piece of bread with the spicy spread. She wasn't about to explain that she hadn't exactly meant it as a compliment when she'd first used it. Aurora liked

Connyn's mother but at the same time she had a feeling that the woman could be very scary given the right motivation.

Kaia had been right about the spread being spicy. It left Aurora's tongue stinging slightly, so next she chose a piece of fruit that looked like a grape to try before asking her next question. "Connyn explained about the war and the curse, but why are the Royals required to marry a Mystic?"

"They aren't exactly required to choose a Mystic," Kaia said, "but it is the only way to enhance and release the powers they once had."

Aurora was starting to get a bad feeling about the whole Mystic thing. "There's not a spell or a prayer that might help instead? Forcing a man to marry for any reason doesn't seem like a good idea to start with."

"That's why the Elders and Prophets take the Matching Ritual so seriously. From the day a Mystic girl is born—or found if that's the case—no less than ten months are spent divining which Royal heir is destined to be her mate. Unless she has already taken a mate before she was found of course."

A tiny, ticking pain was beginning behind Aurora's left eye. "So a Mystic empowers the Royal she marries?"

Kaia smiled. "Not in the way you mean. It's actually for his children that the Heir chooses a Mystic for a mate."

The pain increased and Aurora closed her left eye, hoping her wince wasn't too pronounced.

Setting down her plate, Kaia turned to face Aurora straight on. "I'm not being very clear, am I? Let me try to explain a little better. The civil war between the Original Five nearly destroyed not only our race, but our planet. When the gods intervened, the powers that had been taken for granted by the Royal households were fractured and locked inside a line of Mystics."

"That doesn't sound very fair to the Mystics." Aurora reached for her cup and took a drink, wishing it were alcoholic and strong. It was refreshing, sweet and definitely *not* alcoholic.

"No, it doesn't, does it?" Kaia said. "But from the beginning, that particular clan was the only one not to take sides in the civil war. As a result, they ended up being hunted by every faction. Not exactly a shining moment in our history."

Aurora set her cup down. "We've had similar non-shining moments in the world I grew up in as well."

"By locking the powers inside the Mystics, the gods forced every warring faction to protect the Mystics or lose their powers forever. But the powers only manifest in a Royal son when his Mystic mother has been willingly mated with an Heir from one of the Five Houses.

"Not as easy as it might sound since the Mystics had scattered and gone into hiding to survive. Since they had been hunted so mercilessly, the Mystics as a whole no longer

trusted any Royal and even when one was found getting her to willingly mate a Kilt Heir was more than a little difficult."

"I bet," Aurora murmured, thinking of Ellen.

"Ultimately, the curse will be completely broken if, at the seventeenth generation, the eldest living heir from each of the Houses binds himself to the other four in a vow never to bring war between their houses again."

The bad feeling started to solidify in the pit of her stomach and the pain spread to her right eye as well. "So where exactly are we in this prophecy countdown?"

This time it was Kaia who reached for her drink, pausing before she answered after she reset the glass on the low table. She turned her grey gaze fully on Aurora and Aurora could feel the weight of it like a ten ton canon ball making a direct hit. "Connyn is the sixteenth generation."

Aurora froze, a piece of fruit in her hand stopped halfway to her mouth as she stared at Kaia.

Connyn's mother inclined her head and gestured at the ring Aurora wore on the middle finger of her left hand. "Finding his mate has been the most important thing in Connyn's life. He's carried the burden of it without complaint ever since he was a small boy and first understood what it meant to be born with expectation to do what had to be done to save his world. Unfortunately, your son will carry an even greater responsibility."

She patted Aurora's knee again. As soft as Kaia's touch was, it served to jar Aurora out of her immobility. "I see," Aurora managed. She ate the piece of fruit, chewing slowly in order to avoid having to say anything else and giving her heart a chance to stop slamming around in her chest.

"It's quite a lot to take in," Kaia said. "But Connyn would not have claimed you if he wasn't sure you were his mate. He's looked too long and given up too much. The gods have watched over him and guided him. They will guide you too."

"You sound very sure of that."

"When I was young, I learned the hard way that we cannot always understand or choose the path Destiny leads us down. Sometimes, we can only accept it."

"Sometimes I think Destiny cheats."

Kaia smiled. "I agree." Picking up the piece of fruit she had let drop to her plate earlier, she sat back and said, "we should finish this meal so you can rest. Even with a nap this morning, I'm sure you're exhausted. We may be only in the evening here, but your body's time is approaching early morning."

Aurora nodded in agreement. The food was helping, but the leadenness of lethargy still dragged at her muscles even with all the new revelations Kaia was serving up with the food. They ate in silence for a moment before Aurora could think of another topic of conversation that she hoped wouldn't lead into dangerous territory. "Could you tell me what kind of duties other than producing heirs are expected of a Royal's mate?"

"Certainly. It varies some from House to House and it is up to each mate as to the extent of involvement. Generally, outside of being present during formal celebrations, we are fairly free to choose our own path as long as we can be kept safe."

"So no fighting on the front lines?" Aurora asked in a mock seriousness.

Kaia shook her head. "No doing *anything* that involves even the possibility of coming into contact with the Sleht, but just about any other option is open in one manner or another. Do you have any interests you are particularly hoping to pursue?"

An unexpected image of Connyn in all his glorious naked yumminess rose in her mind and she nearly choked herself on a piece of bread. "Umm..." she finally managed, "I'm not sure. Though I'm sure some things will appeal to me more than others." *Like fucking your son.* Jesus. She *was* tired if her mind was wandering there after the fight they'd had this afternoon. Time to simply be quiet and listen. She'd learn something, but most importantly, she wouldn't let something slip that shouldn't. She had a feeling that Kaia didn't miss a single thing.

With an encouraging smile for Kaia to begin elaborating on the Royal duties required of members of the Third House, Aurora settled back against the cushion and kept her mouth shut.

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"What are you doing in here?" Connyn's voice sounded loud in the quiet room and Aurora jerked awake under the covers.

She sat up groggily, brushing her hair out of her eyes. "Sleeping." She flopped back down. "Go away."

Stifling the growl rising in his throat, he scooped her up. "I meant, why are you in this room rather than in ours?"

One eye cracked open. "This is the only room with a bed in it."

He carried her out into the main courtyard and tilted her up to see the door he was approaching. "This is our room."

She dropped her head back against his shoulder, closing the one eye she had opened. "I tried that door. It wouldn't open. I thought it was the room you kept all your treasures in or something."

His mate was more right than she'd believe. Readjusting her so she could see what he was doing he said, "You have to touch the stone with your ring. Any doors in this section of the palace with this stone in the middle open only when you touch it with your palm and the ring."

"Cait doesn't have a ring and she comes and goes," Aurora mumbled.

"Under normal conditions, certain servants can enter the main room with permission during the day."

Aurora grunted. With a sigh, he let the door slide open and then turned to close it again once he was inside the room.

He placed her in the middle of their bed and then stripped out of his clothes. Without opening her eyes, Aurora scooted around the bed until she was under the covers.

"I heard you were interested in your new duties as my mate." The news had pleased him extraordinarily, especially after her ridiculous proclamation this afternoon. His mother had embedded the information in a short but stern lecture about not pushing his mate too far too fast, but she'd be surprised at how much stronger Aurora was than she looked. It still surprised him. *She* still surprised him. Regularly. His mother hadn't been on the receiving end of one of her tirades or seen her attack a Predator. He had and he still didn't believe it.

Aurora squinted up at him and found him looking down at her. She pulled the cover completely over her head.

Smiling, he crawled into bed beside her, tugging the blanket from between them. She turned her back to him, so he wrapped his arm around her waist and hauled her body up next to his. When he started to tug up her nightshirt, she smacked his hands.

"Forget it. I'm tired and still angry with you."

Smoothing the hem of her short gown down over her thigh, he kissed the side of her neck. "You'll feel better in the morning."

"I'll be rested, but still angry."

He chuckled. "We'll see." Pulling the blanket up over them both, he pressed close to his mate. "I've spoken to Wyc and Rordyc. I should have sent Bethany and Brooke over today. It might have made your first day in Ilyria more agreeable if your sisters had been here to welcome you."

"They didn't know we'd arrived?"

"Very few outside our sector were made aware until I had had the opportunity to check that all safety measures were in place."

She went back to her grunt-only response.

He slid his hand over her breast and got an elbow in the ribs for his effort. He didn't move his hand.

"I'm going to sleep," she muttered.

Gently squeezing the soft weight of her breast in his hand, he kissed her hair. "Sweet dreams, my *vystra*."

True to form, Aurora grunted and jabbed him in the ribs again for good measure. He had a feeling the sweet dreams would be his.

* * * * *

They'd been anchored off land for nearly a day and she was furious that he had broken his promise. Instead of setting her free, he'd kept her locked in his cabin under the close watch of two of his most trusted men. It was several hours past full dark when she heard the crew returning to the ship across the inlet, a loud and very boisterous crew that announced their arrival with

spontaneous bursts of off-key singing. The scattered lines from songs with such graphic lyrics would have shocked her into silence if anger had not rendered her mute long ago. They did, however, serve to spark to flame the anger that had cooled in the previous hours she'd been given over to her own company.

Not long after their return, low murmuring came from the other side of the thick wooden door. No doubt her guards were making a full report on her behavior throughout the day which ranged from a screaming shrew to the icy silence of a fury that delved too deeply for mere words, be they threats, logic or desperate pleas.

It was this absolute quiet that had seemed to unnerve her guards the most. Indeed, it was the only time either had tried to talk to her through the door. When she had held her tongue, an argument had ensued between the two over whether their captain's wrath was worth opening the door to check on her. Ultimately, any possible decline of her health was found wanting when weighed against the sure decline of theirs should they go against the captain's orders.

When the door did finally open, Captain Kilth entered with the confident arrogance that was his natural demeanor regardless of the task at hand, though she did notice that his hand rested however casually on the hilt of the sword he wore at his side. Since she had lit no candle or lantern, he regarded her in the dim shafts of moonlight silvering through the portholes.

Had he entered earlier in the day, he would have found himself the target of any and all heavy items left in his cabin not nailed down. At present, her rage was coldly calm, calculating and waiting. She was not surprised to hear the anchor being raised and the ship being readied for immediate sail.

"You are well, I see." The captain's voice came close to startling her, rumbling as deep and dark as the shadows lurking in the room. "My men were quite concerned that you might have expired while they were on watch." He moved farther into the room, removed his weapons and laid them on the table. It might have appeared as a clear taunt, but both of them knew that even if she managed to make it to the table and succeed in using one of his own weapons to disable or kill him, there was nowhere for her to go.

Into the arms of a crew whose captain she'd just attacked? And past them, into the arms of a sea that had swallowed hundreds of men stronger and better swimmers than she, and without the encumbrance of yards of muslin and silk that would carry her to the bottom of the ocean as surely as iron weights shackled to her limbs?

Kilth moved to stand next to her, placing himself so that the moonlight shafted over his shoulder, leaving his face obscured and hers illuminated. "You have something to say to me?" His voice was soft, but not threatening.

She did not move, did not respond. She simply continued to stare straight ahead into nothing.

"No question you'd like to ask?" A dark sensuality whispered through his words, teasing her to awareness in spite of her anger.

Damn the man. He knew she had questions, accusations. But she would not be toyed with, batted about like a ball of string given to a cat for a pleasing distraction. Again, she did not answer or make the smallest movement that might indicate the depth of her anger and disappointment.

After a long moment in which she neither moved nor spoke, he inclined his head. "That is as it should be." Taking a seat at the table, he began removing his boots. "Come then. Ready yourself for bed."

She had thought her anger had plumbed the limits of its depths. She'd been dreadfully wrong. So gripped by shock, she'd not believed she'd heard him correctly until he'd discarded his shirt as well as his boots and began unfastening his breeches.

"You cannot possibly imagine I would share your bed again after your blatant disregard of the promise you made me."

"I have not disregarded my promise to you, blatant or otherwise. Remove your dress." His command was so casual, his comments stated so bluntly, she could not – could not – stop the explosive rage that blanked all thought from her mind in one white-hot moment.

He had moved away from the table in the process of disrobing, leaving her a clear path to his weapons. She leapt forward and grabbed the small dagger he customarily wore at his waist. The same lunge carried her close enough to strike out at him, slicing the air where just a breath before his chest had been. As it was, the tip of the dagger caught him just under the right side of his rib cage and cut a clean if shallow rising arc to his left side that stopped just over his heart.

Instantly Phoebe found both her wrists manacled in his hands, the dagger clattering harmlessly to the floor.

"There you are, Lady Ballantine. I was wondering where you were hiding." The man actually had the gall to smile at her before glancing down at his chest where tiny drops of blood were starting to ooze from the deeper parts of the cut. "Congratulations. You've executed the most successful attack on my person in years."

His smile faded as his eyes focused on the rapid rise and fall of her breasts. Slowly, heatedly, his gaze rose to meet hers. His eyes smoldered with passion and something more. "I promised to release you once we reached a port. The port is of my choosing."

"That is preposterous. Send me ashore at once."

"This port? Where every man and woman would have been only too happy to take you off my hands?"

He transferred both her hands to one of his behind her back. Sliding the fingers of his free hand through her hair, he started at the nape of her neck and threaded through her curls until they fell free of the twist she had been wearing it in.

His touch had a drugging effect on her, but she fought to hold on to her anger and her senses. "Then it should not have been a problem to live up to your end of the bargain."

Angry impatience flashed in his eyes and his sudden stillness seemed to have the authority to freeze the very air around her. Until he released his breath on a half growl, she hadn't realized she was holding her own breath. "I will uphold my promise when it best suits me, woman. But understand this. I will not release you until you are assured both your freedom and safety. The best you could have hoped for in that place was to die quickly. Not the rescue you envisioned, I'm sure."

She'd heard of such places of course, but it was difficult for her to believe that there wouldn't have been one decent soul to help her return to her uncle among the degenerate masses described, though finding that particular needle in the haystack might have been difficult. Regardless, she

wasn't willing to release her anger yet. She turned her face away from him, refusing to acknowledge the heat in his eyes and the desire it lit within her own body.

"I can take care of myself." Even to her own ears, her words seemed full of false bravado.

Leaning in, he placed his lips against her throat and murmured, "I have no doubt you believe that to be true." Her heart skipped and then thumped loudly in her chest, speeding up as he started to kiss her neck. His lips, tongue and teeth quickly worked their mysterious magic on her body. He pressed her to him with her hands still caught at the base of her spine. The way he held her, bending her slightly backward while kissing her, pressed her breasts against his naked chest. Even through her bodice and chemise she could feel the scalding heat of his skin and immediately she felt herself start to melt into him.

"I'm sure I would have figured out something," she said, grasping for the sanity that was quickly slithering out of her reach.

His low chuckle reverberated through his chest, teasing her tightened nipples as they chafed against her clothes. "I'm sure we can figure out something right now." With movements no doubt perfected by practice, he had her stripped to the waist in a matter of seconds. When his kisses began on her breasts, the lust she had become so familiar with over the past days rose in force and she knew the time for arguing had passed. For the moment.

Desire washed over her in waves as the ship rocked, both she and the ship moving toward deeper waters. Scant minutes passed before she lay beneath him on his berth, flesh to flesh and gasping as his expert touch once again reduced her inhibitions to ashes.

Kilth rolled to the side. "I'm in the mood for a different perspective."

"What?" Phoebe stared at him, trying to clear the lust haze from her eyes. She scooted to the edge of the bunk when he shifted to lie on his back. He was a large man and there was very little room left once he settled in place.

The ship rolled and she nearly toppled out of the bed. He easily caught her with one arm and patted his taut stomach. "Come here."

She blinked. "Excuse me?"

"I want you on top."

"On top?"

A sexy grin spread over his face. "Yes. On top."

She stared at him, questioning. When he nodded, her gaze slid down his chest, snagged at the corded muscles of his abdomen before widening when she took in the width and length of his erection. "I don't think it works that way."

"Straddle my chest."

Her eyes flew back to his face. "Is this a pointed jest at my inexperience?"

"Woman, climb up here." His words were stern but his tone was amused.

After a brief pause, she pushed herself up, grabbed his shoulders and threw her leg over his waist. He jerked when her shin grazed his cock. "Careful," he admonished. Placing his hands on her hips, he guided her to a sitting position wherein she straddled him halfway up his chest. "There you go. Sit up."

She did and immediately felt exposed in a way she hadn't before. Nervously, she crossed one arm over her breasts and shielded the junction of her thighs with her other hand.

"No. Rest your hands here," he said, placing them high on her outer thighs.

Glad for the dimming shadows when he did nothing more than stare at her body spread open over him for what seemed like a century, she was embarrassed to find that she was starting to breathe rather quickly when he'd done nothing more than look. With his gaze so intimate, she found herself wishing he would touch her instead.

His expression sharpened with desire until the planes and angles of his face were set hard as flint. "You have a beautiful body, Phoebe." His palms caressed up her arms from her hands to her shoulders. He brushed back the thick strands of hair that had fallen forward to screen her breasts. "Never be ashamed of it."

When his fingertips feathered over her collarbone, her hands instinctively rose to hide her breasts but she stopped at the challenging look he leveled at her. With a force of her will, she returned her hands to where he had placed them, gripping her thighs to make sure they didn't wander. The approval that shone in his eyes at her response spiked her desire in a way she was not wholly comfortable with. But as unnerving as this new position made her, it also stimulated her in a new and thrilling way.

Before she could examine that further, his hands were moving on her body again, scattering all thoughts save the ones being ignited by the flames his touch was lighting. His hands molded around her breasts, lifting them and rubbing the pads of his thumbs around her nipples until they were straining toward him. Leaving them with a gentle twist that had her back arching slightly, he splayed his hands and leisurely swept them over the soft swell of her hips and stomach. They dipped down to her inner thighs and his eyes raked over her skin with the same heat as was in his touch.

His thumbs grazed over the swelling lips of her pussy and she struggled for breath. Back and forth, he moved his thumbs over the same spot until the throbbing between her legs became insistent, demanding. She'd been watching his hands on her. Now she looked up and found his gaze on her face. Waiting. She opened her mouth to ask. "I..." His thumbs pressed harder yet still avoided the one spot aching for his touch. But the throbbing increased, robbing her of her voice.

It didn't matter. He knew. Still watching her, he slid a finger deep inside her.

Phoebe's head fell back on a moan –

"Aurora." Connyn ran his hands over his woman, gently skimming them down her back and thighs. She murmured a sleepy protest and pressed her face more firmly against his shoulder. He said her name again, louder, and slipped his hands under the hem of her short nightgown to cup her ass.

"Leave me alone," she grumped.

He slid his fingers deeper into the crevice of her butt and squeezed. "You're making that a little difficult."

"God. I'm sleeping here."

"I was too until you crawled on top of me."

The warm, relaxed body that had been draped over his slowly stiffened. He could feel her heart start to beat harder against his chest.

"Shit," she hissed. "It was a mistake. Just forget it ever happened."

"Not a chance."

She started to push off him. "Why do you have to make everything so damn difficult?"

"You must still be tired. You're cranky."

"And you're irritating. Even when I'm not tired."

He might have laughed, but at that moment Aurora shifted and all thought fled except having her soft and willing beneath him. Soft she was. Beneath him, he could manage. Willing...he might have to work at.

Swiftly he switched their positions so that he was on top, settled between her legs and propped up on his elbows looking down into her face. With an exasperated huff, she blew her hair out of her eyes. Not an encouraging sign.

"You're not going to take no for an answer, are you?" she asked.

"Are you saying no?"

Aurora hesitated. It was brief, but it was there. It was all he needed.

The kiss was long and tender. He took his time and let the passion build. She had been braced for an all-out attack—he'd seen it in her eyes. But he knew that even with her resistance set, it would have been a battle he'd have won. The undiluted, primitive desire that simmered constantly between them promised that, ensuring that neither could physically deny the other for long.

But he didn't want her constantly resisting him and the destiny set between and before them. Yesterday, he hadn't been able to get out of his mind the panicked look on her face when they'd talked about the future. He'd never have for even a brief flash of time imagined his mate might be against carrying his child. Ever. It was unthinkable. Impossible.

Her fear had to be connected to their inability to mentally join. It must run so deep that unconsciously she was blocking him on the soul-melding level needed for their union to be complete. Even though the words of acceptance had come out of her mouth, they must not have come from her heart. The ancient texts he'd studied had been very clear that in order for the necessary heirs to be produced, a royal must have that vow truly from his mate.

May fate and the gods be damned to their chosen place of eternal torture, and may they take destiny, prophecies and omens with them. It had been a favorite saying of Rordyc's until recently and at the moment, he was inclined to agree, though they rarely agreed on much. In fact, one of the few things all of his cousins did agree on was that the gods had been so angered by the Five Brothers that they had made finding and keeping mates a

cosmic riddle meant to punish not only the brothers, but their progeny throughout the generations.

Obviously the Ilyrian gods hadn't taken lightly the way his ancestors abused the powers given them for the protection and peace of their people, using them instead to bring their world to near desolation in a war for supreme domination. The ensuing curse had set the course of destiny in place for the heirs of the Five Houses, placing on each generation the onus of expectation to fulfill their part in the prophecy that would once more bring about the peace and sure survival promised to his people. His generation carried the knowledge that if they were unsuccessful, the final heirs would never be born to lead their people into peace and the prophecy would fail.

The weight of duty and the expectations he'd lived with all his life were reasons he could grasp for the alarm that reeled through his mind on needle-sharp prods every time he tried to connect with Aurora's mind and found himself drowning in a sea of shimmering gold nothingness. The burden of duty was something he and all of his cousins had lived with from the moment they were born. What he couldn't identify, but what was becoming disturbingly stronger each day, was the reason behind his need for her that had nothing to do with duty or the prophecy.

Breathing in her sighs as he continued to kiss her, he fed off the yearning of her desire, patiently courting her reluctant response. Between each leisurely kiss, he softly whispered against her skin his joy of having her in his arms, in his life. He teased and invited until she was opening wider, allowing his tongue in deeper. Cradling her head in his hands as he lingered over every exploring kiss, he focused on her pleasure. Every murmur and throaty hum he captured and locked into his memory.

She wrapped her arms around him and arched her body until her breasts pressed against his chest. Her legs moved restlessly and her skin grew hot. Running her hands over his back and shoulders, she urged him on and returned his kiss with a rising eagerness.

Mentally he reached for her mind as he pressed deepening kisses to her willing mouth. Again, there was nothing but the glittering gold curtain engulfing him. He whispered her name, opened and offered his soul. The golden mist shimmered and a warmth flowed through him unlike anything he'd known before. A siren call of emotion too faint to be heard clearly, but there. Lasting no more than the brush of a passing butterfly's wings, it was still undeniably *there*.

Pouring the exultation of hope into his kiss, he slightly loosened the reins on his lust and allowed desire to swirl in rising anticipation between them. Her fingernails lightly scored down his back in response and he skimmed his mouth down the side of her neck. With the tip of his tongue, he circled the throbbing pulse at the base of her throat and when her breath caught, sucked the delicate skin between his teeth.

Adjusting his weight so that he could look into her face, he skimmed his hand over the gauzy material covering her breast. The soft white garment had a row of pale pink bows tied between her breasts that kept the two sides in place. "Very nice," he murmured as he toyed with the bows, tugging on the top one until it pulled apart.

"Thank your army of seamstresses." Aurora's voice was husky and under the heavy fringe of her eyelashes, her eyes gleamed hot with passion and promise. "You should see what else they came up with."

His mouth curved up. "You think I'll be pleased?"

"Oh yeah," she said. Hedonistic invitation laced through her words and tied them to his fantasies.

"I can hardly wait." Lowering his mouth to her breast, he laved and sucked on first one nipple and then the other until the fabric was tantalizingly transparent over the tightened peaks. When he pulled back to blow on them, Aurora arched her back and moaned, her hands pressing his back, urging him back down.

Instead of taking her direction, he pulled the remaining bows apart and slowly peeled the damp material from her breasts. Circling the edges of her areolas with his fingertips and then very lightly tracing the full under and side curves of her breast, he watched the pale skin pebble and her dark pink nipples pucker tighter. Watching his mate respond to his touch flooded him with a rush much deeper than simple lust. A relentless, erotic rhythm drummed through his veins. A primal directive to take his mate, to make her his and to keep her at all costs. Keep her safe. Keep her satisfied. Keep her *his*.

The feeling exploded from his soul and battered every other thought, every other consideration from his mind. Whatever it took, she would be his. Body, soul *and* heart.

Aurora's hand slipped down his side and around to his front. Splaying her fingers wide, she ran her hand down the center of his chest and back up. When she feathered them over his nipple, a jolt shot through his body and the throbbing in his cock grew insistent.

He pinned her wandering hand to the bed and dipped his head to her breast, sucking it deep into his mouth with one long pull.

"Oh God! Connyn!" Aurora's free hand clutched at his back as she twisted under him.

The taste of her skin, the soft firmness of her breast and the frantic edge of need in her voice as she called out his name had him turning to her other breast with a focused intensity as he continued to draw the fire more tightly around them. Swirling his tongue around the sensitive peak, he teased her until she was panting and had twisted his hair in her fist. Still he waited.

"Now," Aurora ordered. "Get inside me now!"

He pressed her nipple to the roof of his mouth, sucking hard again. She jerked and gasped, then settled into a ragged breathing that lifted and lowered her fully aroused breast against his face. Slowly he released her nipple, dragging his teeth over the very tip.

"God you're good with your mouth," she hissed. "I want more."

As he looked down at Aurora, the need for possession dug deep into his bones. Her body was damp with perspiration, long curling tendrils clung to her cheeks and neck and her dark eyes flashed with the demand of desire he was more than happy to meet.

Letting go of her hand, he reached between their bodies and yanked the hem of her nightgown to her waist. Repositioning himself over her, he pressed the head of his cock against her entrance. When he went no further, she cried out in frustration and vainly attempted to pull him up her body. He caught her hands and threaded his fingers through hers, pressing them into the deep pile of the bedding.

"Fucking hell," she ground out as she strained under him. "What are you waiting on? You wake me up and tease me until I'm fucking *asking* for it and now —"

He rocked forward and the head of his cock parted her slick, swollen folds.

"Yes," she hissed. Closing her eyes and pressing her head back into the pillow, she threw her legs around his hips. "More."

At her sudden movement his cock slid further into her welcoming cunt. He groaned as a shudder racked his body, his muscles locking as he fought to hold steady his control. With a low growl, he battled the rising tide of demanding need whipping through him and pulled back a fraction instead of plunging in deep and hard like he wanted to. Ruthlessly he reminded himself that as wide open and willing as his mate's body was at this moment, he wanted more.

Chapter Ten

The man drove her certifiably insane. On any scale in any world he'd set the standard for Most Able to Irritate the Hell Out of You. It wasn't her fault she'd woken up on top of him damn nearly purring. It was the pirate's fault. He'd left her fantasies to find solid footing in her dreams. She'd been dreaming again and — *oh god!*

Connyn started to rock, shallow thrusts that kept him barely lodged in her entrance but had a devastating effect on her ability to do anything but desperately crave what he kept just out of reach. Her body ached with a violent and consuming need, twisting through her and binding her in a sensual thrall. She arched her back hard, pushing up toward him and trying desperately to force him deeper inside. For a blissful second, his cock slid in another inch before he countered the movement by leaning back.

She collapsed back onto the bed. "What? What do you want?" she demanded.

He stilled over her. A dark calm emanated from within him and molded itself around them until they hung suspended together in the moment. Suddenly, she wished she had never asked the question. She could read the clear answer in his eyes before he said, "You."

Her lungs froze, the world tilted and her life compressed down to the emotion engulfing her in a rising tide of desire for more than her just body's fulfillment. In the deepest part of her heart she wanted all he offered wrapped in the fantasy of forever. A fantasy he continued to build in her mind, holding out promise after promise until she was actually starting to believe it was all true, believe that it could really happen.

She'd always enjoyed and appreciated good sex and had been content to leave it at that. Now Connyn was utterly screwing that up by making her want a lot more than an orgasm. Something amazing in and of itself since the man could deliver the best damn orgasms she'd had in her life. Why the hell did she want more than that? Especially when wanting more could seriously cause major problems once Ellen finally did arrive.

Before, she had reacted on impulse when she said she accepted him as her mate, flying high on the feelings he inspired and the adrenaline pumping hard from the fight and flight they'd been involved in from almost the moment they'd met. And then he'd immediately taken her over the edge of lust and any retreating she might have done was incinerated by the explosive sex that followed.

But each day now he continued to complicate things and throw in hazards that were never considered in the carefully laid plans that had been discussed. She closed her eyes and tried to get a handle on her runaway emotions. Shit. What was wrong with just having *sex*?

The warning in Connyn's growl had her opening her eyes quickly. She realized she had whispered her last thought aloud as she saw the anger flash the blue flecks in his gray eyes to the color of hammered steel.

"I just meant..."

Her words faded as he lowered himself down on her, slowly pushing in until he was fully implanted inside her, the pinning weight of his body matched and exceeded only by the feeling of being stretched to her limit from the inside out. He continued to settle over and around her until his chest had flattened her breasts against him and his mouth was next to her ear.

Whisper-soft and more breath than sound, he said, "There's nothing wrong with just sex, Aurora. But this isn't *just sex*." He flexed his hips and she gasped as he sank deeper. "I want you. All of you." He pulled back and looked down at her, his eyes no longer hard with anger but teeming with emotions much, much more dangerous. "You are the promise the gods taunted me with every day of my life and I'm never going to want less than everything. Do you understand?"

Aurora swallowed. She understood all right. Too much. "Yes."

He waited, but when she said nothing more, he kissed her. Expecting the hard crush of his mouth on hers, she was nearly undone by a kiss so slow and enticing, so sensual and gentle that it struck at the foundation of the confidence she'd had in the rightness of all she was doing. Again and again he'd brought her to the brink of all she knew to be true and challenged her to weigh it against the life he continued to offer her. The life she was beginning to want with a desire that curled around her most cherished hopes and dreams.

A cool breeze brushed against her side, merging the wild sandalwood scent of Connyn with the smells of dew-touched earth and morning flowers. The heady aroma swelled the soul-deep longing of wanting him until it crashed over her in a sudden, unexpected wave. With a soft whimpering moan she returned his kiss passionately, tangling her legs with his as he started to rock. Squeezing with her thighs and cunt, she matched his rhythm as he moved slow and heavy over and in her. Friction, heat and the forceful slide of his cock had her aching again for release in a matter of seconds.

His slow, controlled thrusts tightened her lust to the point of shattering. Flexing her fingers around his, she strained toward ecstasy until her muscles started to shake. The silky wet slide of his tongue against hers and his cock pushing into her incredibly wet and slick cunt held her mercilessly in a state of anticipation so acute every inch of her body felt consumed by him. Each hard thrust filled her and possessed her, stirring her magic and streaming blazing cords of pleasure through her. Cords that multiplied and grew under her skin, weaving together a shimmering, sensual net that caught her in his spell and made her restless to reach fully for him. Made her want to give him anything he asked for. Made her willing to tell him —

With a frenzied panic she clenched her inner muscles as strongly and as quickly as she could, squeezing and releasing his cock in a tight, hard set of contractions. A groan

vibrated out of his chest at his release while her climax broke over her, a swift sharp snapping of the chords that had held her in a fiery abeyance. The countless filaments shattered in a blazing burst that tossed her through the universe as easily as a tornado might sweep away a feather. She gasped out his name as the unraveling threads whipped a stunning pattern of ecstasy through her body.

Her heart thundered from her orgasm as much as it did from coming so close to the edge of revealing too much. Of becoming vulnerable enough to trust a man she'd been well warned of. As Connyn rolled to the side and tucked her against him, tenderly stroking her back as they both caught their breath, she knew she needed to gain more control during sex. His ability to strip away her defenses was unstoppable when he was in charge. No matter his reasons, she couldn't lose herself so much in the moment that she'd do anything for him, say anything. That was too high a price for her to pay at the moment even for ecstasy.

She pressed her hand against his chest. A tearing surge of emotion swept through her as she felt his heart still hammering hard. It wasn't only *her* emotions, *her* life at stake here she reminded herself. Others were relying on her to keep her promises. And she would. Some promises were worth all the world—or worlds—to keep. Even worth the cost of one's own heart.

Closing her eyes against the pain, she pushed away the craving that grew day by day to have him be completely hers. To be completely his.

* * * * *

Aurora pulled her hair back from her face in a tight ponytail at the back of her head. Since Connyn had left, she hadn't had the energy to explore the rooms that made up the private bedroom suite they apparently were to share. After a cursory glance through the adjoining spaces, not even their unique luxuriousness or oddities could hold her attention long enough to banish the nagging despair that had plagued her since this morning. She was so afraid that the plan she'd put so much hope in was about to come crashing down around her.

Since she was unable to put her finger on the cause, she was unable to solve the problem at the root of this *premonition* or whatever one chose to call a feeling this strong. Unchecked, the emotion was left free to roll through her in one suffocating wave after another. The sheer weight of those waves when they peaked and crashed down over her made her doubt everything she had trusted in up to this point.

Splitting the ponytail into two sections, she grabbed one in each hand and yanked, pulling it painfully tight. Cait had come in to draw her bath and help her dress. Even her lively banter hadn't dispelled the gloom that hung over her for long. Cait had noticed, but when Aurora had assured her that she was simply feeling a little overwhelmed in her new home, she had left it at that. Cait was a wealth of information but grew worried when pressed about how portals worked between worlds. Not wanting word to get back to Connyn, Aurora had quickly drifted to a different topic.

However, she had gained an invaluable piece of knowledge that fit with what she had learned previously from an offhand comment from a seamstress during their marathon fitting session. Now she just had to find a way to use it all.

A soft melody floated through the air, announcing that someone had arrived and was waiting outside the main door. It was, in her opinion, a great improvement over most doorbells she'd come across in her life. But the beautiful music still managed to set off a case of the jitters since the only visitors she was expecting were Bethany and Brooke. She'd have rather put off those introductions a while longer, at least until she got her footing more stable in this place, but Connyn had arranged it without her input. Surprise, surprise.

Since she'd sent Cait away for the afternoon, she headed for the door to answer it herself. Having no idea how this first meeting would go, she didn't want an audience for it. Reaching for the door, she saw once again the jagged scratch left by her ring when Connyn had taken her so hard and suddenly there. It had indeed done what he'd anticipated. Not once had she gone through it or even looked at it that she didn't remember exactly how that mark was made.

When she'd tried to rub the mark away yesterday before they'd left for lunch, Connyn had stopped her, telling her that the metal their rings were made of was the only substance hard enough to scratch the stone once it had been polished and that it couldn't be removed. He'd traced the mark on the stone and then touched her face. The kiss that had followed nearly made them late for the meeting with his parents.

Instead of reaching for the stone to open the door, she found herself tracing the mark as Connyn had. Once again the despair rose and a sob nearly choked her. Suddenly she knew. Clamping a hand over her mouth to muffle the cry, she leaned against the door for support. *Shit*. She'd fallen in love with him. Almost as soon as the emotion raced through her it was pushed aside by a flood of anger. What the fucking hell was wrong with her? She couldn't be in love with the man. Not only had she not known him long enough, he was too arrogant, too infuriating and too damn sexy.

She wasn't in love with Connyn Kilt, First Heir to the Third House of Ilyria. She was simply insane.

The music came again. No time for soul searching with people waiting to meet her. Taking a deep wits-collecting breath, she touched her ring to the red stone and stepped back as the door slid open. Two women stood there, both with wavy auburn hair and expectant smiles. And bright jade-green eyes.

They both stood motionless for a moment, staring at her in surprise, smiles frozen in place.

The taller one asked, "Aurora?"

Aurora nodded. The shorter one laughed and then hugged her. "Sorry," she said. "We were expecting red hair and green eyes. It seems to run in the family." Letting go she gestured to herself and then to the other woman. "I'm Bethany and this is Brooke."

She put her hands on her hips and tilted her head to one side. "Wow. The rumors are true. You are gorgeous."

Brooke smiled. "Finally. Someone to give Shyrana a run for her money."

Aurora's smile faltered. "Excuse me?"

Brooke waved the comment away. "Never mind. You don't look like I thought you were going to, but my most recent memory is over twenty-five years old. And honestly, I just remember a head of curly red hair."

Aurora licked her lips and looked from one to the other. "My hair darkened as I grew."

"Dear god," Bethany said. "We've only just met you and already we're making you nervous."

"No, no. You're fine. Come in. Please." She backed up and gave them room to enter. "This isn't exactly the normal family reunion and I've been nervous about meeting you for a while."

Bethany laughed again. "I gave up on normal the moment my husband turned into a big black cat."

Aurora nearly stumbled on the rise of the bridge she was crossing. "A what?"

"A *kyltar*. A mythological beast that used to roam through ancient Ilyria."

"The same *kyltar* that's on the floor of the porch?"

"Sort of. Though that's called *The Kyltar* and my husband turns into a *kyltar*. One of many manifestations of the magic we carry in our blood. Apparently, how it manifests changes from heir to heir and generation to generation, constantly shifting and mixing the gifts."

"I'm pretty sure you lost me with the 'my husband turned into' part."

"Don't worry. It takes some getting used to, but you'll catch up," Bethany replied. Suddenly her eyes rounded as she got a good look at the courtyard. "This is beautiful! I'm going to tell Wyc we need a fountain in the front courtyard."

"You have fountains in nearly every room already," Brooke said.

"I know. So what's one more? Besides," Bethany said running a hand over her swollen stomach, "I'll tell Wyc the sound helps calm me down and that it's good for the baby."

"You're shameless," Brooke laughed. Turning to Aurora, she explained, "Ilyrian men have a lot of faults, but being indifferent to their families is not one of them. Especially when it comes to their wives pregnant with their first child."

Bethany snorted. "Crazy is more like it. We both had fully armed escorts here and we never even left the palace grounds."

"Escorts?"

"Guards," Brooke said. "We left them outside with yours. They didn't look too happy about letting us come in alone, but they didn't want to argue with us and fight your guards at the same time."

"I don't have any personal guards. Those are just the house guards."

Brooke shrugged but Bethany said, "See how far you get past the front entry by yourself without at least two extra shadows."

"Do they follow you everywhere?"

"Pretty much," Bethany said. "At least when you're not inside private quarters."

"Have you been outside the palace grounds?" Aurora asked.

Bethany shook her head. "No. But the grounds are *huge*. Still, I'm working on talking Wyc into it. I really want to see his family's territory. But because I've had complications with my pregnancy —"

"Uh, *hel-lo*," Brooke interrupted. "Being nearly poisoned to death is not a normal pregnancy complication. Wyc wasn't the only one freaked out by that, oh mother-to-be of the first child to be born into the final generation of the prophecy."

Bethany rolled her eyes. "Well, anyway, since then Wyc's been beyond overprotective. We stay here because there are more safeguards put in place. All five families have many of their best soldiers here. More added as each one of us has been found and considering the circumstances, I understand." Bethany gave Brooke a warning look. "Something I would never admit to saying."

Brooke nodded. "Of course. Wouldn't do to let them know too often that they're right."

"So Connyn's irritating arrogance is a family trait?" Aurora asked. Absently Aurora rubbed a spot between her eyes. The small ticking pain was back.

"Arrogance?" Bethany said and then smiled. "You are so tactful." Bethany's brows pulled together in a slight frown. "Are you feeling okay? We could come back another time."

Aurora dropped her hand and tried to smile reassuringly. She really hoped her eye didn't start to tick again. "No, please stay. Everything is fine, it's just this whole prophecy thing has kind of unnerved me since I had a talk with Connyn's mother. "

"His *mother*? Well hell—oops. I mean *heck*." Shaking her head, Bethany let out a loud sigh. "I'm trying to cut out the cursing since I'm going to be a mom," she explained. "Connyn should be telling you all this, not his mother. I can't believe these men don't explain themselves better. One of these days, one of them is really going to piss off their mate and Ilyria will have one less heir to a throne."

"It's the final generation thing that's throwing me the most," Aurora said.

Bethany ran a hand over the obvious swell of her belly. A thoughtful look came over her face. "It's enough to throw anyone. Having the fate of a world rest on the shoulders of our children..." She took a deep breath and looked back up at Aurora and

Brooke, facing them with a shaky smile. "Jesus. I can't think about that for very long. It scares the hell out of me."

"I'm sorry," Aurora apologized. "I'm sure there are others who can answer my questions."

"It's all right. It's hormones. And just really wanting my child to live a perfect life free of pain and trouble. That's not asking too much, right?" she said with a wry shake of her head." Bethany turned to Brooke. "You went out of the palace when we first got here, didn't you?"

"Rordyc took me on a quick two-day tour of his family's territory when we first arrived, but I haven't pushed the issue to go back because jumping through portals makes me puke. I'm just not up to traveling. Hopefully things will even out during the second trimester."

Aurora's eyebrows flew up. "You're pregnant too?"

Brooke blushed slightly. "Yes."

"Good god. Is there something in the water in this planet?"

"Nope. Just in the Mating Rites," Brooke laughed. She frowned at Aurora. "Are you feeling okay? You just went white as a sheet."

"I...uhh...yes. I'm fine. Just trying to assimilate." Aurora mentally shook herself and gestured to what she had started to call the Canopy Room, the day room she'd been shown to the first day. "And I'm forgetting my manners." Cait had set out a table of food in anticipation of the visit. "Please, after you. I hope you're hungry."

"You are a mind reader," Bethany said, not shy about taking the lead toward the food. After the initial oohing and aahing over the miniature buffet as they filled their plates, they each picked a comfortable seat next to the window.

Licking pink cream from her fingers that had oozed out of a puff pastry, Bethany said, "This is a beautiful room. It would make an amazing nursery."

The cracker in Aurora's mouth turned to dust. Brooke looked at Aurora and then glared at Bethany. Bethany blushed. "Oops. Sorry. New mother syndrome. I should know better. Too much too fast. If it helps, I screamed at Wyc the first time I thought he might have gotten me pregnant."

"Are all the men the size of Connyn?" Aurora asked.

"Pretty much."

"And you screamed at him?"

Bethany grinned. "I was upset. I also tried to cut out my guardian tattoo with a carving knife, but that's another story."

"Honestly, Bethany," Brooke said. "It's a good thing I'm here or she might think lunacy runs in the family."

Bethany picked up a small triangular finger sandwich. "Huh. You forget that I was there when you tried to run over your mate with a truck."

"He deserved it."

"Oh I know he did." Bethany popped the little sandwich into her mouth whole and threw Brooke a broad teasing grin before she started chewing.

Now it was Aurora's turn to laugh. "Now I don't feel so bad for some of my more violent thoughts toward Connyn. I was beginning to think it was just me."

"Ha!" Brooke said. "It's not us. It's the men. Good thing they're so sexy."

Bethany's impish grin was full of mischief. "It does tend to make up for an awful lot."

"Usually," Aurora murmured, her tone making it clear that there were times when even an Ilyrian male's ultimate sexual appeal didn't get him completely off the hook.

Bethany's grin spread to a full smile as she pointed another sandwich at Aurora. "We're going to get along just great."

* * * * *

By the time she'd parted ways with Brooke and Bethany, Aurora had two women she'd come to regard as friends and a hell of a lot of information she was still trying to digest along with other salient facts she'd collected since she'd been in Ilyria. Apparently, she did have several personal guards. When Brooke and Bethany had taken her on a tour of the palace compound, they were "escorted" by at least a dozen guards. Only six of them had arrived with Brooke and Bethany.

She had felt like the sideshow to a traveling carnival the way people stopped whatever they were doing to stare at them as they passed by. Bethany and Brooke ignored it as they pointed out the different streets that led to the private sectors of the Five Houses, making sure she knew the way to get to both of their homes.

Pacing back and forth in the Canopy Room, she put into place all she had learned. There was only one more full day before the Council met and she could feel time slipping through her fingers. It was actually a relief when the message came that Connyn would be late again. Every time she even glanced at the main door, heat flashed over her skin. Which was one of the reasons she'd camped out in the Canopy Room while she considered her options.

Still praying that Ellen would show up before she was paraded in front of the Council, she ran through plans B, C and D. She was still working on plan E. Her first order of business in all of the plans was to make sure she held in complete check her willingness to confess all her heart while in the throes of sexual ecstasy. And to do that, she'd need to keep the reins of control in her hands. That shouldn't be too hard for just two more nights.

After the Council met, all bets were off. She had a very bad feeling about that meeting. Bethany and Brooke hadn't been able to tell her much about the Council. Neither of them had been before it or knew much about what might happen, nor had they even known Connyn had arranged for her to be presented to the Elders and

Prophets. Their expressions when she mentioned it did nothing but make her worry more. A lot more.

Pulling her hair loose from the ponytail, she stared out at the darkening night. Shit. There was nothing she could do about the Council. But there was something she could do about Connyn. She smiled. And there was plenty she was planning to do to Connyn as well, if she could keep her nerves under control long enough.

Turning away from the window, she walked to the bed, shedding clothes as she went. Right now she felt wound tight enough to burst. Not the place she needed to be in if she intended to keep control tonight. With her body wrapped in this tension, it wouldn't take much convincing just to let Connyn take charge and work it all out of her. The idea of letting him simply dominate her in that rather primitive but undeniably sexy way he could had her skin warming with just the thought.

Though she'd learned to bring the lights on by watching Cait run her finger around the rim of the light bowls, she didn't bother with adjusting each one individually. Turning in a slow circle in front of the bed, she held her hand out, fingers spread, and whispered, "Lights low." The room was immediately suffused in a soft light that made the white bedding glow like a welcoming pool of romantic dreams.

Once she was lying in the middle of the bed, she stretched out completely naked and closed her eyes. Let herself drift, sifting through fantasies as her arms and legs shifted over the smooth material that was both soft and cool against her skin. She opened her mind as the possibilities wafted through, smiled at the vision her imagination created of Connyn standing behind the spoked wheel of a pirate ship, confidence shining out of his gray eyes, dark as the thunderheads building in the sky behind him.

She ran her hands lightly from her breasts to her thighs. No, she didn't want a storm. Well, it was her fantasy. She could fix that. Cupping her breasts in both hands, she reached for a fantasy she'd put off, waiting for a time she'd need a good hard orgasm and plenty of time to work through it. Pinching her nipples, she inhaled a long deep breath, bent her knees and drew them up, opening her heating pussy to the cool caress of the evening breeze.

Phoebe was nervous. Captain Kilth was in a mood today. She'd like to believe it was the storm they'd been racing all day to stay ahead of. One quick look out the porthole had been enough to prove that they were no longer dealing with that particular obstacle. She glanced back at the door. Which meant the captain might soon be down to finish what he had threatened.

Her skirts brushed and swished around her legs as she walked in tight circles in the small space, wondering just how far she'd pushed him this morning. It had been more than a week since they'd left the last port and this morning she'd opened her eyes to find him looking down at her with a strange expression on his face. He'd looked half angry, half perplexed. She was surprised that he hadn't either already dressed and left or stroked her fully awake and ready to receive him. Either being the norm depending on the situation of the ship or crew.

The large door creaked as Captain Kilth entered and then thudded loudly as he pushed it closed again. She spun around in time to see him slide the bolt into place with an ominous,

heavy-sounding clunk. He turned to face her but didn't reach for her. Instead, he leaned his shoulders against the door and crossed his arms over his broad chest.

Suddenly she found it difficult to breathe. The man embodied the very perfection of physicality in male form and the aura of danger that enveloped him only made him appear more unreachable and more desirable. As frequent as their interactions had become, not once had she grown immune to the reactions he sparked in her. Days ago she had been quite shocked to discover that she actually looked forward to being with him. In fact, enjoyed the time they spent together both in and out of his bunk. The conclusion she'd come to after a clear examination of those feelings last night while she was, as always, tucked against his side after being exhaustively seduced was at the root of her offer this morning.

They had to be closing in on several possible ports and she knew she must be set ashore as soon as humanly possible. To help expedite the process, she'd quite generously offered him a large sum to be decreased daily in order to ensure a possible port would not be ignored in favor of her "safety" once again. If she didn't remove herself from his presence soon, her physical safety wouldn't be the only thing in jeopardy.

The curse he'd breathed across her brow was both shocking and startling. And when she'd tried, in her most polite but pointed way, to reason with him in an attempt to draw out some semblance of agreement from her captor, he'd pushed out of bed with another oath. Now being angry herself, she'd accused him of being any number of things she couldn't completely recall at the moment but that had leapt off the tip of her tongue in her burst of anger.

She knew she had called him a liar, a rogue and had creatively compared him to one of her uncle's dogs that she particularly disliked, but it was to her shame that she couldn't actually remember everything she had yelled at him as he dressed. Though this was undoubtedly a most difficult state of affairs, she'd never in her life behaved so badly, lost so much control. Apparently the man was able to push her past all the limits of polite society that had been drummed into her very core by years of proper education for a woman of her social standing.

A glint of light from an object he held caught her attention enough to remove her gaze from where it had locked on his chest. It looked like a small flask. She frowned, wondering if he was drunk. Frowned deeper as she wondered if he planned on getting her drunk.

He ignored her questioning stare and instead asked, "So are you still of the mind to pay me more than what I've already taken from you to guarantee the promise I made regarding your safe return home?"

She swallowed, or tried to over the large lump suddenly lodged in her throat. The angry gleam in his eyes belied the calm, civil manner in which the question was asked. But she had already made the proposition. At this point there was no pretending she hadn't. "It's a good deal," she said. "You'd be a fool not to take it."

Immediately, she wished the words back as he pushed off the door with an indolent roll of his shoulders and closed in on her. A harsh darkness flashed in his gaze. She instinctively backed up. "Perhaps fool was too harsh a word," she amended. "I was not implying –"

Her uneasy blathering was brought to an abrupt halt when his hand bracketed her jaw and he held her face to look up into his.

"As a matter of fact, I have made up my mind." As he spoke, he walked her backward until her bottom hit the berth. "Though I don't want your money. This trip has already reaped a lucrative compensation for my time and effort." His eyes narrowed as they focused on her mouth, his fingers gentling slightly around her jaw. "However, I find that I still want you."

The rough edge to his voice was ragged with the color of lust she'd come to recognize, but there was something else cloaked in his words. A sharpness of emotion that fled his face the instant after it appeared. Then his eyes were hard again. Flint and fire as he stepped back and tucked the small flask he still held into his wide belt.

"Turn around," he ordered.

She blinked once, set her mouth and lifted her chin before she complied. When she realized she was showing her fear by worrying the sides of her dress between her fingers, she forced her hands to relax and release the material.

"Bend over on the bed and pull your garments up around your waist."

She'd heard this tone only once before. It was not one to be argued with or denied. Not if one valued life and limb. Taking a deep breath, she followed his command, leaving herself bared to his gaze. Her pulse kicked when he took her skirts and tossed them further up so that they covered her head.

"Leave them," he said when she started to push them away. The layers of dark material were as effective as a blindfold and she dug her fingers into the bedcovering, both in anticipation of the novelty and in alarm of it. Before, when he had entered her from behind, a wanton wickedness had blazed through her, encouraging shocking fantasies that intensified the carnal pleasure. But at that time he'd not been angry and had dealt softly with her.

As his hands moved over her body today they were firm and felt coldly assessing, as if she were property being inspected and judged. Still, as one hand ran up the back of her thigh, heat flared almost instantaneously between her legs. When he splayed both hands over her bottom and squeezed, she closed her eyes and bit her lower lip. The fear was quickly overshadowed by the sexual tension as his hands roamed from her lower back to her thighs. His touch was not cruel but truly knowledgeable. She found herself widening her stance and tilting her opening up quite brazenly as her body warmed and yearned.

He kneaded her bottom harder. His thumbs pressed parallel lines into her giving flesh as he followed her curves from the junction of her thighs up to her hips. She shivered when he kissed her hip, grazed his teeth over the swell of her bottom. When he pulled her buttocks apart and licked the top of her crease, she gasped and automatically attempted to jerk away, her arms tangling in her gown as she tried to free herself.

"No!" His open hand landed with a loud crack across her backside in a startling spanking. The message was clear and she quit struggling. Immediately his hand smoothed over where she was sure to have a bright red mark. "Good," he whispered.

And then his mouth was on her again, kissing, biting, licking, sucking, moving over the globes of her bottom. Occasionally his tongue dipped into the crease of her bottom and she had to force herself to remain still, the dull sting from where he had spanked her a clear reminder of his intolerance of her disobedience.

His nimble fingers played wherever his mouth wasn't, caressing her inner thighs, stroking her nether lips, brushing the back of her knees. Every time his fingers came close to the swollen bud at her center, her breath caught as her need spiked. And every time her desperation was driven higher as he denied her the touch that would spiral her body into release.

When her own juices dripped over the heated core he was purposefully evading a hard shiver shook her bones. And then another as he slid a long finger deep inside her without warning.

"So wet, my Lady Ballantine," he whispered. His taunting arrogance was as much in his tone as in the way he stroked her inner walls. A second finger joined the first and he pressed firmly against the front of her womb. A staggering bolt of energy shot through her and she felt a rush of liquid release over his fingers. If not for the lashing need still snapping at her every nerve, she'd have thought he'd just brought her to an astounding orgasm.

Her desperate moan of protest as he withdrew his fingers was suspended in disbelief as she felt the pressure of his finger at her anus. Stunned and scandalized, she remained arrested and mute as his finger pushed in. Her mind simply could not process his action. Had no way to assimilate what he was doing with what should and could be done.

"Breathe." His abrasive dictate was curt and jolted the breath from her lungs. As the air whooshed out, his finger pushed in deeper, twisted and slid in deeper yet.

When he removed his finger, she was surprised by how empty she suddenly felt. She heard the cap to the flask being unscrewed and drew in a shaky breath. Phoebe jumped a little when a cool liquid trickled between her buttocks, warming as it dripped down between her legs. Oil, she decided when his finger slid, slippery but sure, back into her anus as far as it could go.

Her small, breathy exclamation huffed out when he pushed a second finger in to join the first and the tightened ring of muscle stretched to house the doubled thickness. He worked his two fingers there with the oil for several minutes, putting pressure on the opening and forcing it to give. The repetitive turning and flexing of his fingers inside her urged her through new and deeply erotic waves of sensation.

A sharp gasp caught at the back of her throat when he added a third finger. His murmured assurances drifted faintly through the layers of material and could barely be discerned over the pounding of her heart. Pressing her cheek into the mattress, she held tightly to the bedclothes and twisted them in her hands as her hips began to buck in rhythm to his thrusts. The sensations were too raw, too indecent to be considered pleasurable by the normal capacity one might employ to judge such matters. But the hunger, the absolutely primitive and compulsory craving his attentions whipped to life within her could not be denied.

Even though her body began to relax as it grew accustomed to the alternate invasion, fiery threads wove through those muscles still taut with the new labor of accommodation. More oil dribbled over where his fingers continued to stretch the tight opening, trickled down between her legs where he caught it with his other hand and used it to wet his fingers so they slid provocatively over and around the tiny bundle of nerves there. Panting, she dug her fingers into the bed coverings. She arched her back and went up on her toes as all the muscles in her back and legs tightened for the expected release.

"Not yet my lady," he said, withdrawing his fingers from her anus. He stilled the other hand between her legs but continued to cup her gently there, keeping just enough pressure to hold her

to the edge of her climax without allowing her to go over. It was a moment before she realized that the soft, incoherent plea that drifted around her ears was her own. Her entire body ached for the ecstasy she'd grown used to under his hands. Writhing, she stretched her arms in front of her and pushed back, clamping her thighs around his hand.

He flattened his fingers against her pussy, spurring a new wave of desire. Rocking back into him, she felt her buttocks part and a new pressure at her anus. She jerked forward, forgetting the hand between her legs. But she was virtually lying across the bed and didn't have anywhere to go. A hot thick rod pushed slowly into her. Her muscle resisted for a moment and then gave way to the oiled head of his cock. The feel of him there, penetrating her body in such an untried manner loosed a bevy of dark erotic impulses and sensations. It engulfed her at such a primitive level, she knew without being told that a lady of her standing should never encounter, not to mention court or sanction, this type of carnal exercise.

Holding her breath, she didn't move. Instinctively clenched her muscles and closed her eyes, gathering the will to resist the desires lashing her from the inside out.

Kilth cursed, a soft exclamation that sounded more like a surprised entreaty for mercy than a conscious blasphemy. "By all that is holy, you're so damn tight a man could lose every shred of control he possessed entering you."

"I've never been entered quite this way," she managed, grasping for sanity, some thread of normalcy she could seize hold of to steady her through this erotic storm raging through her body.

Captain Kilth's laugh was strained. "Undoubtedly." Gently, he massaged her bottom. "Relax now. It will go easier if you breathe."

Feeling the need to protest rising from the depths of her incredibly proper upbringing, she lifted her head though she could not see him through the layers of material that still covered her. "I don't believe breathing is the issue here. This particular activity seems rather un –"

One large hand wrapped around her hip and squeezed. "Phoebe."

The command with which he laced her name stopped her contention. "Yes?"

"Stop talking." A strained amusement underscored his order, but before she could respond, he pushed in further, large and solid, filling her and stretching her. With his manhood fully lodged inside her, she tried to breathe and found the best she could manage was a shallow puffing.

On one hand she was truly amazed at what her body could accommodate and the sensations this type of intercourse released. On the other hand, she couldn't quite get past the shocking way he was using her body to bring about those sensations. This last kept her from totally losing herself to his carnal domination, her mind too busy justifying and weighing –

"Stay with me," he said, pressing her clitoris between two of his fingers and pulling back. Her sharp gasp was cut off when he pushed fully into her again. Even with the applied oil, it was a rougher, more savage taking than her imagination had ever wandered to. It left her feeling adrift in vulnerability, once again a fresh initiate to the world of corporeal lusts where she was forced to play a game without knowing the rules. A place she had thought she'd finally passed thanks to the considerable instruction of her captor.

The worries and concerns spinning through her mind scattered when he pushed into her once more. This time the action was more determined, harsher. Harder. Her anus stretched and

burned even as she received him. The fiery sensation licked down her thighs, the back of her knees and straight to her toes. Again and again he thrust inside her, his powerful legs smacking against her as each time he drove deep. There was no softness, no charitable lessening of lust-driven actions to spare more refined emotions. His complete tyranny over her body was frightening and terribly arousing.

His fingers found her center again. They teased and stroked as he continued to plunge into her. Feeling the size and heat of him, every long inch as he sank inside her from behind, she pulsed against his hand as he rubbed where she was so wet and swollen. Flames circled furiously under her skin, swirling in an ancient and fierce pattern that swept so thoroughly through every fiber of her being it annihilated all prospects of decorum and restraint. She was left with a single, simple need, a solitary desire. To submit. To the lust. To the ecstasy. To the inferno of a man who refused to bargain and refused to back down. Who took what he wanted and left her wishing in her most secret heart he'd want more.

With a final cry she threw herself into the eclipsing explosion and let it roll unhindered through her soul.

Letting the climax fade by slow degrees and her heartbeat return to a normal rate, Aurora stared up at the sheer, filmy fabric that hung suspended above the bed in such a way that it appeared to float on the air. As the cooling breeze soothed her heated body, she lay still for long moments and thought back through her fantasy. She'd been so caught up in it that she'd given herself over to it. Perhaps too much.

Hooking her finger around a damp strand of hair that had fallen across her neck, she twisted it tightly around until she could feel the sharp tug at the roots. She shouldn't worry about the fantasy. She wasn't some young innocent girl being ravished for the first time and Connyn was no pirate. He was heir to a throne in a war-torn world and she was a woman on a mission for what was left of her family. And she would do what she had to do to complete it.

Chapter Eleven

The light in the courtyard had already been dimmed. Connyn was not surprised. He was unwilling to leave Aurora alone in the capital city until things were more settled between them, so much of what he had to immediately assess and deal with was taking longer than usual. If he had returned personally to his home territory, decisions would be made much quicker than dealing with second-hand information through reading and listening to reports. After the Council meeting, he'd have to travel home regardless. His people needed to see him. But for the next two days...

He hurried across the courtyard to their bedroom, suddenly eager to hold his woman. Throughout the day he'd found his mind leaving whatever concern lay at hand to seek out memories of Aurora. Because he knew she wouldn't appreciate being watched so carefully, he'd not told her that every hour he was away from her, he was having reports brought to him of her whereabouts and activities. It was as much for his peace of mind as for her safety. If he didn't have information being brought to him, he'd feel compelled to find out himself, delaying his work further.

Today he'd been pleased that she had gotten on so well with her sisters. Hopefully their presence would ease her transition between worlds. Though not happy that they'd wandered out of his family's sector, he knew she needed to feel some sense of freedom or she might do something rash to prove her independence. He contented himself with the knowledge that his men would have stopped her had she decided to leave the highly protected grounds of the palace compound and that she had returned safely.

Likely she'd already be in bed asleep now, but he looked forward to waking her as the door slid open silently at his touch. Here too were the lights dimmed, their soft glow intimately illuminating only the bed. An empty bed. His heart stopped. Immediately he scanned through the far wall, looking in vain for his mate in the adjoining room.

An unfamiliar fear spiked through him, its saw-toothed tentacles severing him from his habitual restraint. "Aurora!"

"Yes?"

The low, husky answer floated to him from behind. He turned to find her under one of the open arches that led out to the balcony, one arm wrapped around the column. She leaned against it with the languid grace expected of a woman who held a warrior's passions at her beck and call. Silvery rays from Ilyria's two moons swept around her and softly outlined the curves beneath the sheer material that lay draped over her body.

Panic turned to lust in an instant. She stood mostly in shadow, seeming as ethereal as the gown she wore that floated in the slight breeze as gently as the morning mist

rising from the river. As his eyes adjusted to the low light he saw that her hair was loose, cascading around her shoulders and breasts in subtle waves of glimmering midnight made all the darker against the pale white of her skin and gown.

Where she stood, the only light touching her was in the form of ethereal moonbeams streaming through the large open archways. The floor, walls and columns in this room were the black stone quarried from deep within the mountains of his home. Though the walls were left rough with the red crystal marbling through it, the floor was polished to a mirrored shine making it appear as if she were standing on the cavernous edge of eternity, a dream of beauty caught for just a breath of time by the web of night.

He felt rather than saw her smile before she slowly pushed away from the column and started toward him, her hips swaying seductively.

As she got closer he could see that what he thought was a dress was actually separate strips of material tied together in an intricate pattern that played more on the imagination of what was hidden beneath them than on what the outfit actually revealed. The layered strips were woven through with thin shimmering threads of silver. Gathered in an array of complex knots at both shoulders and at her waist, the strips ended in an uneven edge around her ankles. Her feet were bare, silent on the smoothed stones of the bedroom's floor as she approached.

The reflective threads in the gown caught at every small shaft of light in the room making her appear as if the gods themselves had wrapped her in the diaphanous beams of his world's twin moons. Seeming to float more than walk, she graced every movement, every step, every slight swing of her hand, sway of her hip, tilt of her head with an unmistakable sensuality focused directly on him. He never remembered ever wanting a woman so much.

She stopped just out of reach. "You called. Did you want something?"

His gaze moved up from where the shape of her nipples pressed through the gown. Her eyes were dark with a teasing promise and her full lips curved in invitation.

He started to reach for her but she stepped back and held out her hand to stay his movement.

"No," she commanded, frowning at him.

He froze. "No?"

Slowly her seductive smile returned. "Tonight we play by my rules. And first, I want your promise."

Narrowing his eyes, he asked, "What promise?"

She rested the fingers of her right hand on the base of her throat. Drawing out the movement, she let her hand drop so that her fingers grazed over her skin to lie lightly in the deep vee of material between her breasts. "That you will do as I say. And only as I say."

His blood pounded at the erotic tenor of her words. No woman had ever made such a request of him and he wasn't sure he liked it. In fact, his reputation for the way he

absolutely ruled a woman's body and thus drove her to the highest levels of ecstasy had always made his lovers willingly yield to his will. Until Aurora.

"Why?" The word came out harshly, making him sound as if he didn't trust her. Making him wonder if he did.

Since the moment he'd seen her on the Riverwalk in San Antonio, he'd studied his mate. Watched her expressions and gestures, gauged her emotions and reactions. Because of his close scrutiny, he caught the lightning fast flicker of anxiety in her eyes and the slight way her lips tightened nervously before she turned away from him.

She moved back toward the balcony, back into the shadows. For a moment, he was mesmerized by the soft curve of her ass as it swayed in front of him with each step. She stopped by the column and looked over her shoulder at him. Shrugging it slightly, she said, "Just because."

There was something in her voice that hinted at all things erotic beyond the *just because*. Catching his gaze, she held his eyes with her own, the dark, intimate offer smoldering in their depths clearly revealed before the heavy fringe of her lashes fell to shield them and she turned to look out into the night with a small sigh. "But it's obvious you've worked hard today, so of course I'll understand if you're not up to it tonight."

He grunted in disgust. Just because he knew the words were only to spur him into her agenda didn't mean that he could stop the automatic denial that would spring from any Kilth male in a similar situation. "Woman, stop talking nonsense and come back here."

"Woman?" She turned with her hands on her hips but her tone was light. "Careful, Your Royal Highness, your inner barbarian is showing."

Tension skated along his jaw and down his neck. He was nowhere near showing his barbaric side. Something for which she should be gratefully thanking her blessed stars since the way she looked and the way he wanted her both drew deeply on the elemental passions driving him tonight.

He was about to pick her up and toss her on the bed when she took a step toward him. The soft lights she'd left on in the room fell across her face and a strange new emotion swelled up from somewhere deep inside him as she looked up at him, waiting. The feeling, strong and sweet, flooded through him until it saturated every chasm and crack in his heart and soul. Without even thinking about what it might cost him, he found himself nodding and agreeing to her request simply because she had asked it of him.

Her smile of acceptance settled on him like the rays of a thousand suns. He started to reach for her again but her eyebrows shot up in an arrogant affront. Teasing one of the small knots below her right breast until it started to unravel, she said, "You've given your word. I expect you to keep it. Unless you don't you think you can control yourself enough to keep your promise." She tugged harder at the knot and her breast jiggled

above it. "And here I was laboring under the impression that all Ilyrian men, especially the warriors, were known for their control no matter what the situation."

As he watched the knot come undone, he felt tension grip him tighter. Her low, sultry laugh filled the silence as once again he let his hands fall to his sides. Though he knew she was only goading him to get the response she desired, he grudgingly had to admit it was working. She was appealing to his basic lust as well as to the honor of his word and his reputation as a man and warrior.

Winding the loosened strip of material around her finger, she gently tugged on it and the other end pulled free from where it was attached at her shoulder.

"Well?" she asked. The strip of material slid over the swell of her breast and in its wake left her breast slightly more exposed. "Do I have your promise?"

"Yes."

She allowed the strip to uncurl from around her finger and drop to the ground by her feet. Smiling up at him with desire and triumph glittering in her dark eyes, she whispered, "I promise you won't regret it."

Too late. Connyn already regretted not taking her immediately. That smile of hers promised a long and torturous night.

"First," Aurora said, stepping close and running her hands over his shoulders, "no touching." Pointedly, she looked down at where he had automatically placed his hands on her hips as soon as she'd drawn near.

He raised his eyebrows. "You're touching me."

"Oh I plan on doing a lot more than just touching you," she said. "But we're playing by my rules and my rules say that you only touch me when I say."

Her skin was warm under the thin material. His fingers itched to slide between the sheer layers and touch her, pull her against him. The teasing scent of flowers drifted from her hair. He wanted her. Now. "Aurora—"

"No." Dropping her hands, she stepped back and his hands slid off her hips. "My way or no way."

He was staring at her breasts when she crossed her arms underneath them, plumping them up. He wanted to put his hands on them, slide his fingers around the fullness, feel her nipples tighten under his palms. Instead, he slowly curled his fingers into fists. "What do you want me to do?" His voice was gruff with irritation.

Her slow smile was sexy, promising and sent a chill down his spine.

"First," she said, "Take off your shirt." In seconds he was naked from the waist up. She might have plans to draw out this sensual torture, but he sure as hell didn't.

"Very good," she said. "Now put your hands behind your back." She waited as he did as she commanded, holding his left wrist in his right hand. "Oh..." she purred. "You are being such a good boy. That deserves a reward." Unknotting another corner of one of the strips at her shoulder, she pulled it loose from where it was tucked at her waist. This left a thin ribbon of flesh along her hip and thigh bare to his gaze. Its

removal also left only one thin panel covering the center of her right breast through which her nipple could be seen clearly. It poked up against its covering, proud, pink and begging for the attention he could give it.

She dropped the thin strip of material on the floor and then ran her hand from her shoulder to her hip where the material had been. Gazing at where his cock strained against his pants, she said, "I see you appreciate your rewards."

"Rewards can work both ways," he offered.

"I'm sure they can." She stepped closer again, slid her hands back over his shoulders. "And maybe another time we'll explore that variation. But not tonight." She kissed his neck and let her breasts brush against his chest. Barely. Her kisses were light and teasing, and when he turned his face to catch her mouth she pulled her head back. "No. I just want you to stand there for a minute. I want complete freedom to touch and taste you without interference."

With a scarcely muted growl, he complied and turned to stare straight ahead.

Running her hands across his chest and shoulders, she moved to stand behind him. "Did I ever tell you how sexy your hair is?" she asked as she untied the narrow braids that kept it pulled back out of his way. Her fingernails gently scraped down his back as she combed her fingers through his hair. She repeated this process several times and he was about to make a demand of his own when she sauntered back around.

Slowly she splayed her hands over the center of his chest. Even in the dim light her ivory skin seemed to glow against his own darker tone. She flexed her fingers until her nails made shallow half-moon indentations in his skin. And then she leaned forward and kissed the spot between her hands. Her tongue swirled and then started to move down.

Straight down. She didn't stop until the waist of his pants made it impossible for her to go further. She looked up at him, her mouth still doing wicked things to the spot below his navel. Briefly, her nails dug in deeper as she swiped her tongue under his waistband. Need shot through him and his arms jerked with the restraint it took to keep them behind his back.

A hum of approval skated over his skin as she started kissing her way back up his abdomen. Her hands moved, kneaded, pressed over his chest, shoulders and arms. Her hair fell forward and slid against his heated skin. His teeth clenched and he switched how he was holding his hands behind his back. He'd been holding his left wrist so tightly, his hand had started to numb.

When she straightened away from him, the absence of her mouth on his skin left him with a sharp, yearning ache.

She flipped her hair over her shoulder. "My, my. You are showing some nice restraint here, Mr. Kith." With the edge of her fingernail, she traced a line from the center of his sternum to the top of his pants. "It's making me a little hot."

"Are you done playing?" he asked. The words ground out of him like boulders being pushed through a strainer.

Her laugh sparkled around him like falling diamonds as she unwound another strip of material from her gown. "Where would you ever get a silly idea like that?" She swiveled her hips in an erotic rhythm as the panel fell from her hand in a silky pile near her feet before she began untying another one.

Lust pounded through his veins as his eyes devoured her. Hungry to see more. To touch her. To fuck her. And the slow, piece by piece removal of her gown only goaded the animalistic desire already mercilessly riding him. His muscles hardened with the need to touch her as another panel fell to the floor. Both of her nipples could now be seen through the sheer fabric as her breasts swayed with her movements and the material draped from her waist flowed around her legs revealing brief peeks of creamy skin along her thighs and hips.

Not for a moment did he believe she'd gotten the urge to be playful tonight *just because*. But neither did it feel as if she were intent on repaying him for some unknown offense. Her teasing didn't have that tart edge of punishment, even when she'd occasionally allow her nails to leave pale red marks behind as she dragged her fingers across a portion of his chest.

He searched her face as she moved around him, her hands bold in their exploration of his upper body. They pressed over his torso, following the lines of muscle that defined his stomach, chest and arms. With each artful sweep of her fingers, she wound his desire higher and hotter.

Aurora was his mate and if she wished to lead in their lovemaking from time to time, he'd gladly indulge her. But there was more to this game she was playing of not letting him touch her. Something she was keeping from him.

Desire was there in her dark eyes as she watched the progress of her hands, but she was also using it to mask something just below the surface. Something that glinted quickly but repeatedly through her eyes. A vulnerability, a fear that she hadn't shared. He'd seen it more than once despite the effort she was making to keep it hidden. Tonight, she was using this sexual game of hers to keep her distance.

The knowledge that she was purposefully isolating even a small part of herself from him raged inside him. It prodded him to ignore his promise, turn the game back on her and force her to trust him enough to tell him her secrets.

Inwardly he cringed at his own thoughts. Many things could be forced, duty and even desire. But trust, genuine trust, could never be coerced. And his mate would trust him. She must trust him.

Aurora leaned against his side to kiss his shoulder, her breasts cushioning either side of his arm. He shifted to press against the softness and, with quick reprisal, she bit his shoulder hard enough to leave a mark. When his breath hissed out she smiled up at him and he knew she'd guessed that it was because her bite had nearly unchained his control.

Her hands slid down his back and front simultaneously until one cupped his ass and the other his cock. Slowly, she dragged her hands off him, her nails lightly scraping

over the tough fabric along the bulge at the front of his pants. Though thicker than the material covering her, his clothes did little to reduce the electric kick that hit him at her final touch.

He was barely breathing when she stepped away from him. "Time for you to get naked," she said.

Reaching far into the reserves of his self-control, without a word he bent to remove his boots and groaned when his pants didn't give quite enough to accommodate his hardened cock. When he straightened back to unfasten his pants he saw that Aurora had moved to stand in front of the bed.

In the process of removing another strip of material from the lower front of her gown, she smiled at him. A smile that might have been sweet if not for the wicked gleam shining too brightly in her eyes. Soon the shimmering panel she had chosen slid to the floor, leaving a single thin veil covering the thatch of dark hair between her legs.

A large stack of pillows had been piled in the middle of the coverlet and she sat down on the bed, scooting backward until she was leaning against them. After spreading her hair out around her shoulders, she rested her arms on the pile of cushions and stretched her legs indolently out in front of her, bent slightly at the knees and crossed at the ankles, a pose that looked both regal and offering.

The bedclothes were a rich red, the same color of the stones that represented his house. Black and gold trimmed out the suite and the excess of deep hues could have made the space feel closed and dark if the room hadn't been so large. He'd always been proud of his family's crest, the colors representing all he held dear, and worn it with a pride born in his bones. Aurora, poised majestically and laid out on his colors, had no idea the beast she was shaking awake to play her game.

She adjusted her position slightly under his penetrating gaze and several panels of her dress parted as a result, a smooth slide of shimmering silk over soft skin that revealed her legs from ankle to thigh. Only three sheer strips kept her breasts and mound from being bared to his sight as well. The fact that they completely covered her, but were sheer enough to cover nothing had his mouth going dry and his breath solidifying in his lungs.

At the very least they were moving in the right direction. She was finally, *finally*, on the bed. He rolled his shoulders back and forced his breath to ease out.

With another maddeningly teasing smile she said, "Don't act so relieved. You're not getting in bed with me."

Her eyebrows were rising again in that arrogant affront. He frowned in return, feeling the crease between his eyes deepen as she lifted one hand and made a circle in the air with her index finger.

"Well?" she asked. "What are you waiting on?"

His hands fisted around the waistband of his pants. "Apparently, I'm waiting on a command from you."

With a mock frown she *tsk-tsked* at him. "But I've already given it." Her finger did that annoying circling thing again. "You. Naked. Now."

The tyranny of strength so elemental to his nature made it close to impossible for him to act on her demand simply because it *was* a demand. Added that the haughty command had come from someone much weaker and under his protection, his *mate* even, and the inner war he was fighting to remain calm was nearly over before it began. It must have shown on his face because the same vulnerability he'd seen earlier flashed in her eyes and her smile froze slightly.

Fuck. Taking a deep breath, he popped three buttons off the fly of his pants when he jerked it open. Once he'd finished stripping, he stood fully erect on all counts and waited for her next order, wondering if she was going to have him perform in some way. He'd appreciated her imaginative streak in the bedroom before, but now the infinite number of possibilities she could be mulling through for her next command made him halfway wish for a more sedate lover in his mate.

After taking a deep breath that pressed her nipples harder against the thin gauze of the gown, Aurora let it back out on a hum of approval as she raked her eyes hungrily over him. Blatantly stopping in her visual examination just below his waist, she licked her lips suggestively.

"Do you know," she asked, her voice a slow purr that turned every word into a temptation, "what it does to me to see you standing naked and ready before me?" Before he could gather enough thought to put together words that had even the slightest chance of being articulate, she continued.

She tilted her head to the side and lightly laid the fingers of her right hand just below her ear. "You don't even have to touch me and my breath still starts to rush and my skin tingles." She traced a line down to the neckline of her gown above her breast. Looking down at her hand, she watched as her fingers pulled the sheer material to the side, completely baring her breast to his sight.

Sliding her hand underneath the soft weight, she lifted it, squeezed it gently. "My nipples have been tight since you walked in. Ready to be touched. Like this." She held her nipple between her index finger and thumb. Pinched it.

"Or like this." She twisted the tightened peak and the corners of her lips lifted in pleasure. "Damn," she murmured, "I love having my nipples twisted." Looking back up at him she said, "But you already knew that."

Instinctively Connyn knew that this new level of teasing had just begun, though his body insistently responded to her every taunt as if climax was a breath away. For sanity's sake, he tried to balance what his brain was telling him with his body's commands. He attempted to control his breathing and relax his muscles using the same mental techniques Jordyn had taught him as a young man in the face of terrible stress and pain. If you allowed the enemy to remove your focus, you handed him the victory before he'd even fought for it.

Aurora tugged the other side of her neckline out of the way so she could plump up both breasts, one in each hand. When she bent to lick first one nipple and then the other, a knuckle on Connyn's right hand popped and he realized that he was holding his hands fisted tight enough to crack bones. So much for battlefield composure techniques.

At the sound, Aurora looked up and smiled. He was starting to hate that smile.

She rose up on her knees, still holding her breasts, the nipples now a beautiful glistening pink aimed directly at him. "I bet your cock would feel wonderful sliding back and forth right here." She ran her tongue along the line formed between her breasts when she pushed them up and together and then licked her nipple again in quick, hard flicks that pushed the tip away only to snap back for another lash with her tongue. Moving on to her other nipple, she sucked it into her mouth. Connyn's blood roared in his veins as Aurora closed her eyes and moaned when she tilted her head back. Her lips parted and her breast pulled free through her teeth.

Another knuckle popped. His cock throbbed and a shudder ran down his spine. Without realizing it, Connyn had moved forward, the need to touch his mate overriding his memory of the game or her rules. Her eyes flew open and she stared at him accusingly when his knee came down on the bed, causing the mattress to dip toward him.

"No touching," she said.

He froze, half on half off the bed, cursing the size of the bed. He'd have been on her before her eyes opened if his were a normal bed. He was close enough now to see the pebbling on her skin caused by her arousal, the shaded pinks of her nipples starting with a lighter pink at the areola and darkening to a deep rose at the peaks. He could see the individual curls of her mound through the single sheer panel that fell down between her legs and the tiny shadowed oval of her navel.

Aurora slid her hands down over her stomach and onto her thighs. "But you can watch."

Lust hammered hard in Connyn's chest. The urge to lunge was barely restrained. The need so intense his gaze was branded by its fiery demand and for a moment, Aurora appeared engulfed by flames before him. His cock jutted out almost painfully before him and the one thought crushing all others was how fast he could thrust himself inside her body and how deep he could go.

He glanced at her face, saw determination and desire mixed in her expression. She lifted her chin. "Well?" she purred, curling the ends of the word up at the end with a teasing little lilt.

"I'd rather touch." His voice grated over the words like raw flesh over salted sand.

Her laugh was charmed seduction as her fingers slid between her legs, pushing the thin material tight over her mound. "You'll have to leave the touching to me. Tonight." Aurora shifted so her knees parted and her fingers pushed in deeper between her thighs. "Agreed?"

He nodded. Once. Sharply.

Aurora's head dropped back on a soft moan as she stroked her pussy. "Good, because taunting you like this has me so fucking turned on I feel like I could come right now." With her head dropped back, her breasts thrust out high and proud as she continued to touch herself. "God, my clit is so sensitive right now that even this thin material almost feels too rough pressing against it."

Slowly she lifted her head. "But you can't see very well, can you?" She tugged the material from between her legs and held it out. There was a wet spot in the middle of it. "We'll have to fix that. But first," she said as she leaned forward, bracing her weight on one hand, "there's something else I want to touch."

She glanced up at him, her mouth a breath away from his cock. Combing her fingers through her hair, she pulled it to one side. "So you can see," she said. When she let go of the thick twist, it fell in a cool sweep against his thigh. Like a cool brush of heaven against his hot skin, the strands caught in his leg hair for a second before its own weight pulled it down.

Heaven gave way to ecstasy the moment her hot tongue swiped up the side of his cock. It bobbed away from her mouth and then back against her lips. Wrapping her fingers around it to keep it in place, she swirled the flat of her tongue in a circle over the head of his cock. She kept her head tilted to the side so he could see her tongue's progress as she licked up, around and back down.

When she licked her way down to his base, his cock jumped in her hand. After generously attending to both balls until they started to draw up, she ran her tongue roughly up the seam between them, continued up the length of his cock and when she reached the top, sucked the head fully into her mouth. Her hum vibrated through him with a stunning jolt as her hand massaged his shaft with a gentle twist.

His hands were on her head, holding her in place as he thrust up, needing to feel her mouth completely surrounding him. He was seconds from sending a hot stream of cum down her throat and the thought of how her lips would slide down, how his release would fill her mouth and how her tongue would press against his cock as she swallowed had his hands fisting in her hair as he pulled back, preparing to thrust forward again.

But Aurora yanked her head back and he had to loosen his hold on her hair or risk hurting her. With a reproachful look, she *tsked* at him. It was a sound he was quickly learning to hate. A loud, aggravated growl rumbled out of his chest as he untangled his fingers. She shook her head and let go of him. "You touched me."

He couldn't speak. His entire body pulsed with frustration and he didn't trust himself to not reveal the thoughts going through his mind if he opened his mouth. If she thought his barbaric side had started to shine through earlier, she'd think he hadn't evolved at all if she could read his mind right this minute.

She twitched her index finger back and forth. "No more touching." Pushing back up to her knees, she propped her hands on her hips. "However," she said, frowning as

if she were trying to figure out the solution to a difficult problem, "I did say you could watch." Pointedly gazing at his cock she said, "And I am certainly *not* done with you."

Her words, paired with the way she looked at him, sent a lava-hot rush through his blood. The woman was pushing him to the limits of his restraint on purpose. It both angered and electrified him. He'd tear his way through an iron mountain to get to her at this moment, yet was using all his control to stand motionless simply because she'd asked it of him. Every man knew in his heart that a warrior's strength was no match for a woman's will. It was the warrior's only boon that few women ever realized the extent of their power simply because they didn't understand the limits of physicality when compared to the depths of their own hearts.

The small part of his brain still able to think grappled with how this little game of hers just might reveal to her the power she was capable of wielding over him, but he refused to quit the sport now. He was seeing a new, wildly erotic side to his mate and there wasn't a warrior alive who wouldn't want to engage her sexual fantasy to the end. But for the sake of his throbbing cock and his innate need to dominate that twisted and wrenched against the slippery leash of control he'd lashed around it, he hoped her game finished soon.

Aurora lay down with her feet in the pillows and her head nearly hanging off the end of the bed, her hair sweeping down with the dark ends fading into the glossed black stone of the floor. She lay spread before him on the crimson coverlet, the sheer strips sliding between her legs and back over her breasts as she shifted into a comfortable position. Her hands smoothed down her body from shoulders to thighs leaving behind a trail of chill bumps that sharpened and defined the peaks of her nipples under the gown. Perhaps she was trying to punish him after all.

"Come here," she whispered. Crooking her finger at him, she urged him closer. "Lean over me so I can reach you."

When he got close enough for her to touch him, she cupped his hips and steered him forward. He kept moving forward until his hands were planted on either side of her opened legs. Her hands gently wrapped around his erection and she guided him down further until his knees sank into the edge of the mattress. He was going to suggest a more comfortable position when her lips closed around the head of his cock. A low, hungry growl rumbled out instead and his hips automatically rolled forward, pushing his cock deeper into Aurora's mouth.

The scent of his mate's arousal goaded his lust with the knife-edged spurs of primal, undeniable demand. With a hissed curse, he locked his muscles into place to stop himself from pushing in further, closing his eyes to focus on regaining control. But the last thing he'd seen was Aurora's swollen pussy just beneath a damp swatch of translucent fabric and the image still burned in his mind as clear as if his eyes were still open.

He sensed her shift beneath him and his control jerked fiercely against the final thin cord of restraint, a rein pulled so tightly it was already beginning to fray. When he

opened his eyes again, he was ready to take his mate into his mouth regardless of her no-touch rule. She'd pushed him past the place where he could play by rules, any rules.

But he didn't lower his head, didn't graze his teeth over the tender flesh of her inner thigh and didn't press his mouth against her mound or run his tongue around her clit. He didn't move. Suddenly he didn't want to do anything to stop Aurora as she pulled the strip of her dress out of the way and then slid two slender fingers over her pussy and into her cunt.

Pushing her fingers deeper into her cunt, she moaned around the head of his cock and clasped his shaft with her other hand, sliding it up and down as she licked and sucked on him. She pulled her fingers out, slick with her cream and pushed them back in. With her mouth and hand busy on his cock, he watched her finger fuck herself until her clit swelled and turned a dark red, until her cunt was unbelievably wet and clutching every time her fingers drove deep inside.

Fire scored down his spine as her moans vibrated around his cock. She licked and kissed and squeezed his cock in abandon as her fingers pulled more cream from her cunt, smeared it over her pussy lips and clit. The flames razed the last tether holding his control when with firm, fast strokes she rubbed her swollen, slick nub. When she bucked and writhed against her own touch, he lowered himself to feast on his mate.

Thrusting deep with tongue and cock, he was swallowed by her mouth and cunt. He felt the desperate, spasmodic clutching of her inner walls around his tongue as she arched up and the furious working of her mouth around his cock. He thought he heard her cry out as his chin pressed her fingers hard against her clit but every sense was converging into a colossal explosion of sensation.

He started to pull back, a fear of hurting her momentarily piercing the sexual frenzy riding him. Immediately, her hand on his cock urged him back. Spreading her pussy lips with her fingers to fully expose her clit, she jammed her heels into the bed and pushed herself forcefully up against his mouth again even as his cock slid deep into her throat.

The tight constriction, the frantic laving of her tongue and pressure of her lips drew him to the edge of the elemental tempest of ecstasy at its most primal, powerful level. Her fingertips pressed a spot between the base of his balls and his anus making his blood roar. Blazing colors blanked his vision from the inside out. His climax surged through him. His mate's orgasm filled his mouth with the erotic taste of her own release as her pussy pulsed against his lips and tongue. His mind lost its bearings to the certainty of time and space as his body exploded into a dimension beyond the suns. His soul soared until it filled the universe and inhaled the sky.

Instinctively he reached for Aurora, for her mind and soul, the part of her that belonged to him more surely than even her body.

He found her. Saw her. Knew her. And it was not what he expected.

Chapter Twelve

Aurora was already awake when Connyn's arms slipped around her to pull her against him in the morning. Since her back was to him, she left her body limp and pretended to still sleep as he adjusted her snugly into the curve of his body. Last night she had played the part so well, had controlled the lovemaking and her response to him with a precision she'd been proud of.

Until the end. Her climax had been so...so *mind blowing*, she had lost hold of hers for a moment. A moment she'd give anything to have back. She had *felt* him in her head and knew that in that brief spark of time he had, for lack of better words, read a part of her soul. The force of him was beyond what she had ever experienced and she hadn't had enough wits about her to try to jump into his head as well. She had no idea just which of her secrets he now held and that scared the hell out of her.

He'd held her for a long time afterward, seeming to take her abnormal silence for granted as post-ecstatic bliss. After a while, he'd mentioned that he'd learned of her short field trip through the palace compound with Brooke and Bethany, making it sound like they'd been a bad influence on her. At the time, she'd not been able to shake the worry of having him in her head and had barely registered his reprimands and new rules about wandering outside his family's sector without his permission. She fell asleep still wondering what rooms in her brain he'd visited and exactly what he had seen while there.

The one thing she was sure about when she woke was that he didn't want her out of his family's section of the palace without him.

When he kissed her gently on the neck, she murmured a sleepy-sounding protest. Sex might numb her fear, but apparently it was the key that could unlock her brain to the mental link he'd been so worried about. She wasn't anywhere near ready to experiment with that unique little twist this morning.

His hands slid up to cup her breasts. "I'd stay and wake you properly if I hadn't promised to meet my cousins for breakfast."

Aurora's heart thudded with sudden hope. "Amdyn? Ellen's here?"

"No." His fingers stilled on her nipples. His breath blew out past her ear with a frustrated huff. "We haven't heard from anyone since we arrived. Bornyn, the Elder who receives reports from Shyrana, hasn't been able to connect with her since before we left. Even Rordyc's younger sister hasn't heard from Shy." His hand moved from her breast to her ribs, spanning them easily. "That's one of the topics to be covered this morning."

She rolled over to face him, ignoring his gaze that dropped to her breasts and how his eyes immediately darkened to a deep silver-gray. "Is anything wrong? Are they okay?"

"I'm sure they're fine." He brushed her hair back. "Are you sure Ellyna didn't say anything else to you that would account for her not coming through the portal?"

Aurora dropped her eyes to his chest as if she were deep in thought for a moment. "I really don't know what she was thinking," she said truthfully.

With a finger, he lifted her chin so he could look into her eyes. "Aurora, if you know something, now would be a good time to tell me."

She blinked, did her best to look innocently confused. "If I knew why she wasn't here, I'd tell you."

His hand slid around to her nape and he pulled her closer for a long, wet kiss. His tongue swept deep inside, stroking and caressing until she was close to talking him into missing the meeting with his cousins. At least the first part of the meeting.

As soon as she softened and arched toward him, he pulled back. "You'd better." He looked down at where her nipples pressed against his chest. "And I'd better go before I forget I have a meeting to attend and stay here in bed with you all day." He bent his head and kissed the top of her breast. "But one day soon..." his voice faded away as he watched her nipple bead up. He gave her a quick, hard kiss on the mouth and then pushed off the bed. "Soon."

She watched him disappear into the bathroom to bathe and dress, admiring his ass as he moved away from her. On any world, the man had a fantastic ass. Strong, long legs. Broad shoulders and tight, muscled arms. Jesus. She was getting wet just watching the man walk away.

Flopping back on the bed she gazed up at the domed ceiling intersected with clear stones that let the morning light through. The stones were cut in a manner that diffused the light softly through the room and bounced it off the red stones that had been placed within the ceiling as well. The effect gave the room a rosy glow that cut the heaviness of the black stones used for the remainder of the ceiling, the walls and the floor.

She pulled the thick silken comforter up to her chin and thought about her options for the day. Tomorrow she would be paraded before the Council. She'd feel a hell of a lot better if she knew when Ellen was going to show up. She needed her here yesterday.

Connyn came out of the bathroom fully dressed and looking delicious. She let her lust show in her eyes as she propped herself up on her elbows. Connyn stopped and an arrogant smile curved his lips.

"That's the way a man likes to see his woman. In his bed, naked and looking at him with a clear want in her eyes."

Raising her eyebrows, she replied with a cool arrogance of her own, "Perhaps I'm just hungry for breakfast."

He didn't deign to answer her with anything more than a disbelieving grunt as he moved toward the door. She sat up, collecting the blanket under her breasts in a bunch that plumped them up in a nice sexy display. "I'm thinking about visiting Brooke this afternoon and going shopping in the market we passed the other day when they gave me the tour of the compound."

His frown was immediately erased when he turned around and saw how she was sitting. As she had planned. "You may visit Brooke, but Cait can get you anything you need without you exposing yourself to danger by wandering around in the crowded market."

"I like to shop. Try things on." He stared at her implacably. "See what's available. What color goes with which lipstick, shoes. See what other women are wearing. What's popular and new. To just get out of the damn house for a while." When he still continued to stare at her, she rolled her eyes at him. "It's a girl thing, okay?"

"I don't like it."

"Well I don't like someone thinking he can simply tell me what I can and can't do, assuming I'll just fall in line like a simpering little sycophant."

He glanced out the window. At the rising sun and then back to her, a hard line set along his jaw. "I don't have time to review the necessity of your obedience to my orders when it comes to your safety. You may visit Brooke. I will send a unit of soldiers to escort you. We will talk about your shopping needs tonight."

"That is not—"

"Or I can see to it that you are locked in our suite until I return. Your choice."

She threw the bedclothes off and scooted to the edge of the bed opposite him. "This is just one more example of you using your brute strength, or that of those you command, to substitute for an intelligent discussion—"

"A discussion there is no time for at present. Regardless of whether you approve of my methods or not, you will be safe."

"Asshole," she hissed, not looking back at him to see when he left as she walked into the bathroom. As soon as she rounded the corner and was well out of his sight, she allowed a small smile of triumph to settle on her lips.

Connyn watched his mate walk away from him. Even when she angered him with her lack of respect for her own safety, she still stirred his blood to a fever pitch with clothes on. When she was completely naked, it was nothing short of a small miracle that he could think past the want whipping just under his skin.

Yielding to desire, he adjusted his vision to watch her through the wall for just a minute more. Storing up images to revisit while he was stuck in a room with his cousins for hours. Not that he'd need many more after last night for some time to come. It was as if she'd sifted through his fantasies and then created one that surpassed them all. He knew she was upset with him again by the way she'd stalked off without a glance back.

The stiffness of her spine thrust out her breasts as she rounded the corner and he had to smile. There were advantages to irritating his mate.

After last night, he felt sure of his place in her heart no matter how annoyed she became. He knew that he could control her body, make her want, beg, come again and again. But without the mind link fully engaged, he never knew where exactly he stood in her heart. Until the breakthrough when she was climaxing against his mouth and he slid into her mind for just a moment. Then he finally knew she had taken him into her heart. How deeply, he wasn't sure. It lasted too briefly to tell, but at least he was assured that she had begun to care for him and was tying herself to him on a deeper level. He had at least sensed those emotions in her.

His smile froze. Every sense went on high alert at the expression on her face when she tossed her hair over her shoulder and he glimpsed the smug, satisfied smile that had settled there when she thought she was out of his sight. Crossing his arms over his chest, he narrowed his eyes to bring her into sharper focus. The tension in her body melted away as she piled her hair up on her head and grinned at herself in the mirror. Not the slightest frown or sign of annoyance.

What had just happened here?

He was half persuaded to forget his meeting and find out what Aurora had going on in that pretty little head of hers. He'd taken half a step in her direction when he realized he'd have to explain to Rordyc why he'd missed the meeting. Control of one's mate was not an issue he wished to discuss with his not-so-favorite cousin.

Before his irritation turned into something darker, he turned on his heel and stalked out of the suite. At least now he was in the right frame of mind to deal with Rordyc.

* * * * *

Aurora wasn't surprised to see her "escort" waiting for her when she exited the suite on her way to Brooke and Rordyc's sector. She was surprised to find that no less than fifteen soldiers were positioned in a semi-circle around the entrance. The soldier Connyn had spoken to when they first exited the portal was standing in the center of the arc of hard-looking men. He nodded to her and stepped aside to let her pass.

Instead, she stopped in front of him and held out her hand. "Hi, I'm Aurora."

Rather than take her hand, he did a curt, militaristic bow over it. "Yes. I'm Beyran. At your service. Should you require anything of me, all you need do is ask one of my men for me if I am not in sight."

Eyeing the ring of warriors, she raised her left eyebrow. "A little much for a short walk, don't you think?"

"No." His answer was flat. All seriousness.

So much for amicable conversation. Inwardly, she shrugged. What else did she expect from Connyn's captain? Though he might not be the warm-fuzzy kind of guy, he

certainly fit Connyn. She bet they worked and fought together like two sides of the same coin.

At the obvious end of their conversation, Aurora continued past the line of men. Purposefully, she'd chosen a neutrally colored outfit that paired loose-legged pants with a sleeveless tunic of a soft, clingy material. She also wore a long forest green cape open in the front with the hood thrown back and her arms through the slits in the side. The way she had it presently arranged, fastened at the neck but worn back over her shoulders like a superhero's cape, made it look more like an accessory than planned camouflage.

The soldiers let her lead the way until they passed the gates that marked the sector boundary of the Third House. Once they were in the open area of the palace complex, they closed ranks around her. Since there were so many she wasn't personally crowded, but she could only catch glimpses of the city beyond the moving wall of muscle that enclosed her from any and all real or imagined threats.

The walk to Brooke's went quickly. Amazing how fast you could move through crowded streets when you had your own human steamrollers paving the way. Once they reached the main gate of the Fourth House, all but four of Connyn's soldiers aligned themselves with the soldiers already posted outside the gate while the others followed Aurora.

The wide doors were opened at her approach and she entered a large hall set up similarly to the Third House. Brooke was coming down the center staircase and smiled broadly when she saw Aurora.

"Right on time! I was so excited when Cait brought the message that you might be able to come by today. No, no. Stay where you are. I want to walk through the gardens." She stopped when she got to the bottom and glanced around at the men arranged around Aurora. "It looks like you brought your own entourage."

Aurora rolled her eyes. "Yeah. Totally my idea. If you think this is bad, you should see what I left on your front steps."

Brooke laughed and shook her head. "Don't worry about it." She gestured at the Fourth House guards positioned around the perimeter of the room. "Paranoia is a family trait." Turning to Beyran, she said in a polite but regally firm voice, "I trust your men will be comfortable in here while we walk in the gardens?" She gestured to the perfectly manicured lawns just beyond the central dome they stood under. "Or do you not believe the security of the Fourth House is sufficient?"

Beyran frowned but didn't answer.

"Oh for heaven's sake!" Aurora bit out. "Do you think I'm in danger from the flowers? I need some girl talk *without* hovering males listening in when I ask Brooke to spill all the gory details of what happens to a woman's body when she's pregnant. If you don't mind."

Beyran looked irritated and glanced back out toward the gardens. The men he'd brought with him were steadfastly holding their gazes away from Aurora and Brooke and standing as mute and stiff as statues.

Brooke took a step toward Beyran. "Are you married?"

"Yes."

"And do you have children?"

"Yes. Two." It was painfully obvious from Beyran's expression that he understood exactly where Brooke was heading with her questions.

"Do you remember how your wife's body —"

Beyran held up his hand to stop her. "We'll wait here."

Brooke's smile was deep and so genuine, Aurora almost felt guilty.

"Good," Brooke said. "I'll make sure you and your men are brought refreshments. We're going to eat out in the garden."

"That's not necessary," Beyran said, not happy about the arrangements but grudgingly resigned to them.

"Of course it's not. But indulge me while I practice my hostessing skills." She nodded to a man standing off to the side and then turned her attention back to Aurora. "Come on. One of the best things about this place is the garden."

Aurora noticed as she followed her out to a large walled garden that the Kilth seal of the abstract fighting lion was set into the design of the columns they passed under. Only this lion wore a blue stone in the fourth place in its collar rather than the red of the Third House.

"Wow," Aurora said as they entered the garden. Spread out before her were flowers of all kinds and sizes rioting in a raging symphony of color punctuated by large fountains and rambling arbors.

"I've been told that before Rordyc was born this was a very formal garden. But he tore it up so much as a child practicing and playing warrior that the gardeners eventually turned it into a mini jungle he could pretend to hunt in. They even installed a pool at the far end he could dive and swim in when they were away from their home by the sea. His mother loves gardens, and according to Rordyc, this pales in comparison to her favorite at the main house in their home territory, but I haven't had the chance to see that one yet."

"It's beautiful," Aurora said.

"Yes, it is." A small, secretive smile tugged at Brooke's lips as she looked back at a bench that was tucked between two columns they were passing. A flowering ivy twined thickly around the columns and reached out to tangle their vines together at the top creating a private alcove safe from any prying glances originating from the main hall.

"I gather this is one of your favorite places for more reasons than just the flowers."

Green eyes flashing with remembered delight, Brooke said, "This place can be very romantic at night."

"And getting from the garden to your rooms takes too long once the mood strikes?"

Brooke laughed. "Oh yes. And it's nearly impossible to resist a man who wants you that much."

"The fact that he's one of this planet's reigning sex gods has nothing to do with it, right?"

"Nope. Not a thing. By the way, nice ditch job with your watchdogs. I'll have to remember that line the next time mine are breathing down my neck."

"They're not bad inside the family's sector, but once outside it's like there's a threat under every pebble. I've been dying to see the market but that's a big no-no."

"I think all the cousins have an overdeveloped sense of safeguarding their own, especially their mates. They spent such a long time looking for us that having something happen to us after they've found us is completely untenable to their way of thinking. Though from the viewpoint of independent women, it does get overbearing and exasperating."

They stepped down into a round, sunken garden. Aurora goggled and tried to catch her breath. The spot looked like a fairy's garden on steroids. Shaded from one corner by a humongous old tree whose branches bore thin, whispery leaves as broad as a grown man's spread hand, the spot was lent an air of privacy by the long, dark green vines that fell from its outlying branches to kiss the ground. They swayed in the breeze and allowed rays of sunlight in to chase each other across the soft, thick grass. Lacy white flowers burst out of tall, elegantly thin sapphire-blue urns of varying heights and graceful stands that held the same style of bowl and rock that provided the favored form of light used on this planet.

"This spot was created for Rordyc's sisters and patterned after an imaginary land in one of their favorite childhood stories. Almost immediately, Rordyc was banned from it for years after he was caught trying to house some sort of water snake in the fountain that ended up eating most of the fish. He doesn't like to discuss it, so I've never gotten the full story of his sisters' retaliation. But I'm sure I will when they come to see the baby."

"They don't live here?"

"No. Three are married and live in different cities. Lyra is still at home in their regional capital with his mother and father. His mother isn't in the best of health and she refuses to leave the open country for the city. I only met them briefly when we took our trip. They all keep rooms here and I think Lyra's has an entrance somewhere along that side wall."

Aurora looked to where she was pointing. "I don't see anything."

"I know. It's a secret door. Rordyc built it for her so she could sneak into the garden when she was younger without her parents' permission. She's the youngest of his sisters and they've always had a special bond."

Aurora moved further into the wonderland scene and just stared. Carefully carved swings, both single and double seats with arms and backs, provided seating. Tables low

to the ground had been covered with sheer, ornately sewn runners and set with a variety of snacks surrounded by more flowers. A small fountain splashed into a shallow pond where brightly colored fish darted in and out of the dappling sunlight, their antics sending rainbows bouncing through the air above the water.

"This is my favorite spot," Brooke said. "It amazes me how much my body wants to sleep even though the baby is still so small, so I come out here almost daily to take a nap."

Aurora turned and saw where what looked like a double bed hung from one of the largest branches of the tree. It had a loosely woven canopy that served to shade it from any full sun and keep the trailing vines off the mattress.

"That's balanced so that if you push it once, it will rock back and forth on its own for hours. And all these hanging vines are a night-flowering variety. Deep blue and they smell amazing. I'd sleep out here every night, but Rordyc is afraid I might catch a cold or something."

Aurora settled herself into one of the swings and pushed off gently. The branch above dipped and swayed slightly and a kaleidoscope of emerald and white butterflies fluttered through the leaves for a moment like tiny dancers dressed in sparkling gemstones startled into motion.

"Have you heard anything new about Ellen?" Aurora asked once the show above her head ended. "Connyn said that Rordyc's sister could telepathically link with Shyrana who reported on what was happening Earth-side."

Brooke chose a cookie from one of the tables and sat in a swing opposite from Aurora. "She can normally. But there's been some interference along the telepathic links lately. They can't seem to pinpoint the source but think it might be coming from someone on Earth rather than from here." She took a bite of the cookie and watched a couple of fish jump over each other in the pond. "But they really just don't know. It's making them a little crazier than normal. Rordyc said they're considering sending someone through a portal for information."

"So there's a portal that leads back to Earth that remains open?"

"I'm not sure about that. But I do know there are options, though some they only use in an emergency. Which is why I think they're considering sending someone back. They can't figure out why Amdyn hasn't brought Ellen home."

"She didn't want to come." At Brooke's widened eyes, she added, "Yet. I think there are some things she wants to reconcile first, though she didn't exactly say so."

Brooke nodded and looked thoughtfully past Aurora. "Yes. That I can understand. The cousins knew that if we were still alive, we'd have had to build lives in another world that didn't include them, Ilyria or a world-saving prophecy, but in reality, they see us rather myopically. For the most part, they expect us to fall right back into the world we left as if we never had left."

Aurora stopped the swing and leaned forward. "I know. That's why I asked if Lyra had heard any news. I really need to talk to Ellen. She's taking care of something very

important to me and I need to know how it's going. Before I can feel right here, I need to know everything is okay back home."

"I know. I had a similar hesitation, but Rordyc helped me work it out. I'm sure Connyn will do anything he can if you ask him." Brooke's sympathetic expression nearly had Aurora blurting out the truth, but the memory of Connyn's blatant refusal to offer the help she had asked for killed the would-be damning urge.

"Probably so," she sidestepped. "So how did you do it? Adjust to suddenly belonging to a new world? A new culture, people?" Aurora shifted to look around the garden, her mind gazing past the limiting walls to the limitless possibilities and dangers beyond. "A new life?"

"Most days, I still have to work at it. Finding my place and accepting this mammoth change isn't easy. But it helps knowing that I still had family that never gave up on me. Being reunited with my sisters helps make sense out of memories I thought were just nightmares or dreams." She kicked her shoes off and curled her toes into the grass. "Plus, it really helps loving and being loved by the man who totally upended my world. Both my worlds."

She studied Aurora not unkindly for a moment and then asked, "Connyn hasn't told you he loves you?"

"No." The answer was out before Aurora could amend the emotion attached to it. She shook her head and tried to laugh and deflect the stabbing disappointment that Brooke's question brought and that hung on the one word that had escaped. Sitting back, she breathed in the warm sweet air, pushing aside emotion that wasn't hers to claim. "I mean of course not. Why would he?"

Brooke flicked a dark auburn curl away from her face. "Stupid men. They could all use a course in Relationships 101."

"Not much difference from world to world in that area."

"True." Brooke waved away what looked like a cross between a bluebird and a hummingbird when it dipped too close to the last part of the cookie she held. "Have you told Connyn that you love him yet?"

Aurora's head jerked back. "What? I don't love him. I can't. Couldn't. I mean, it's just too early. We've just met."

"Not wanting to love him is not the same as *not* loving him."

"You're wrong. I don't. I mean I'm *grateful* for him bringing me here and for rescuing me from a Predator, although I was holding my own on the Riverwalk. And there's quite a bit of lust going on between us, but it's jumping the gun to say we're in love." Aurora stopped to take a breath. Brooke was listening with an amused look on her face. Aurora realized that her headlong rush to explain why she couldn't possibly love him pretty much cemented the fact that she did in Brooke's eyes.

She tried to brush off her too ardent denial, taking another tack. "Even if I do, it's beside the point. Because to Connyn, love isn't what matters. Duty covers it all. And to

him, it's all the same thing. Duty, love, lust, need. At least as far as mates are concerned. Anyway, it doesn't matter."

Brooke's frown was sudden and intense. "Oh yes it does matter. Very much. And Connyn's being a complete ass by telling you that to him love and duty are the same thing." Her full lips flattened with her burst of anger as she scowled in the general direction of the Third House's sector. "A total and complete jackass," she hissed.

Aurora's own complicated and swirling feelings calmed considerably in the face of Brooke's anger on her behalf. "Not a fan of duty?" she asked.

Brooke turned her gaze back to Aurora, her livid eyes still gleaming darkly as her words snapped out, "Duty is fine. But it is not a substitute for love."

Rising from the swing, Brooke moved to one of the tables and silently filled two cups with pink liquid from a crystal pitcher. Once she had finished, she plunked the container down and stood rigidly over the glasses, looking down at her handiwork. Finally, she picked up the glasses and handed one to Aurora.

"I sincerely apologize. I have no right to snap at you like we've known each other for years."

Aurora started to say something but Brooke continued. "As much as I'd like to blame my outburst on hormones, it's more that I just haven't gotten complete control over that particular button of mine and still tend to idiotically blow off steam when it comes up. I believe in duty as much as the next person, but I don't believe it gives a person the right to use or abuse another." She shrugged and returned to her seat. "But that's part of my history and baggage. The whole duty thing."

She took a long drink and settled more comfortably against the back of the swing. "But enough about me. Get this pregnant woman's mind off the fact that in spite of her suddenly amazing life with or without duty lurking, she's still scared stiff about having her first baby." She smiled disarmingly and said, "Tell me about your life since I last saw you when we were orphaned in a cave over twenty-five years ago."

* * * * *

After a return to lighter, sociable girl-talk, they'd both taken their fill of the mid-morning snack and then Brooke had taken Aurora on a tour of her new home. When Brooke caught her staring at a mark on the inside of the door to their private rooms that was very similar to the one scratched on the inside of their door, Brooke said, "Yes, I recognized the same mark on your door and Bethany has one on her door too." Her lips twisted up. "There's a lot to be said for family traditions."

Aurora hadn't quite known how to respond to that and stumbled through small talk on the way back to the Fairy Garden as Aurora had dubbed it until Brooke had stopped halfway down the stairs. She stopped so abruptly that Aurora had to grab the railing to keep from running into her. Brooke's expression had been one of absorbed delight that held for several moments before it passed and she blinked, her eyes refocusing on Aurora.

"Sorry. I'm still getting used to this mate-mindlink thing. It's not as strong between Rordyc and me as it is with mates who have full telepathic powers, or at least one of them does, but it's still pretty wonderful." She sighed and her lips twisted in a wry, half-smile. "Not to mention a little freaky."

She continued down the stairs toward where Beyran and his men stood. "Anyway, apparently the meeting is still in full swing and he wanted me to know not to expect him until after dinner."

Aurora grinned as two bright spots of blush pinked Brooke's cheeks. "I'm guessing there was more to the end of that message than just expecting him late."

Brooke returned the grin. "A little more, yes."

They passed Beyran and his companions, all of whom showed considerable restraint at not even mentioning following them back out into the garden. But Aurora paused before they had gone very far. "I should let you get back to your day—"

"No, please stay," Brooke said. "For a while longer anyway. Unless I'm keeping you from something."

"Only from worrying about the meeting before the Council tomorrow morning."

"Then stay as long as you like. I'll tell you all about my first marriage and you'll feel much better about Connyn."

"You were married before you met Rordyc?" Aurora jerked to a stop on the garden path.

"Honey," Brooke drawled in a deeply pseudo-Southern accent, "I was married *when* I met Rordyc."

"Shit," Aurora couldn't stop the laughter bubbling up. "I bet that just made not only his day, but his entire fucking month."

Brooke laughed and continued on down the path. "That's putting it mildly."

Choosing a different position from last time, Aurora relaxed sideways on a double swing, her back against one armrest while propping a foot up on the other. Her dangling foot she used to set the swing in motion as Brooke stretched out on the suspended bed.

After explaining the ups and downs of Rordyc's and her rather rocky courtship and how she came to learn the difference between a marriage on Earth and a mating on Ilyria, Brooke's voice began to fade through a series of random comments they exchanged until an easy silence of camaraderie enveloped them. The afternoon lengthened as they both relaxed under the leafy shelter, the sun-dappled shadows dancing in the arms of each passing breeze. Little by little, the buzz of insects melted into the warming sunlight. The balmy afternoon brought determination glazed with a thin sheen of fear to one and a soothing, deep sleep to the other.

Chapter Thirteen

Connyn looked up from the map spread over the length of the table to his cousin who had stopped talking in the middle of a sentence. Every muscle in Rordyc's face tightened and he frowned, still looking down but not at the map. All in the room turned their attention from the map to him as his unnatural stillness continued. Rordyc had just raised his head and looked straight at Connyn with an expression of such deep concern it froze Connyn's blood on the spot. Before Rordyc could say anything, the wide doors at the end of the hall opened and Beyran stood there, flanked on either side by his men.

Connyn straightened and turned toward his captain.

"She's gone." Beyran's low voice carried easily through the eerie quiet that had engulfed the long hall.

Connyn turned toward Rordyc. "Brooke was telling you the same thing, wasn't she?"

Rordyc nodded. Connyn turned back to Beyran, crossed to him with long, heavy strides. "When?"

"We don't know. They were in the garden. Brooke fell asleep. When she awoke, Aurora was gone. Maybe as long as two hours ago."

A roar of fury, of fear surged through his mind like the pounding of a storm-tossed sea crashing against shoreline cliffs. He forced it back. Drove it down. "How?" The single word carried the weight of a thousand death sentences in it from an ancient time.

Beyran understood and accepted it. He continued under the force of it. "We don't know that either. There is only one way into the garden and we stood guard there the entire time."

"That's not true."

At Rordyc's words, Connyn's head snapped around to glare at his cousin. "What do you know of this?" His words harsh and accusing.

Rordyc came around from the other side of the table with Wyc and Cynn to join Connyn. The other men who surrounded the table deferentially ceded space to the royal family.

"There's another way out of that garden," Rordyc said, and then inclining his head toward Beyran, "but few know of it. It's hidden."

"And Brooke showed this to Aurora?" Connyn's voice held a knife-edged accusation. Anger flashed in Rordyc's dark eyes, but he held his temper.

"She only knows it's there somewhere. I haven't shown it to her or instructed her on how to open it. It may not even work anymore. It's been years since anyone's used it as far as I know."

"Come," Connyn demanded, already moving toward the door. "We'll talk to Brooke. You," he said, pointing to one of the soldiers aligned behind his captain, "go find Cait and bring her to the Fourth House. I want to speak with her immediately."

Before they had arrived at the Fourth House, the city had been locked down and warriors from all the Houses had been dispatched through the streets on a building-to-building search. Brooke could tell them little else, other than that Aurora was worried about some task she'd left in Ellyna's hands to complete and was anxious to hear from her. That Connyn already had guessed, though she'd failed to mention anything about a "task".

Rordyc left to check the secret passage and found where some of the plants had been pushed aside and had not fallen back precisely in place, leaving the ground around the door slightly disturbed on the other side. Brooke looked more surprised than anyone when her mate came through a sudden opening in the garden wall and swore that she'd not shown Aurora the door nor even known exactly where it was.

The palace was searched from top to bottom and it was discovered that a suspicious series of events had happened one right after the other heading from Lyra's room toward the outer side gate that led down into the market. The sector had been humming with a larger than normal staff due to Rordyc's return with his mate, but each area connecting the next to the exit had been emptied out one after the other. The servants in the hall had rushed to clean up a tray of food that had fallen over. The kitchen staff was distracted when flames had inexplicably started shooting out of the oven, and so it continued until no one could stretch their imaginations far enough to accept the long line of incidences as a straightforward string of coincidences.

When Cait was brought in, her brown eyes so round and wide in fear and worry, Connyn stalked toward her, intent on wringing every last iota of information from her. Before he reached her, his father cut him off by stepping between him and the young girl. Placing his big hand on the girl's shoulder, Cynn patted her gently, reassuringly.

"Cait," he said quietly, "we need your help. Aurora is missing—"

Cait's hand flew to cover her mouth as she gasped. "Has she been...taken?" she whispered, tears brimming along her bottom lashes.

"We don't believe so. We do think she might have gotten herself lost and we just need to find her before anything happens to her. You understand this, don't you?"

Cait nodded and nervously glanced around. "But I haven't seen her since this morning when I helped her dress."

"What exactly was she wearing?" Connyn's harsh question speared over his father's shoulder and Cynn shot his son a hard glare.

Seeming to shrink in on herself, Cait replied, "A pair of tan pants and a matching tunic. It was such a drab outfit I tried to get her to change her mind, but she said she'd

already have people looking at her as she walked through the streets with an armed guard that she didn't want to give them additional reason to stare at her."

Connyn turned to Brooke. "Did she make plans to visit you yesterday?"

"No. Cait came by early this morning to ask if I'd be home and if I would mind if Aurora came to visit. Which is ridiculous because we told her yesterday she was welcome any time. The invitation was left open by both me and Bethany."

He turned back to Cait. "Did Aurora ask you to also stop by Bethany's to see if she would be home today as well?"

Cait's head shaking looked more like a spasmodic shiver. "No, she just gave instructions to take her request to the Fourth House."

Connyn turned back to Brooke with a condemning sneer. Rordyc stepped in front of his mate and returned Connyn's dark look.

"Brooke had nothing to do with Aurora's disappearance."

Brooke stepped around to his side. "Well of course I didn't. Why on Earth — Ilyria — would I?"

Connyn glared down at the woman whose green eyes were pinning him with a reproachful gaze of her own. "Because you don't like me."

"Of course I don't like you. You're arrogant and condescending and you tried to get me to leave Rordyc for you."

"Brooke." Rordyc's warning tone was ignored by his mate. She waved a hand, dismissing her last comment.

"Ancient history. The salient point here is that I do care very much for Aurora and wouldn't do anything to harm her. Including putting her in danger by removing her from your protection." She put her hands on her hips and narrowed her eyes as she leaned in toward Connyn. "And because I care about her, I'd never even suggest she should try to leave you for the simple reason that she's in love with your dumbass self."

Connyn's entire body absorbed her last sentence like a ship receives a missile dead on its mark. The shock went through him in waves that deadened his every sense one moment and then sharpened them to almost painful clarity the next. All he could do was mutely stare down at the furious red-haired minx who had just moved the world out from under his feet.

His father moved forward and eased the situation by asking, "Did Aurora mention anywhere she was particularly interested in going?"

Brooke shrugged. "Just to the market, but it didn't seem like a huge deal to her. I'm sure she's fine and just wanted to explore some on her own." She pinned Connyn with a meaningful stare. "She seems to think you've been a little too controlling at times."

Rordyc laid his hand on her shoulder. "Is that all?"

"Yes — Oh wait! She did ask if we had heard anything from Shy about Ellen and if there were portals back to Earth. Whatever Ellen's doing for Aurora is important to her."

The word *portals* snapped Connyn back into focus. "What did you tell her about the portals to Earth?"

"Nothing. Just that if needed, you could open up an emergency one to get to Amdyn and Ellen."

A small squeak came from behind him and it took a minute to realize that Cait was trying to get his attention. "Yes?" he asked.

"She was asking me about portals the other day when I was helping with her bath."

When Cait started to shake instead of continue, Connyn felt his minimal patience begin to ebb. "And?" he growled.

"She changed the subject. She didn't seem very interested at the time."

"That's it?" Connyn snapped.

Cait jumped and it took her two tries to get intelligible words to come out of her mouth. "During the fitting session, one of the seamstresses mentioned The Gateways to her." Cait's voice was so soft, he had to strain to pluck the words from the air. "She asked a couple of questions then, but that's all."

Understanding hit all the males in the room at the same time. The Fourth House was quite close to The Gateways compared to either the Third House or the First House. Aurora had known exactly what she was doing. When the men all tensed, their faces all reflecting their new insight, Brooke looked from one to the other. "What?" she asked. When no one immediately responded, she asked Cait, "What gateways?"

"*The Gateways*," Cait corrected her. "It's an entertainment venue where citizens can explore other worlds."

Brooke spun on Rordyc. "What? You mean you've had the ability to pop into Earth and get me a morning coffee from Starbuck's all this time and you just *haven't*?"

A pained look crossed Rordyc's face. "They're not portals to inhabited worlds, or even worlds that can support extended stays. They're for entertainment and are strictly limited and controlled." When Brooke just frowned, Rordyc said, "On Earth, you go to the movies. On Ilyria, we go to other worlds."

"And you're just now telling me this?"

"We'll talk later." Rordyc's voice lowered and he leaned close to his mate and touched her chin with his fingertip. "Besides, your favorite coffee is off your menu for the next several months anyway."

Connyn turned his back on the argument and focused on Cait. "What exactly did you tell her?"

"Not much. Just that you could jump into other worlds from there and then we started talking about something else."

Connyn dismissed the girl from his mind as he turned to Beyran.

"As soon as it was mentioned," his captain said, "I dispatched soldiers to The Gateways. They'll start the search and update us when we arrive."

Tilting his head to acknowledge Beyran's actions, he turned to his father.

"Go," Cynn said. "I'll stay here with Brooke and Cait and get the news to your mother."

Connyn didn't add any comment but turned and led the way out of the Fourth House.

* * * * *

The caretaker of The Gateways looked like he might become violently ill at any moment. He'd started to explain the situation to Connyn but had begun stuttering so steadily, one of the soldiers stepped forward to take over the story.

"She arrived just after he came on shift and began asking him questions about the different worlds available."

Connyn glared at the ashen-faced man. "You didn't notify any palace guards when you saw a Royal's mate wandering unescorted through the city?"

"S-s-she s-s-stood in l-line w-w-with everyb-b-body else. D-d-dressed n-normally."

"And you didn't notice her ring?" Connyn's anger leached through every word.

The soldier continued for the man who'd gone mute. "She kept her hands in her pockets and he didn't know who she was. She told him this was her first time in the city and that her friends had recommended this place to her. When he'd asked for the entrance fee, she didn't have the money to get in."

The older man found his voice for a moment and interrupted the soldier's story. "Sh-sh-sh-she l-looked so d-d-disap-p-pointed, I-I t-t-told her the f-f-first world w-w-was on m-me."

Connyn knew it probably had more to do with Aurora's beauty than her look of disappointment, but he'd not let that distract him at the moment.

"She's not come out," the soldier added.

"Where is she?" Connyn hissed. There truly was only one way out of *this* place. It had numerous guards and safety measures in place and could instantly be shut down should a threat make it necessary. His fear abated a measure, though his fury surged to replace it.

Now the soldier looked a little ill. "We haven't been able to locate her. The worlds were emptied and the portals shut when the alarm first went through the city. No one by her description was found."

Connyn's mind blanked as a wall of panic slammed into him.

"Are you sure she didn't exit with the crowd?" Rordyc's quiet question had the caretaker glancing anxiously back and forth between the two cousins.

"Y-yes. V-v-very sure. I-I-I was w-watching f-f-for her. S-s-since it w-was h-her f-f-f-first t-time."

"That means she must be in the Royal corridor." The only reason Rordyc's calm assessment didn't infuriate Connyn in the face of his own uncertain control was that he had witnessed firsthand Rordyc's panic-fueled flight across half a country to reclaim his own wayward mate. When it was your own mate at risk, there was no logic cool enough to snuff the emotions that raged and drove you. If asked now, he'd be forced to grudgingly admit that his cousins could be helpful in a crisis.

"We haven't searched there," the soldier replied. "No one can enter without a Royal."

Connyn's abrupt nod accompanied his equally abrupt "Understood," as he headed toward the massive double doors centered at the back of the venue's entry. Soldiers were pulling them open so that when he was near enough to go through, the gap between the doors was wide enough for him, Rordyc and Beyran to enter abreast of each other.

Paying no heed to the other three corridors, they took a hard right down a narrow hall with a high ceiling. At the end was a guard who stepped out of the way at their approach.

"Has anyone entered this corridor today?" asked Connyn.

"Not to my knowledge, sir."

"Have you left your post at any time?"

The guard shifted uneasily. "Once. Briefly. Another guard sounded the distress for immediate help, but when I reached the main entry, no one admitted to calling out.

Rordyc looked at Connyn with an uneasy sharpness to his gaze. Ignoring it, Connyn stepped forward, placed his hand over the center of the door where the five stones were inlaid and pressed his ring against the *rythra*. The door slid back, revealing a long, dark passageway with shimmering ovals along both sides hovering just above the floor. Reds of sunsets, yellows of sunrises, blues of oceans and greens of jungles reflected in muted colors through the inactive portals. But only one glowed with a bright golden ring around it, indicating exactly which one was occupied.

Rordyc's eyebrows flew up when it registered which portal she had gone through. "I won't waste my breath asking if you'd like help returning your mate—"

"Good."

"But I will remind you that she has a very difficult audience to face in the morning."

Connyn was already walking toward the portal. "She's the one who chose the portal," he said. By the time he'd reached the gateway, Rordyc and Beyran were no longer in sight and the door was shut tightly behind them.

* * * * *

Connyn found his mate quickly, though she'd left a rambling trail that twisted and turned in on itself several times. Lust, relief and anger all heaved through him at the

sight of her standing by the edge of a pool of water with her back to him. He moved in behind her as silently as any number of predatory cats stalking their intended prey. She seemed to be staring intently down into the clear water, though he knew from experience there was nothing to see but the soft glow of the translucent orange rocks that lined the bottom.

"The water's safe," he said when he was less than a foot from her.

Aurora shrieked and spun around, her long dark green cloak tangling around her legs. She arched precariously over the water's edge as she tried desperately to regain her balance. Instinctively, he reached for her. Caught her and brought her up next to his chest. Her brown eyes filled with shock and then pain as she tried to free her arm from his grip.

Pulling her up straight, he peeled the cape off her shoulder and down, revealing a long bloody cut on her upper arm. She shifted her other arm out of the cloak and it fell to the ground as he inspected the curved gash down her biceps. A mark he recognized since he'd had one like it down his chest years ago.

He said nothing but picked her up and carried her past the first pool, through the dense vegetation and thick stands of trees toward another pool surrounded by the specific tree he needed. When he reached the bank of the pond, he lowered her to her feet. "Take off your clothes. Do you have any other wounds?" he asked as he pulled away a section of the outer bark of a nearby tree and then used the tip of his knife to scrape off the oozing green sap.

"No."

When he turned back to her, she was still clothed. And shaking. A ferocity of emotion pummeled him at the sight of his mate wounded but safe. Scared but defiant.

Afraid to touch her while such violence pounded in his blood, he came only close enough to her to spread the sap over her cut with the flat of his blade. "It's shallow and should heal easily."

She nodded.

He knew it stung, but his mate never so much as flinched. "The sap disinfects any beginning infection and will neutralize the irritant from the *meglay's* claws as it begins the healing."

After cleaning his knife in the grass, he sheathed it and then tossed it to the ground. He checked the wound, found that the sap had stopped bubbling. "Take off your clothes and get in the water."

"I don't want a bath," she said.

The diverse emotions loosed by the hunt for his mate melted together in a surge of anger. Connyn's fingers curled into his palm as he resisted the urge to rip her clothes off himself and toss her into the water. "The water will soothe your scrapes and bruises." When she didn't move to take off her clothes, he hissed through his teeth, "You can enter the pool under your own strength or mine."

After a brief hesitation where she seemed to be weighing her options, she pulled off her clothes and set them carefully aside. Gingerly, she stepped into the water. This pool wasn't as clear as the other and she hesitated with each step, finding her footing.

"There's nothing harmful in this world," he said, moving toward her, "unlike the one where you received your cut." Pausing, he watched the water rise to cover her body as she moved deeper into the pool. He forced his voice to remain calm even though the brutal truth of just how close she had come to certain death still seethed through his veins. "You're lucky the *meglay's* hunting season just ended. We both are."

He'd nearly lost his own life when he was a youth and had foolishly disregarded Jordyn's instructions to stay out of the *meglay's* world. The *meglay* was not a large beast compared to those Aurora would be acquainted with on Earth. A feral predator, it was the size and shape of a large dog with feline claws and teeth. During its hunting or mating season it attacked with a ferocity that knew no fear and no end until death. His own first encounter with a *meglay* was nearly his last, due to a greatly inflated and arrogant estimation of his own hunting prowess. If his youngest cousin Siriyn hadn't seen him enter the portal and immediately run to snitch on him to Jordyn...Connyn shook the memory away. "How many portals did you enter?"

"Four."

His heart did a quick, swooping dive toward his feet. The *meglay's* homeworld was not the only dangerous portal that opened into this corridor.

The water was up to her shoulders now. She turned to look at him. "The first was one that from the outside looked like the mountains of Colorado, but Colorado doesn't have flowers that hum."

He cocked his head to one side. "True."

"The second was a similar-looking environment and that's where I was attacked. I was still close to the portal and basically fell out of it again when I jumped backward. I was still lurching and trying to regain my balance when I fell into the third world. A world that looked like nothing more than a deserted beach for miles and miles. But the sand moved under my feet and it was like trying to stand up on a waterbed. Plus the water was a golden pinkish color."

An icy shiver crawled down Connyn's spine. If she'd fallen into either the right or left portal next to that one, his family would most likely have been lighting mourning candles tomorrow instead of planning a long overdue Mating Ritual celebration. He leaned over and began removing his boots. "So not Earth?"

"No." She watched him warily and stepped deeper into the pool, bringing the water up to her chin. "But you already knew that."

"Yes." He straightened, pulled his shirt off over his head. "In fact, I know that none of these portals lead to Earth or any other inhabited world." After he took off his pants, he stepped into the water. "They are not even inter-dimensional portals."

"You told me that all the portals were guarded." Her belligerent tone implied that he had lied to her and thus her actions this afternoon were partly, if not completely, his fault.

"I never said such a thing. I said that the five portals to Earth were guarded."

"You never clarified the difference."

"Could it be because I was concerned for your safety?" He reached out and touched her shoulder just above her wound. She looked away and crossed her arms over her breasts. "You caused quite an uproar in the city you know," he said.

Her brows furrowed over her deep brown eyes. "Why?"

A low growl rumbled at the back of his throat. "You don't think a Royal's missing mate, a woman who in part holds the destiny of an entire people in her hands, would be cause for alarm?"

Guilt flashed over her face. "Oh." She backed away slightly, discovered that the bottom of the pool started rising again and stopped. "I hadn't meant to be gone long. I got lost."

"You've upset a lot of people. Beyran believes he's failed in his duty to me—"

"But—"

"Cait was in tears, you abused Brooke's hospitality, caused my parents anguish that they could have been spared, spurred a military search from house to house and shut down the entire city among other things."

Aurora blinked. Twice. Her lips parted as she stared up at him in shock. "I didn't mean..." She shook her head. "I'm sorry for everyone's trouble."

He ignored her apology. "Why do you feel you must talk to Ellyna?"

"I need to ask her a question."

"Ask me."

"You can't answer it."

"How do you know until you ask?"

Resentment flared in her eyes. "How do you know I won't be safe anywhere but in Ilyria?"

His anger threatened to breach the restraining walls he'd caged it in. Fury at the danger she'd put herself in propelled him toward her. He stopped himself just short of reaching for her, refusing to give up his control. Instead he pushed off the bottom of the pool and floated on his back, allowing the warming water to soothe the ragged edges of his nerves.

He could feel Aurora's confusion and tension vibrate through the waters at his actions. Letting her uncertainty build, he closed his eyes and breathed deeply, strengthening his hold on his control. He was going to need every last thread of it to deal with his mate tonight. At the moment, his anger was burning so hot, so deeply, he halfway expected the water to turn to steam where it touched his skin.

Finally she said, "You don't seem to have been too upset by my leaving."

His feet dropped to the bottom of the pool. At once she recognized her mistake and turned to flee. But he had the advantage of size, speed and fury on his side and she'd not gotten halfway to the other side before his arms wrapped around her and held her tightly against his chest.

"Do you really want to know how upset your disappearance made me? How the knowledge that you purposefully ignored my commands in regard to your safety affected me? Affects me to this very moment, Aurora? For your information, I can't tell you. Yet. The demarcation lines setting the boundaries of those particular emotions have yet to be set."

Sliding one arm up between her breasts and the other over her stomach, he gripped her by the hip and shoulder, his arms crossing over her torso in a way that pinned her more securely to him. "So let me tell what I do know. I know how close you came to death in these last hours. How much I now owe the gods in recompense for the miracles worked today on your behalf to ensure your whole and safe return. I know that life freezes the moment someone tells me you're gone."

Breath dragged into his lungs as rage colored vision to black before he could find the control to push it back and grind out the cause behind the rage. "What I don't know is who helped you evade my guards and distract anyone who might have stopped you."

It wasn't until the words were out of his mouth that he realized how that poisonous thought had been subconsciously eating at him. There was no other explanation of all the "coincidences". It hadn't been Cait and it hadn't been Brooke. Bethany hadn't been around and the only others she'd had any consistent contact at all were his own guards. There'd been hours she'd been able to seduce or be seduced by any number of his men while he was attending to state business.

Every soldier under his command marched through his mind as he tried to sift through the most likely to betray him. Each was dismissed in turn as he found it impossible to believe a treachery so deep from any one of them. It burned like acid under his skin knowing that it had to have been one of them and despite all the evidence to prove it, he was still too blind to see which of his men could be guilty of such duplicity.

Aurora had help. As his thoughts clarified around that one salient fact, other sureties fell into place. The betrayal hadn't been by someone loyal to the Sleht. If so, his mate would be dead or well into enemy territory. She would *not* have been released to wander through the portals. Everyone in Ilyria understood how The Gateways worked and his soldiers knew that there were no inter-dimensional portals here. Any one of them would have told her the same if they had known she was hoping to return to Earth.

Understanding lodged like a boulder on his heart. Her accomplice had been acquiescing to her requests. She'd been in charge the entire time, not revealing her

whole plan, but arranging help for what she could not do on her own. Which meant Aurora had not been seduced, but had been the seducer.

Suddenly, the devious smile that had worried him earlier that morning made perfect sense.

"Who is he, Aurora?"

Her body stiffened in his hold. "What?"

"Who is the traitor in my own household?"

"Traitor? What are you talking about?"

"Who helped you escape my protection?"

"No, you have it wrong." Her voice rose with her panic. Her arms and legs flailed. "You don't understand." She twisted, kicked, struggled and then fought to turn in his arms, but he would not release her.

The pain of seeing her face when another man's name passed her lips struck a deep fear inside him of the brutal viciousness it could loose. He felt the snarling and snapping of the ruthlessness already rising, acutely sharpened by the collapsing hope that had only just risen to life at Brooke's declaration that his mate loved him. Now he knew that the emotion he'd touched in her soul when he finally broken through that golden mist had not been for him, but for another man.

The howling, epic darkness that swallowed his soul along with that newly born hope left him with nothing but the bleak and granite purpose of vengeance. He would do no violence to his mate, but he would tear her co-conspirator apart with his bare hands until every bone was ripped from its joint and every ligament shredded from the bone. With the thought, his rage plumbed beyond the fire to a point of cold calculation.

"Tell me, Aurora. I know you could not have done this by yourself."

"Connyn! Listen to me. It wasn't—"

"No!" He squeezed her just enough to cut off her lie as the air was pushed from her lungs. He walked over to the side of the pool that had a drop-off from the edge. It still was fairly shallow but would suit his purpose. "A name, Aurora. That's all I want to hear."

She sucked in air. Shook her head. "Connyn, let's talk about this. I can explain. I don't have a name. There wasn't—"

"Enough!" he roared. That she would lie to protect this man cut a grief so sharply through his soul he nearly lost the icy grip on his control.

Her hair twined around his fingers as he fisted a thick mass of it in his hand to hold her head still. He pulled it back so her neck arched and her breasts crested the waterline. He lowered his own head next to hers until his mouth was directly next to her ear. His harsh whisper grated out through clenched teeth. "If you say another word that isn't his name, I promise you'll regret it."

She shuddered in his arms and then went so completely still he wondered if she was even allowing herself to breathe. Something died inside him when she held her

silence on behalf of the other man, but the determination to know who had stolen his mate out from under him on the eve of the Council's blessing fueled his purpose. No matter how empty the victory would be without Aurora by his side, he would not stop until he knew the truth.

Chapter Fourteen

Aurora was frozen by shock. She'd been exhausted and nearly spent before Connyn had found her and now she actually feared for her life. When she'd first considered striking out for a portal on her own after Cait's comments, she'd accepted that there'd be a price to pay for defying Connyn's iron grip. She'd never in her life have guessed he'd reach such horribly wrong conclusions.

Fury cracked against her with every word. Every accusation. She knew she should be furious that he would even think she'd betray him. She'd never do that. To anyone. If she was done with a man for whatever reasons, she told him and left. And now when she'd actually started falling in love with a man, he was certain she was a liar and a cheat.

Shit. What the hell could she actually say if he let her explain? Better he think she was unfaithful than know the truth. He couldn't. Not yet. Damn, she had needed to hear from Ellen. Shit shit *shit*! She hoped she hadn't ruined everything.

Connyn leaned over her, bending her with him until her head rested on the bank. Expecting hard ground, she was surprised to find her head cushioned by a dry sponge-like material. Not as soft as a pillow but not uncomfortable either.

The weight of Connyn's body held her immobile against the edge of the pool as he captured both her hands and stretched them out in front of her into the tall weeds that surrounded the pond. Lifting her head, she watched as he yanked down new leaves still hugging a dark purple stalk and began wrapping them around and around her wrists. He left the bottom part of the leaf attached to the plant, effectively anchoring her in place.

When he released her arms, she immediately tugged on the restraints but the plant's leaves held.

Connyn brushed her hair from her face and then stepped back so that his weight wasn't pressing the breath out of her anymore. She gasped and tried to straighten, but Connyn grabbed her hips and pulled her back so that her arms were pulled out straight in front of her, with her head resting on the bank and her body bent over at the waist. The water level hit her so that her stomach was in the water but her back was above it. With his foot, he pushed her feet apart so that her legs were spread and then he held her pressed against him, her ass cushioning his cock.

His low growl of need startled her, made her wonder what kind of torture Ilyrians reserved for those they considered traitors. A bone-deep shudder racked her body as he ran his hand down the center of her back. It was a very possessive gesture that didn't stop there. Both hands swept back up her sides, around to her breasts and down her stomach. They continued over her thighs and between her legs, around her hips and

over her ass. His hands were swift and would have been rough were it not for the softening aspect of the water. His touch felt more like an experienced horse trainer examining the muscle tone of a new acquisition than a lover's caress.

She felt the weight of being possessed with every sweep of his hands. Even though there was a coldness to his touch, it was no less expert and soon had her body aching and shivering for more although she wished with every molecule in her being she had enough magic left to blast the man right out of the water.

Unfortunately, she'd felt much of her magic leach away with the body-racking shudders that had overcome her every time she stepped through one of those damn portals. She'd used a large amount of magic to keep her stomach inside her body instead of allowing it to lurch its way free as it had been quite insistent about doing. It reminded her of the step into Ilyria, but today it had been much worse.

When his hands slipped between her legs again and brushed over her clit, a revealing moan whimpered out of her before she could stop it. He passed his fingers over her again and she pressed her face against the bank to keep another moan from escaping.

"Give me the name of the man who helped you and this will go much easier for you," he promised. He continued the firm strokes of his fingers on her pussy until she had to turn her head to the side and breathe. Gulping in air, she tried to look back at him but her hair had fallen over her eyes and this time he did not brush it aside.

"I did it all myself. I had no help." Even though her voice rasped out of a throat nearly closed from fear, her words were clear.

Connyn stood motionless for a moment before leaning over her and whispering, "That isn't possible and lying only makes it worse. I'm tired of waiting for you to willingly tell me the truth. Time to take it from you."

Aurora jerked her head up. "What?" Her vision was obscured by wet strands of hair, but in her mind the fragmented images all fused together of a relentless ruthlessness in which there was not a shred of mercy. She struggled anew to pull free of the plant, but she only succeeded in tightening the fibrous leaves around her wrists.

Connyn's big hand came down on top of her wrists. "Stop. You'll only injure yourself."

Her laughter barked out harsh and hollow. "Afraid I'll hurt myself before you get a chance to?"

His hand flexed around her wrists once before he released them. "It's not my plan to hurt you." Splaying his hands over her shoulders, he smoothed them down her back again, his thumbs pressing along the sides of her spine. "But I will get my answer."

Inwardly he cursed the fates that had not held her in their world until her first birthday, allowing them to go through the Matching Ritual so many years ago. She'd have had a Guardian in place that would have kept her from taking any other man as her mate. It was a scourge he'd lived with and carried on his soul since he could

remember. But when he'd first seen her dark brown eyes flashing up at him, he believed that she was his, *knew* she was his. Forever.

How quickly dreams could burn.

His palms slid over her ass, his thumbs sliding into the crevice between her buttocks sending a shiver over her skin. "Did you know that your mind opens to mine when you climax?" His thumbs slid in deeper. "What I've discovered is that the harder you come," he said as he pulled apart her ass cheeks, allowing the water to lap at the tightly puckered hole between them, "the easier it is to read your thoughts." He brushed his thumb over her anus.

"Connyn—"

"No. I don't want to hear another word."

Leaning back over her, he reached for another plant growing beside the pool and, gripping it around its base, squeezed the center of it upward until several translucent globules popped out of the top. A spicy cinnamon scent wafted from the whitish balls when he picked one up and held it in front of her face.

"See this little thing?" he asked, turning it around so she could get a good look at it. "It's amazing what it can do. If you squeeze it, jelly comes out." He demonstrated and then wiped the cool, sticky gel-like substance along her bottom lip. It warmed and tingled, created a sort of low-level electric buzz that shot straight to her cunt.

His eyes narrowed arrogantly at her reaction. "And that's not all it can do. When you squeeze it, not only does the gel come out, the little ball starts to vibrate."

He stood, scooping up the half dozen little globules in his palm. She closed her eyes and focused on gathering her remaining strength. Steeling herself for an assault on her senses she'd be able to do nothing to deflect, she focused her energy on covering the secrets buried deep in her mind that were not hers to reveal. Desperately she prayed she had enough magic left to do that at least.

First, she felt the cool gel drawn in a thin stripe down the center of her spine. Almost immediately, the gel began to work its magic, sending warm tingles out in pulses that had her arching her back as the need that had been simmering in her pussy since he'd first started touching her increased. She held her breath as Connyn continued spreading the gel down past her tailbone, afraid that he was going to rub it on the one place that might undo her far too fast to keep any control of her thoughts.

Connyn stopped just short of her anus and Aurora took the opportunity to breathe again.

"If you like that," Connyn whispered, "you're going to love this." His voice was icy. Words that should have been gentle against her skin were instead laced with a thinly veiled threat. His hands dipped into the water on either side of her, his palms skating over the sides of her breasts. Her muscles wound tight as she waited, knowing what was most certainly coming. But he drew her tension out, pressing the sides of her breasts in, rotating his palms to increase the friction and weighting them against the push of the water.

Maybe, just maybe he wasn't—"Oh!" she cried out as he pinched both her nipples between his fingers and twisted them, transferring more of the gel onto her oversensitized peaks. A hot, sizzling sting shot a new wave of need through her body and she would have sunk to her knees if Connyn hadn't grabbed her by her hips and held her in place. When she had stabilized, he began applying the gel to the inside of her thighs, around her navel and along the nape of her neck.

The electricity buzzing through her body could have lit up a small town. It crackled and sparked like a live wire over wet pavement until her hands were fisting, her toes were curling and she had long given up on silencing her moans.

She could feel the probing of Connyn's mind like a steady force against hers, resolute and determined. Before, she'd never realized she was blocking him. During sex her magic had always swirled through her mind. It never bothered her that she could feel the magic pulse and stream in a steady current beneath her skin as her body heated. She'd just assumed that that was the way of it, at least for her. Until Connyn and his alien thought probe, all she'd ever struggled with was to keep the magic in check as far as outward signs went. At an early age she'd learned that it was better to walk across the room and flip a switch than panic those around you by engulfing a room in darkness with a simple *off* thought directed toward it.

But now, with her powers used and weak, she felt the full pressure of his mental powers as he pressed through one flimsy barrier after another. She didn't know how much he was actually able to "read" or if he could only sense emotions. And she sure as hell wasn't about to ask.

A rush of frustration poured through her that wasn't hers. Perhaps he wasn't being as successful as she thought he was. But then he surged forward again, both with his body and mind. The heat of his flesh pressing down where her body was already hot with the tingling gel had her crying out, bucking and losing her footing. He wrapped his arm around her waist and kept her up. Whispered in her ear. "So you like Brooke's garden?"

"What?" It shocked her enough to clear her mind of some of the sexual haze and push his thoughts back.

"And just when we were making progress." He reached around her and roughly squeezed more globules out of another plant. "There is one thing I forgot to mention," he said as the water around her began to bubble. "There are tiny fish in this pool that feed off this plant. They especially love the jelly."

Aurora gasped out his name as tiny sucking bites latched on to every spot where he'd spread the gel. Was this what being at the center of an orgy was like? The tingling heat continued while her nipples, her inner thighs, her navel, everywhere underwater he'd spread the gel was sucked and teased at once.

Connyn's clever finger dipped back between her legs and he spread a liberal dose of the stimulant over her pussy lips and her clit. Her clit, already distended with her arousal, made an easy target for the fish.

Her cry bounced back at her from the surrounding trees. She jerked forward and clamped her thighs shut. The resulting pressure streamed the fire of orgasm straight from her center to the ends of her toes and tips of her hair. Jagged blazes of electricity curled around her bones and licked at her skin. The culmination of the days roiled through her, the fear and hope, the lust and love, the confusion and determination. She drew in shallow panting breaths as the waves of orgasm continued to roll through her, pushed higher by the constant nibbling, sucking and tingling.

Her body started to shake, was still shaking when Connyn pulled her back and pushed her legs apart. Once again the fish swarmed her clit for a just a moment before Connyn's hand flicked them away. Aurora pulled in a great breath of air, ready to gush out thanks for the small relief.

Until he pushed one after another of the small globules into her cunt.

"What are you doing? Wait! They might get stuck and—" She gasped as the fiery frissons that had been on the outside of her body invaded with a militant strength.

"Don't worry," he said, the smugness unmistakable. "They dissolve."

Before he'd finished explaining, her inner walls constricted and the gel filled her cunt and then started streaming out. Heavier than the water, it flowed down over her clit sending new jolts of scalding sensations and a fresh wave of frenzied feeding by the tiny fish. The water churned around her pussy as more fish joined the feast, their minute tails and fins now teasing her tender skin as well as their sucking bites.

The little balls inside her cunt started to vibrate and another orgasm built with such ferocity, such speed, that when it hit, she could only throw her head back and scream as lightning arced through her body. Her skin was too thin a boundary to hold in the sharp edges of her climax. It tore through her and lanced into the sky, turning everything within her sight to a fiery amber. The universe began to close in on her. Stars and planets, comets and galaxies rushed toward her, pushing her past her magic, past control and reason.

The scent of cinnamon wreathed through the spicy sandalwood of Connyn's skin and tugged her soul hard with the emotions that stubbornly stuck to her heart. She quit fighting Connyn's mental invasion. It didn't matter anymore. Her defenses were gone. Stripped raw and throbbing, leaving her breathing in ragged, sobbing pants. His mind broke through the thin veil as he sifted through her thoughts of the day, reading her memories, what she had done and seen. What she had caused.

She was with him there in her mind as he saw how she had watched Brooke fall asleep and then used her magic to reveal the door in the wall. How she had used her magic to push the tray of food over from down the hall and around the corner and even how she had flirted with one of The Gateways guards to catch his voice in a spell that lured his companion out of the way.

When he took her through the memories of the portals, she felt his surge of rage underlined with fear as he watched the *meglay's* attack, fading only as she remembered how she used her magic to push herself away from the animal. He saw her fright at

being lost and exhausted, the surge of relief that flooded her when he'd found her and the love for him at the base of every other emotion that had driven her through the day. All of it. Every memory and emotion of the day lay bare before him, unprotected and wholly vulnerable.

Connyn pulled out of Aurora's mind and stared down at his mate's shuddering body in shock. He'd been so wrong. So incredibly wrong.

He'd accused her of betraying him. *Believed* she'd betrayed him. What he'd seen he could hardly take in. The rage he'd felt at what he'd thought to be her betrayal was now turned on himself. His soul felt stained by his accusations and the thought of what he could have destroyed, had been so intent on destroying, tore through him with an agonizing howl of regret and shame.

The sound of Aurora's uneven breath brought him back from his mind's rush toward oblivion and he looked down at his mate, bent over before him and still struggling with the effects of her last climax and his mental invasion. Tenderly he smoothed his hand down her back.

She loved him. That had been as clear to him in her mind as one other very important piece of information.

"Magic?" he whispered. "You can manifest the magic the gods trapped in your blood all those centuries ago?"

Aurora's head was resting on the bank between her outstretched arms. Her eyes were closed and her hair was plastered to the skin of her flushed face and shoulders. Under his hands, he could feel the tiny tremors still quaking through her muscles.

"Yes." Her answer was so soft he could almost believe she'd answered with her mind except he'd seen her lips move. Slowly, her eyes opened. The dark orbs were bright with the effects of her recent climaxes, her body still besieged by sensations that kept her tightly held next to the edge of ecstasy.

"Why didn't you tell me? Why would you hold such a secret from me?"

Before she could answer, another shudder rolled up her spine and he watched the agony of pleasure tighten the muscles of her face as her eyes closed and her mouth rounded on the faintest moan. So soft. So sexy.

He leaned over her and covered her body with his own, holding her closely, closer than he'd hold his own life. Pushing his hand between her legs, he covered her pussy, shielding it from the constant play of the fish.

"Were you afraid of the Council's reaction?"

She shook her head and labored to take in a breath.

He kissed her shoulder. "Never mind. It doesn't matter now. They will accept you because you are my mate." Carefully he drew her hair off her face with the tips of his fingers. Combing it back and over to the side, he left her bared to his sight from her

neck down. Gently he leaned over her, wrapped his arm around her and splayed his hand over her heart. "My *vystra*."

"What?"

Laying another tender kiss on the back of her neck and then her temple, he said, "You're my mate and I should not have doubted you."

"You didn't know —"

"That doesn't excuse my actions."

"But I haven't told you —"

"It's all right. I know what's true now." His voice was harsh with regret and self-loathing. He leaned down and swiped his tongue over Aurora's shoulder simply to taste his mate and to calm the storm still raging within him.

He rested his forehead between her shoulder blades. "What we don't know of each other, we'll learn." Lifting his head, he kissed the curve of her neck. "Destiny has bound us and our hearts have confirmed it."

"Connyn, please let me explain—" She broke off with a shudder and her thighs clamped around his hand.

"Shhh. There is nothing more to say. Not tonight."

He reached out again with his mind to touch hers. Found it was open to him, though the gold mist was starting to creep back in around the edges. It didn't worry him. Soon the mental paths they shared would become stronger and easier to travel and she would be able to touch his mind as he did hers. The blessing from the Council should complete any missing pieces that complicated the matter at present.

Aurora moaned and pushed back against him, her ass pressing into his cock. His very hard cock. The heat of her body ignited a need to have his mate that was so primal, so absolutely elemental it destroyed all other thought.

Before, when he'd believed she'd chosen another, *invited* another into her body after lying to his face about her vows, he'd not even considered mating with her. Taking her was his right as long as she'd given him that right with truth in her vows. As was her right to take him the moment he'd given her his vows. But not with a lie between them. Bringing her to a hard and sustained pleasure to understand and gain the truth, yes, he'd do that. To use her body for his own release out of anger and emptiness was a sacrilege to the vows he lived by and a thing he would not do, regardless of the amoral demands of his flesh.

But now, now that he knew she was his, that her heart belonged to him and her mind could be opened to him there wasn't a barrier in existence that could keep him from having his mate.

His hand had remained cupped over her pussy and he pressed his fingers up, testing. She was still hot and swollen but not so sensitive that she jerked when he touched her clit. Carefully he slid a single finger into her cunt, probing to make sure all

the globules had dissolved. He didn't think she could handle another round of the fish on top of what he had planned for her.

Aurora had stepped forward so that her chest was resting on the bank as well as her head. Her eyes were closed and her arms relaxed. Other than a short throaty moan when his knuckle grazed the exquisitely sensitive spot at the front of her vagina, she didn't respond as he examined her.

"I'll be right back," he said as he withdrew his hand. "Don't move."

Her eyelids didn't even slightly flutter as she raised one arm slightly off the ground as far as the binding plant would allow. "You're kidding, right?" she asked sarcastically.

He waded to the far side of the pool where he gathered the pertinent parts of two other plants. When the ripples in the water telegraphed his nearness, Aurora looked up.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

"Preparing to take what is mine."

Aurora groaned and dropped her head back down. "For the love of god, Connyn. If you don't quit, I won't be walking for a week."

After shifting the plants to his left hand, he ran the right one down the center of her back and over her hip in one long proprietary sweep before pressing his thumb into the firmness of her ass as his fingers claimed the crease at the top of her thigh. "Don't worry. I'm well able to carry you any place you need to go."

His mate's softly muttered curse made him smile, but the way she arched her back and tilted her ass up at his touch made him burn. He didn't try to stop the low growl that rumbled up out of his chest. Spreading his hand over her ass cheek, he pressed his fingers down until they dented her flesh and his palm was hot against her skin.

Ready to have both his hands on her, he placed one of the woody stems across her back while he dunked the long, knobbed pod he'd peeled out of another plant into the water to moisten it before slowly pushing it into her cunt. The unusually heavy seeds trapped inside would roll around once he started thrusting and his mate would be doubly stimulated and filled. It was a tight fit and he had to twist it in to secure it. Aurora didn't resist, instead, she widened her stance to give him easier access. As a reward, he stroked her clit as he finished inserting the pod. She was rocking backward into his fingers when he stopped his caresses.

Rolling her head on her arm she protested with a throaty groan. "Damn it, Connyn. You don't play fair."

"And you played fair with me last night?" he asked, remembering the cutting edge of lust she had tethered him to for so long. He slipped his fingers down inside the crease of her buttocks and pressed one against her anus.

Aurora's head came up and she snapped it around to look at him, her eyes wide and wild. "Oh no," she whispered as he circled her there and started to press inside. "Not now. Not after everything else."

"Yes." He pushed his finger fully in and watched as her eyelids squeezed shut and her teeth sank into her lower lip on a sexy moan. He pulled it back out, pushed it in. She moved with his hand and the water slapped gently around her cunt and splashed up to his finger.

"Shit," she hissed and dropped her forehead down to rest on her arm.

As he removed his finger, he watched the small puckered hole pull against it, felt the added friction of the tight little muscle that guarded this entry. Lust rose in a rush of need to feel that taut circle stretched around his cock.

Breaking the top of the stem of the second plant he'd picked, he tipped it up and poured the syrupy liquid into his cupped hand. After coating his jutting erection in it, he parted her ass cheeks with the thumb and index finger of one hand and gently inserted the opened end of the stem into her anus just a fraction to squirt the remainder of the liquid into her channel. This gel wouldn't attract the fish again, but it stayed slick and thick for some time in water.

Aurora's body shivered as he finished and tossed the stem away. The liquid was cold until heated by friction. Contradictory sensations he was willing to bet would heighten his mate's ultimate climax.

"Put your legs together and tilt your ass up as high as you can," he ordered.

Slowly, Aurora readjusted her position, abruptly stopping once when her movements shifted the pod inside her. "Holy crap," she gasped. "What did you put inside me? It's moving!"

"Only when you do."

She breathed out hard. "Shit, what the hell is this place?"

"The last world you hopped into trying to get away from me," he said, pressing on her back until she was angled to his satisfaction with the waterline hitting her clit and her ass high enough to be fucked.

"I wasn't running away, I was running *to*," she panted. "A clear-cut differ – *Oh!*"

The sound of his mate being sensually staggered into little more than breathy gasps and moans was becoming quickly addictive. It was also a very satisfying way of cutting short her argumentative nature.

Connyn had separated her ass cheeks during her explanation and wasted no time pressing the head of his cock against her back hole. It was tight but gave enough with the lubricant from the plant to allow the head access into the narrow channel when he rocked forward firmly. The puckered hole stretched to accommodate the wide head and tightened immediately under its ridge, sending streaks of lightning up his shaft and blazing over his spine.

Aurora's sudden intake of breath rippled the water around them. The unsteady breaths that came afterward as he pushed in further jiggled her ass under his hands and forced out her tiny, whispery moans. Squeezing her ass cheeks with each hand, he pulled them slightly further apart. One of the best things about this type of fucking was

the unhindered ability to see his mate's body swallow his cock, watch her take it in inch by inch until his entire shaft was in as deep as possible.

As he pushed forward again, seeing his cock disappear into Aurora's ass nearly sent him over the edge of his control. He glanced up to check on her and found her looking at him with her mouth rounded around a breathy moan. The fire in her eyes licked at him with dark flames of desire as the tip of her tongue swiped over her teeth.

She held his gaze as he thrust slowly but completely into her. He held himself there, buried inside her and pressed flush against her, taking in his mate's arousal and the submission of her body to his lusts. When he didn't move she turned away from him and let her head fall backward onto her shoulders. The action arched her back even more severely and pushed her ass more firmly against him. He felt the weight of the pod shift inside his mate's pussy and Aurora's body tensed under him.

"God damn it, Connyn," she ground out, her voice harsh and bewitchingly demanding, "if you don't fuck me now and fuck me hard, I'm going to fucking scream!"

A command, ancient and eternal, rose from the promise he carried in his blood. The ultimate oath between mates where taking guaranteed giving all. A yielding so complete it forged the eternal strength that could ultimately bind two souls as one. It defied the words that would define it, simply existing far beyond the primordial memories that fused his being to his soul. It was beyond dogma and dictates. Forever before and forever after, Aurora was his as he was wholly hers.

Placing his hands on her hips, he pulled back and then thrust in once more slow and deep. He rotated his hips, shifting his cock inside her and making sure she was well coated for the fucking to come.

Connyn groaned as her back channel wrapped around him with a grip that teased his fantasies and compelled him to ride her hard. One last time he paused, soaking in the sensations of being fully embedded in his mate's ass, feeling her body tense in need and anticipation for the ecstasy he was going to bring it.

"God...Connyn." She sunk her fingers into the ground and then fisted them so tightly the dark green juice of the moss seeped between her fingers.

He rocked forward just enough to ripple the water around her pussy and his balls, his eyes narrowing with the sharp swell of pleasure the motion granted. She countered by arching up a fraction more and clenching her muscles making the edge of his vision waver with a sharp stab of ecstasy.

The preparation and teasing were done. With one hand he held her hip to keep her steady and in place so he wouldn't ram her into the side of the pool. The other he slid around and over her pussy, pushing between her labia with two fingers to stroke the sides of her clit.

"Oh, that's good," she said, wiggling her ass. "But damn it, I need — yes!"

He knew what she needed. What they both needed. What she had demanded and his body commanded. And he gave it to her.

Again and again he thrust hard into the tight hole, watched it give around his cock, felt the smack of her ass cheeks and the slap of the water merge with the resistance of her anus along the length of his cock every time he plunged into her. He drove into her again. His desire relentless. His need savage. He tugged on her clit as his body slammed against hers. Again, the undulation of her inner muscles reacting to the dildo sent tiny pulsating flutters rippling around his cock. That delicate throbbing danced around his erection as he thrust roughly into her, his body beginning to yield to the climax he'd been denying. He'd surrender with pleasure, but he'd take his mate with him.

Pinching her clit between his fingers and then tugging it away from her body, he watched his cock sink hard and fast into Aurora one final time before the clawing streams of ecstasy rushed through his veins. Even as his cum poured into her ass, she bucked and cried out, her muscles tightening, her ass clenching around his cock as she hovered, cresting the edge of her orgasm. Every tendon and ligament strained and taut as she threw her head back, her long dark hair lashing across her back like so many strips of wet silk.

Aurora screamed as her body flushed with the sudden heat of her climax. Her pussy so hot in his hand, her ass rocking against him, squeezing him.

His mate pulled him with her through the shattering streams of ecstasy. The sensations were so violent, so primitive and raw, they left no piece of his heart unclaimed, no part of his soul untouched. Unable, unwilling to do anything less, he released himself to the consuming conflagration, letting the explosion roll through him, its roar deafening, its conquest absolute.

Chapter Fifteen

Aurora rolled over and watched the flowering ivy wave gently in the breeze. Hanging down from one of the balcony windows, it swayed and a golden petal drifted to the floor. A twinge of her well-used muscles made her smile. She reached down between her legs and slid her fingers along her labia, finding herself warm and moist.

After last night she wasn't interested in making herself come this morning. She didn't know how she got back, other than assuming Connyn carried her. The last thing she remembered was Connyn lifting her out of the pool and wrapping her in the cloak she'd worn that day. At some point, she'd make all appropriate public and private apologies, but after being fucked into near oblivion, she'd have been mortified to face anyone last night.

She started to curl her knees up closer to her chest but stopped when the movement caused a slight ache in her ass, a shadowy reminder of how Connyn had invaded her body so damn...*amazingly*. Those portals held more than a few surprises.

The sweet morning breeze brushed aside the ivy again, allowing a capricious ray of sun to dart through the foliage. It danced across the other side of the bed and caught her eye with a red flash. She turned her head and found a large pendant had been carefully cushioned in the center of Connyn's pillow. The jewel was the size of a little child's fist, deep red and cut in such a way as to catch the light no matter which way it was turned. The only flaw, if it could be called that, was that the stone had been perfectly halved, probably severed to lie flat when worn.

The soft musical tinging that floated through the air announced Cait's entrance. Aurora had started to learn the tones that signaled the different personnel who had clearance to come through the door to the suite when it wasn't locked.

"Come in," she said, still turning the gem over in her hand.

A few moments later Cait appeared but stopped in the doorway and stood with her hands clasped together, her eyes downcast. "I was told you might want some help getting dressed for the presentation before the Council."

Oh shit! She'd actually forgotten. Mind-blowing orgasms apparently did just that. They blew one's mind. On the good side, she'd gotten a wonderful night's sleep, but now... *"Well shit."*

Cait glanced up nervously, her big brown eyes filled with apprehension. Immediately she looked back down. "But I would understand if you'd prefer another to assist you."

"What?" Aurora stopped scooting out of the bed, the bedspread wrapped around her. "I didn't mean you. It's just that..." She trailed off as Cait seemed to shrink in on

herself with every word. Gathering the material at her breasts, she shuffled around the bed to stand in front of Cait. "Why would I want someone else?"

The young woman started to say something, swallowed what sounded suspiciously like a sob and then remained quiet. Aurora put her hand on Cait's arm. "Cait, talk to me. What's wrong?"

"It was my fault you went through the portals —"

"No." Aurora shook her head. "Why would you think that?" When Cait didn't answer, Aurora dropped her hand. "Cait, please talk to me. I don't understand why you'd say that."

"If I hadn't told you about them, you wouldn't have run off. You could have been hurt. You could have —"

"Wait wait wait. What I do, *whatever* I did, was never and will never be your fault. You weren't the only one to mention portals to me and besides, I'm an adult. Well able to accept responsibility for my own actions."

"But the Royals —"

"Don't blame you either. I won't let them. You've done nothing but help me since I got here and if you don't stop feeling guilty, I'll be very upset. Besides, if Connyn had taken ten minutes to explain certain realities around here, we wouldn't have had this little problem in the first place."

Cait couldn't have looked more bewildered if she had tried. Aurora decided to go on the offensive. "And now I need help getting dressed for what could possibly be the most important meeting of my life. So what do you think? Should I wear my hair up or down? Is there anything I'm supposed to wear, like an official, oh I don't know, headdress or something?"

A surprised hiccup of a shy laugh cracked Cait's solemnity and she quickly covered her mouth with her hand.

Aurora's eyes widened. "Oh god. There is a headdress, isn't there? Please tell me there aren't feathers involved."

* * * * *

Connyn stood in the Hall of Council waiting for Aurora's entrance. He'd left her undisturbed this morning to attend to certain matters left over from yesterday. Or more accurately put, matters left undone because of yesterday. But with the added efforts of his parents and his cousins all had been resolved in time for him to attend the Council. When Wyc and Rordyc had shown up to add their support, he'd been instantly wary, but the only thing that had been said about yesterday's events was Wyc's rather wry comment welcoming him to "matedom" before they left to finish the clean-up of Aurora's tear through the kingdom. He wasn't completely comfortable with the new bond they seemed to now share, but there wasn't anything he could do about it.

He'd been admitted earlier to state his position and petition. The Council had agreed to seal his and Aurora's union with an official blessing before the public presentation of the Heirs and mates later in the month. Wyc and Rordyc hadn't commented on his request, but the looks that passed between them made it clear that they thought his actions were overzealous and pretentious. Their opinions didn't matter to Connyn. They both had mates they'd been matched with from the beginning and their unions had clearly been sealed by the stars and gods.

He'd given his vow to Aurora and she'd returned it. Days ago. He should have that mental link with her that proved the bond. After the years searching...

Tearing his mind from those spiraling thoughts, he glanced around the large circular hall. For generations it had remained the same since before the War of the Five. Large arched windows soared toward a ceiling fashioned so far above the floor that during evening gatherings when the only light was from the wall sconces and scattered light stands it seemed as if the top of the hall ended only at infinity. The entire Council Building was carved from gleaming white stone marbled with thin veins of gold and silver threads. It was a rare stone but found in each of the five territories. Its use was approved solely for buildings of United Purpose.

Here in the Hall of Council, the very center of Ilyria, the walls, floor and ceiling had been embedded with myriad scatterings of the stones representative of each of the Five Houses. He still vividly recalled thinking he had stepped into a rainbow the first time he had entered this room as a boy in the company of his parents, the result of ancient craftwork and a child's vivid imagination.

Initially there'd been five thrones encircling the great seal centered on the floor, but they had been destroyed during the war and in their place were two long curved tables of heavy stone on either side of the seal. The nine Elders and the nine Prophets were seated behind them dressed in the heavy robes of their offices, each holding an intricately carved rod entwined with the same metals as the Matching Ritual rings. Every staff was topped with a clear glass globe with five fragments of wood embedded in the center, one each from the staves originally held by the Five Brothers.

His ancestor, along with those of his cousins, had stood in the center seal of this great hall and brought their staves down together on *The Kyltar's* image in a unified declaration of war. Each staff had shattered, the seal had cracked into five sections and the five stones in *The Kyltar's* collar had turned black. Legend claimed that if, *when*, the final generation of the prophecy stood in unity once more around the seal, the cracks would heal and the stones would glow with their original brilliance.

A single, low tolling of a bell from outside announced Aurora's entrance through the outer gates of the Hall. The muted murmurings among the Elders and Prophets ceased and he took his place in front of the seal between the Elders and Prophets, his stance and expression radiating power and confidence.

Though normal Matching Rituals were attended by a privileged list of men and women related to the two to be matched, this could not be considered normal by any stretch of the imagination. Not only were they far past his mate's first birthday, but he'd

not yet disclosed to anyone his mate's ability to manifest magic. A single, uneasy itch stung the back of his neck at the thought. He ignored it.

A loud, echoing thud of heavy spears hitting the outer stone floor announced his mate's arrival. The large doors, black stone with an intricate gold and silver inlay done in the same pattern of the Matching Ritual rings opened with a slow somberness. Chairs scraped around the large hall as the Elders and Prophets rose when his mate stepped over the threshold and then paused, finding him with her eyes and waiting.

His breath stopped as his entire world distilled down to the one woman standing before him. His entire world encapsulated in all she was. His past, present and future, all he'd been, all he could be, destined from the beginning to be for her. The insanity he had charged to his cousins' actions and feelings regarding their mates seemed trivial in comparison to the unbridled tempest of emotions reeling through him.

His eyes devoured her, standing as regal and noble as any Royal born and bred in the role. She looked less a mate chosen for a present-day Royal and more the description befitting one of the maiden goddesses who had ruled ancient Ilyria when the world was new and the years had yet to begin. For a moment, he wondered if perhaps she wasn't a true goddess—that would explain her magic—before he discarded the thought. The Three Maidens had lived only in Ilyria's distant and mythological past. His mate was most certainly real, present and *his*.

From her hair to the tips of her jeweled shoes, she shimmered elegantly in a gown of deep red embroidered with dozens of tiny *rythra* that veed up from her waist to sparkle over her breasts and flared down to the floor-length hem. The dress was sleeveless, but her upper arms were decorated with repeated thin, delicate twists of gold and silver inlaid with more *rythra*. Her hair, pulled back in the front, was intricately wound around a circlet of yet more *rythra* that glowed like fire in the midnight mass of waves that fell around her shoulders and down her back.

Undeniably breathtaking, she was far beyond the conveyance of the simple word beautiful. He could not stop gazing at her. Her dark eyes appeared endlessly deep and had been rimmed with a smudge of black. Her lips had been stained a dark red that matched the very center color of the heritage *rythra* stone he'd left for her this morning. It hung around her neck on a thin ribbon and lay softly just above her breasts. Like everything about the woman, it shone with a brilliance that made the entire room, even the sun streaming in from the high windows, pale in comparison.

With a slight tilt of her head, she nodded to him, an action that seemed both deferential and arrogant, breaking the spell that had held him frozen in a world that contained them alone. He raised his hand toward her, palm up, gesturing her to him. Aurora stepped forward and took his offered hand. Close up, he could see the veiled panic in her eyes. Lifting her fingers to his lips, he brushed a kiss over them and with a gentle squeeze, smiled to reassure her.

Turning toward the standing assemblage, he drew her even with him. "My mate," he announced, "Aurora Kilth."

Aurora forced herself to breathe. The way Cait and her small army of helpers had fussed over her this morning had prepared her in part for this meeting with the Elders and Prophets, but she still had been hoping for a short sprinkling of “blessed” water and an “off you go now, have a good life” ceremony. Connyn hadn’t given her much of a clue as to what was going to happen, had only said he wasn’t sure since the ritual blessing had only taken place at Matching Rituals and never after the Mating Rite had been completed. But after their blowup in the garden over it she’d not pressed the argument, hoping that Ellen would show up and save the day.

Instead, she stood dressed up and on display as a princess before the High Council in an alien world. At some point, reality truly had become stranger than fiction.

Confidently wearing her best “runway” face as she was escorted through the complex, Aurora nearly lost her composure when the massive doors slowly swung open and the first person she saw was Connyn.

He stood, legs apart and arms crossed over his chest as if he were the captain of the world and this hall the flagship of his fleet. As usual, the two customary thin braids at his temples held his hair back and he wore the Matching Ritual ring. In all other ways, at least compared to how she had been outfitted, he was dressed exceedingly simply. The only relief to his black tunic, pants and boots was the multifaceted medallion he wore suspended from around his neck by a beautifully embroidered ribbon. Embedded in the center of the medallion was the other half to the *rythra* he’d given her to wear. Seeing it there and realizing what it was started her heart pounding heavily in her chest with a confusing mixture of exhilarating joy and stinging trepidation.

The man had carved his mark on her heart more permanently than ever a branding iron could on her skin. And she had allowed it and even found a reason to hope because of it. A hope that was nourished by the look in his eyes when he had kissed her hand. Perhaps she might yet be accepted by him even after all was brought to light.

She glanced around at the men and women who were to be her judges. The tender bud of hope struggled against the Council’s scorching scrutiny. All eyes were focused on her with a weighty solemnity that revealed little of their personal thoughts. She was surprised by the mixture of gender and ages. She’d been expecting an all-male cast of ancients from what she’d seen of the Royals. None of the Council was young, but several had years to go before she’d consider them “old”.

An elderly man with gray hair and shocking blue eyes nodded in response to Connyn’s statement and said, “Aurora Kilth, mate of Connyn Kilth, Heir to the Third House, welcome.” The other Prophets and Elders joined in as one at the *welcome*.

With a dip of her head, she responded. “Thank you.” She thought she should say more but had no idea what would be appropriate. Until this moment, she hadn’t considered things like curtsies, bows and other appropriate Royal exchanges. Did one speak only when spoken to? Inquire as to the Elders’ health? The Prophets’ families? Or simply hope to remain standing on legs that were beginning to shake beneath a gown

that held more gems in the bodice than she had ever seen outside a jewelry store back home?

Before she could decide, all the Prophets and Elders sat down, save one from each side. The man who had spoken walked around from behind the table to stand in front of them. Connyn inclined his head toward him and said, "Aceyrn, Speaker for the Elders." Aceyrn was joined by a short, brown-haired woman from the other table who looked like she had descended from an ancient line of pixies. Her expression was gentle, but there was a steeliness in her light brown eyes that Aurora imagined had leveled more than a few who had unwisely chosen to cross her.

Connyn inclined his head toward the woman and said, "Zyen, Speaker for the Prophets."

"Your chosen mate has petitioned this Council for a Matching Ritual Blessing," began the man.

Aurora nodded, hoping he'd get on with it. Even though the woman had smiled up at her when Connyn had introduced them, Zyen continued to look at her as if she were a new strain of bacteria being inspected under a microscope.

"It is an unusual request," he continued.

Aurora nodded again, not knowing what else to do.

"You have completed the Mating Rite?" the woman asked.

Aurora's gaze snapped down to her. "Yes. I think so." When the woman's eyebrows lifted and her eyes shifted to Connyn, Aurora tried to explain. "I mean, as far as I know, we have. Since I have such limited knowledge of the customs and rituals of Ilyria, I'm quite dependent on Connyn's understanding of these proceedings. If he says we have—"

"We have." Connyn's statement was hard and sure.

"Then we have."

The woman nodded, turned to Connyn. "We can grant your request, but the blessing will not bring about the effect you desire."

Aceyrn turned to look at Zyen, but said nothing. Connyn's grip on Aurora's fingers became almost painful. The temperature seemed to drop twenty degrees as he went rigid beside her and she wondered if he was even breathing. No one else in the hall moved or said a word.

Finally, Connyn released his death grip on her hand and said, "It will. It must. The magic she can manifest—"

The woman's amber eyes flashed. "Magic? What does magic have to do with it?" Zyen blinked and then her expression cleared. She turned to Aurora, surprised. "You haven't told him?"

Aurora looked quickly from Zyen to the Elders and Prophets behind her. A couple of the Prophets looked as if they understood her question, but everyone else was watching her with expressions ranging from mild interest to irritated confusion.

"Told me what?" Connyn's voice was as sharp and heavy as an executioner's axe swinging down.

"I'm not sure," she said.

He turned back to Zyen. "Continue with the blessing."

Nervously, Aurora gauged reactions of those surrounding them, but Connyn's aristocratic mannerisms didn't seem to provoke any response.

Zyen remained silent, as unperturbed and unmoved by Connyn's command as those still seated. Aurora searched the wide amber eyes of the Prophet for direction, but found only patient expectation. An ominous shiver snaked up her spine to her neck where it drew a noose of agony tight around her breath.

With an almost sympathetic nod, Zyen said, "It's time."

Turning to face Connyn, Aurora pulled her hand free of his and lifted her chin to stare into the storm-cloud-gray gaze of the man she had taken as her mate. "I tried to tell you. It's more than just the magic. I tried to slow down the whole Mating Rite thing—"

"The Mating Rite *thing*?" Connyn's growled.

Aurora took a deep breath. This wasn't the way she had planned on explaining. Of course, she had expected Ellen to do the explaining. "Remember back in San Antonio at the Riverwalk?"

Connyn's large hands fisted at his sides and his eyes narrowed with impatience. "This is not the time to reminisce," he said.

"I'm trying to explain—"

"We'll talk later." He turned back to the Elder and Prophet. "The blessing."

Zyen shook her head. "The Matching Ritual Blessing is for children of Ilyrian Mystic descent."

Connyn glared down at the diminutive woman. "She is nearly a full-blooded Mystic. One of Magdalyne's daughters who—"

"No," Aurora interrupted, her voice surprisingly clear over the thunderous beating of her own heart. Her words carried distinctly and definitively through the sudden and absolute quiet of the Hall. Not a single throat cleared nor a single robe rustled as she gave him the secret she had held so dearly, the promise she had sealed with her life.

"I'm not one of Magdalyne's daughters. I'm Lorraine Montclair's daughter. And my brother was Andrew Montclair, Amy's husband."

Connyn looked at her like she was speaking gibberish.

"Amy. Or as you know her, Esraina. That was her daughter I was holding at the Riverwalk."

She had braced herself for Connyn's reaction, but he didn't move. He simply looked at her with a blank stare, his eyes empty and stunned.

Aurora rushed on. "She was afraid she'd be expected to leave her child behind. She needed to know that the Royals would accept Chloe before she would risk revealing herself. She couldn't come to Ilyria without her daughter and we didn't know a person couldn't be forced to go through a portal —"

"You lied to me." It was a statement, not a question.

"I *never* said I was Esraina or a Mystic. You wouldn't listen. And then the Predators showed up and —"

"You left Esraina exposed to the Sleht."

Anger, fueled by the fear that that was exactly what had happened, poured out of her. "No! Amy, Ellen and I —"

"Esraina and Ellyna are Mystic daughters. You had no right to —"

"I had every right! Amy is my sister! I promised her —"

"A promise? Like the vows you made to me?"

"Yes! I made a vow to her first, to my brother's wife and his only child. The only blood relative I have left after his death. I made that promise before I even met you. A vow I was bound to keep —"

"Tell me," he interrupted, "do you even know what a vow is? The truth of it?" His voice had been hard before, but now it turned hostile. Cutting. "Or is our entire world a joke to you?"

"A joke?" Aurora felt an icy claw plunge into her lungs and scrape every molecule of air from them.

Connyn moved in closer, his broad shoulders blocking the light. His face was granite sliced through with rage. "Have you enjoyed mocking me? My family? The future of an entire world?"

His fury had shocked her, but his allegations shook her. "What?" She couldn't believe the depth his accusations reached. How far they delved to tear at her heart. His words raked across her soul as merciless as a fire ravaged dry timber. "No, it's not like that. I would never —"

"No wonder you kept your magic hidden from me. What else have you kept hidden from me?"

A biting, deep cold settled over her, filling the places left empty by his withdrawal. *He* was the one who pushed her into this place, the one who had refused to listen to reason or give her a chance to explain. He had asked for, no *demand*ed she become his mate, using her body and her feelings to bind her to him.

She was the one who had wanted to slow down, to not rush into vows and the whole damn mating process, to give Amy and Ellen a god damn chance to get here and explain everything before anyone got hurt. And yet he was accusing *her*? Withdrawing vows she had fought not to make in the first place?

An anger so intense it bordered on madness flared and exploded like a flame being loosed on pure oxygen. The power of her magic pounded through her veins, drummed

in time to her breath as she grappled once again with his betrayal. He refused to listen, refused to make any attempt to understand. She had laid everything on the line for her family. How *dare* he accuse her of mocking his. Of not knowing the cost and consecration required of a true vow.

She stepped back so she could look at him without giving him the pleasure of making her crane her neck back to do so. "I promised my sister I'd go with her to an alien world so Chloe could be safe and yet still grow with the memories and knowledge I have of her father, my brother. I did that the only way you allowed. Only mates and Mystic daughters return to Ilyria. Remember?"

A flash of pain crossed his face and then was gone. But it was quickly replaced by a forbidding resolve. "Aurora —"

"No. You were so worried about this Council's blessing and them finding out about my magic that you wouldn't listen. Again. Let's show them the magic and get that part all cleared up for everyone."

Aurora brought her arms up and yelled, "Back!" Everything in the room but Connyn slid backward to be pinned against the wall. He stepped toward her but she held up an off-putting hand, stopping him in his tracks. "I tried to tell you. Tried to delay your insistent charge into our supposedly destined union. But you kept assuming the worst or just rolling over me with '*no more discussion of things decided.*' You also said that fate had bound us together. No out clauses. Remember that?"

She had been slowly moving toward the door and when he lunged for her, his fingers only had the chance to brush over her arms before she reacted. Flinging her arms out wide, she commanded, "Wind!" Air rushed in from the windows, circled him in such a furious burst he couldn't move.

The wind licked out and snapped at her dress, flung her hair around her face. "It appears that you were wrong, Connyn Kilth, Heir to the Third Royal House of Ilyria. There is an out clause to your Mating Rite. So much for love and destiny."

Her anger burned hotter as she watched realization dawn on Connyn's face. Narrowing her eyes, she raised her arms up over her head and released the fire that had been destroying her soul since the minute he'd accused her of lying, of mocking his world.

Fire spun around the room, joining the wind in its furious dance. She spared one quick glance around, surprised by the lack of panic on most of the Elders' and Prophets' faces. There were several who looked angry and two whose malevolent glares contrasted sharply with Zyen's expression. The Prophet managed to look pleased even as her robes whipped around her body and flames twisted higher and higher in ever-increasing spirals not a foot in front of her.

Her magic was running so hot, it only took a well focused thought of *open* to hurl the massive doors backward and the two guards with them. She rushed out of the antechamber and into the outer gardens, leaving her hope and love to burn in the maelstrom she had created behind her.

She was halfway across the outer courtyard when she heard her name being called. The friendly, familiar voice pulled her up short. She turned to see Bethany and Brooke rushing toward her.

"God, you're gorgeous! We just came to add some moral support." Bethany exclaimed and then leaned in closer, her bright smile fading into an expression of concern. "Oh my god, what happened in there? Are you all right?"

"Not exactly." Aurora glanced over her shoulder. "I need to go."

"Would you like us to walk you home?"

With a hard shake of her head she said, "No. I can't go back there." She started to tremble.

A shout came from the interior of the hall. Bethany and Brooke each grabbed a hand. "Come on," Brooke said. "Let's get out of here and you can tell us what's going on."

* * * * *

Connyn set his shoulders and wiped all emotion from his face. At his father's command, the door slid back and he entered his parents' main sitting room. His mother was perched on the arm of his father's chair, leaning on his shoulder while they both read a paper Cyn was holding. She looked up and smiled indulgently at him, gesturing for him to sit, not acknowledging the items he held reverently in front of him.

When he didn't sit, she leaned over and kissed his father on the cheek. "I win," she whispered. Brushing her long silvery blonde hair back from her face, she rose and patted Connyn on his arm as she passed. "Kilth men," she said. "So predictable."

"Sit," his father commanded.

"I'll be brief," Connyn replied, not moving.

His father set aside the paper and pointed to chair across from him. "I won't."

After a brief hesitation, Connyn bowed and began the ritual release of the official regalia he'd been entrusted with at his maturity as the next Heir.

"Stop," his father ordered. "Put those down and tell me what happened at Council."

There was no man Connyn respected more than his father. But at this moment he wished his father hadn't earned it and he could dismiss the order and get on with the actions his decision demanded.

He lowered the items to a side table and then sat in the chair his father had indicated. "As if you haven't heard," he said. "I've never known Mother to be far behind news. And what she knows, you know."

His father's dissenting grunt contradicted Connyn's statement. "I know what she wants me to know."

"Then you know my mate set the Hall of Council on fire."

"Without burning a single person or item. Neat trick."

"Not tricks. Magic."

His father smiled. "Of course."

Connyn stood. "Excuse me, Father, but—"

"You are not excused!" The edge to his father's voice startled Connyn. He hadn't heard that tone for ages. His father stood and glared down at him. "You may be the Heir, but I am still the ruling Head of the Third House." Cyn crossed his arms over his chest, all levity in his face gone. "Now explain this foolishness," he said, looking down at the jeweled crest, medallion, dagger and sword Connyn had placed on the table.

Connyn crossed his own arms, ready to stand against his father if the need arose. "My failure is not a matter of foolishness, but a grave disappointment and embarrassment to our House and ancestors."

"Define this failure."

Heat flamed under Connyn's skin. His jaw clenched. Aurora had often complained about his dictatorial mannerisms. Once she spent more time with his father, she'd know he came by them honestly.

His father's voice cut through his thoughts. "Now."

"I failed to bring home one of Magdalyne's daughters. Failed to claim as a mate a Mystic. The Royal line cannot continue through me. I have taken a mate who cannot bear children."

"She's asked to be released from her vows?"

"No." Not exactly. Yelling about out-clauses wasn't an official request, even if done while holding the entire Council against the wall with magic.

"And you? You've released her from yours?"

"No!" The anger that surged through his response shocked him. He swallowed it back. "I can't."

He stood at attention while his father studied him. "Why did you take her before the Council?"

"For their blessing."

"Why was the blessing important to you?"

Connyn curled his fingers into his palms and his biceps bulged as he lifted his fists and then slowly lowered them. "After the Mating Rite, our minds were not linked. She has not conceived." He drew in a deep breath. "I have to face the reality that my mate may never conceive and that the honor of fathering the next generation must be passed to another." He gestured to the items on the table. "I brought the necessary items for the transition ceremony."

"I see. So for sixteen generations, the gods have allowed our line to continue from father to son until now. The gods are so variable that on the eve of the prophecy we have lived to fulfill and so erase our shame, the gods curse us yet again? Refuse to allow

us to atone for our ancestral sins?" He paused and held Connyn's gaze. "Your mother would be shamed if you truly believed that."

Blood pounded at the back of Connyn's eyes as he stared past his father and into the small courtyard beyond. "What other explanation could there be? We both know the prophecy. I had two futures before me, each tied to the mate chosen by the gods. But I did not take a Mystic mate. I didn't even take a mate of Ilyrian descent."

"You are assuming there can only be one explanation of a prophecy that is vague at best. Furthermore, you are assuming your personal interpretation is wholly immutable."

Connyn held his peace as the fury raged within. He would not further disgrace his father by contradicting him.

"Tell me, how did Aurora come to be in Ilyria?" Cyn asked.

"She made a promise to Esraina."

"Esraina. The sister it was your intention to find."

"My intention, yes."

"The prophecy said that your success or failure was tied to Magdalyne's next daughter and her next daughter was Esraina. Is this not true?"

Connyn replied with a curt nod. "We both know it is. But—" he held up a hand to forestall his father's next comment before he could finish. "Aurora is *not* a Mystic. She cannot pass down our powers to a child, even if we should have one."

"The only reason our world is limited to the Mystics passing down powers is a direct result of the curse we brought upon ourselves. In all your travels, have you had such limited exposure to think that Ilyrian Mystics are the only Mystics in the worlds? The only line in all the universes able to pass magic from generation to generation?"

His father's sarcasm was rarely subtle and the only expected response was silence. A rule Connyn was more than happy to abide by at the moment.

Cyn turned and stared out the same window that had held Connyn's attention, giving his back to his son. "How did you discover her ability to wield magic?"

"She revealed it to me."

"Of her own will?"

"Yes. Mostly."

His father did not turn around as he waited for him to explain.

"It was through a brief mental connection. It didn't hold."

Seeming to ignore this last statement, his father turned and picked up the ceremonial dagger. He held it in a ray of sunshine coming through the window, turning it and making the thin blade flash. "The Council approves of her. It wasn't unanimous, but the majority was clear."

"What?"

"Zyen especially liked her. Found her to be an excellent match for you."

He'd never known his father to joke, but he couldn't believe he was serious. "She was the one who pointed out that Aurora wasn't a Mystic."

His father shrugged as he tested the sharpness of the dagger's edge. "Prophets. Not the most tactful or clear at times. They forget that some things they know instinctively can come as a shock to those not so enlightened."

"But Aurora's magic is different from ours. The prophecies state that the magic is to be manifested only in male heirs. She's a woman and her magic is manifested strongly. What if the magic is passed down only to daughters and not to sons? We cannot take the chance with the destiny of our world hanging in the balance."

His father replaced the dagger on the table and then looked back up at him. "The prophecies don't say *only*, they say *is* when they get specific at all. Most just assume that's the way it will be because that's the way it is. But at one point in our history Ilyrian power wasn't limited to males or Royals. Though the Five Brothers ultimately brought down the final curse on this world, they had several generations before them making unwise and selfish decisions. One of those decisions was to limit powers to certain lines. More specifically, their lines and their sons only in an attempt to control destiny. There hadn't been a firstborn daughter generations before The Five as a result."

Connyn stared at his father, trying to assimilate *this* history with the one he grew up learning. "Why weren't we taught this?"

"History is a tricky thing when married with politics. I learned my lesson early on not to reveal everything I knew when it diverged from commonly held beliefs. Our ancestors worked very hard to rewrite or remove much of our history and so cleanse their sins from their descendants' view. There are very few who would choose to challenge long-held traditions at this point."

"But if it is the truth—"

Cyn glared at Connyn and cut him off. "Then you do what you must to bring it to light. In its time. Our race used to be one of the most powerful in existence. Men and women ruled with powers unseen in most worlds. When our ancestors limited powers only to themselves, they weakened our race considerably and left many outlying villages and towns exposed and vulnerable. Portals were left unguarded which allowed the Sleht to settle in our world. Though they had no magic in the beginning, they were smart and knew how to manipulate powers against one another. *And* they were very intent on taking what was once fully ours."

Cyn paused and picked up the medallion that rested at the top of the pile of regalia. Turning it over in his hand, he said, "That is still their goal."

Connyn said nothing for a long time and his father allowed him his silence.

"If we're living a lie," Connyn said finally, "then the prophecy has no chance of succeeding. If there really is any truth to this prophecy at all."

Amusement ghosted over his father's face. "You sound like me when I was your age and first uncovered a document that veered from the official accounts of our history. It's a wonder your mother found the patience to put up with me all these

years." He waved away Connyn's frown and walked out on the balcony, looking up to watch a flock of birds circle slowly across the sky, moving from one perch to another.

"Do you know why I rise so early with your mother every day?"

Connyn joined him and leaned against the ornate stone and metal railing. Until his father asked the question, he had thought his interview was at an end. "To watch the sun rise."

"Yes, but why to watch the sun rise?"

Connyn frowned. "It's a custom you two have shared since I can remember."

"Yet you never questioned it."

"It never occurred to me to question it. Even apart, you both rose and stood to witness the sun's rising." He shrugged. "Growing up, I was just happy I wasn't required to join you."

His father smiled briefly and then his expression turned serious once more. "The day after our Mating Celebration, I brought your mother here in preparation for the annual Gathering to present her publicly. I had business to take care of in Vystral and we left her home earlier than we would have otherwise. We had argued bitterly over her coming with me because her youngest sister was due to give birth within days. She had wanted to stay behind until the baby was born and join me with her parents when they followed later for the Gathering. But I was anxious to see her established in my house and was quite cruel in my insistence that she accompany me. I invoked the Royal Rights as her mate and Head of the Third House of Kilth and left her with no real choice in the matter. The next day, her village was attacked by the Sleht and her entire family slaughtered."

Connyn had known about the death of his mother's family, but not the details. He was surprised by his father's candid statements and even more by the sound of regret in his father's voice. "So you saved her."

Cyn looked back up into the now empty sky. "She didn't see it that way. She told me that I had robbed her of her family. She believed that if she had been there, she would have fought with them, perhaps saved some. She was—is—an amazing warrior when tested."

He'd seen hints of his mother's abilities in this area as he'd grown, but never to the extent that engendered the reverence his father was according them. His father sighed and turned the medallion over in his hand. Catching the sunlight, the *rythra's* center glowed as if it were alive.

"At the very least," Cyn said, "she held me responsible for denying her her true destiny of dying beside them. We received the news midmorning and that day she walked to the top of that hill." He pointed at the tallest of hills that ringed the outer limits of the city. "The entire way, she didn't say a word. Didn't look at me or acknowledge my or any other's presence."

"Once she reached the top of the hill, she simply stopped and stared into the distance, in the direction of the town where she'd grown up, knowing it still burned as

she stood. Through the night, silent tears ran down her face but she would receive no solace or admonition I offered. When the sun rose, she returned to the city. For a year, she walked to the same hill in darkness to face the sun when it rose, never explaining why. Never crying again."

With care, he set the medallion on the flat top of the stone post and placed his hands on either side of it, leaning heavily on the railing. As he continued his story, he stared down at the heritage stone. Connyn wondered if he was even seeing it anymore or if his eyes were only beholding images from the past.

"The last day, when the sun rose marking the anniversary of her family's death, tears ran down her cheeks again. As the sun crested the horizon and its first rays touched her face, she turned and smiled at me with a smile of such mixed hope and sorrow that to this day whenever I remember it and what she said afterward..."

His father's words faded into an impenetrable silence, cloaked by memories and shadows so deep, Connyn could feel their presence even if he could not see them.

Slowly, Cyn shook his head, looking up from the medallion to focus on some distant spot on the horizon. "She told me she was pregnant and had even been to the priestess to confirm it the day before. She also told me that until that morning, she'd been coming to the hill every day praying to die, praying for the sun not to rise on a destiny she did not want."

An invisible fist slammed into Connyn's stomach and he struggled to breathe. "She didn't want me? Or you?"

Cyn's release of breath was labored as he continued to stare out into the distance. "So many years ago and still the thought of what I came so very close to losing nearly kills me."

Connyn was about to demand an answer to his question when his father turned to look at him. The fierce, unfathomable pain in his dark eyes sharply checked Connyn's anger.

"Oh she wanted you. Very much. We both did. Never question that. Those words shook you even after all this time you've known the depth of her care for you. When she spoke them to me that morning I was...beyond shocked.

"Through our entire first year together she accepted her role as my mate in every obvious outward manner. Any of her emotional distance I took the time to notice I just assumed was her *adjusting* to royal life or caused because we hadn't conceived immediately as was the custom."

Releasing Connyn from his gaze, he turned and picked up the medallion again. "I had no idea that she took the fact that we hadn't had a son in the first year as another sign she should have died with her family, freeing me to take another." He shook his head ruefully and said more to himself than to Connyn, "As if I could have ever taken another woman as my mate."

When he again looked at Connyn, his gaze was clear, free of remembered pain. "Looking back, I can see it as a blessing that she wasn't pregnant at the time of her

family's death. Her grief was so deep, I'm not sure it wouldn't have cut you from her womb right then. As it was, she had struggled with her beliefs for an entire year, not wanting to accept that her destiny included a mate whose insensitivity and arrogant conceit could possibly have helped shape her destiny and so, her part in the fulfillment of the prophecy."

He took Connyn's hand and placed the medallion in it, holding Connyn's hand in place when he tried to pull away. "Just as it's difficult for you to accept that Aurora's magic and non-Ilyrian heritage are part of what shapes and completes your destiny."

Folding Connyn's fingers around the family medallion, he said, "You could not be your mother's son and not believe in the prophecy. Her very life is proof of destiny. A destiny that has been rooted in your heart from birth."

"But the truth —"

"Finding the truth, the whole truth for one's life, is up to every individual. It's not up to destiny and the gods alone. It can only be found if one is persistent."

Connyn raised his eyebrows at his father. "You've been persistent?"

Cyn inclined his head. "A trait I've passed on to my son. Along with the deep passion for fulfilling destiny he received from his mother. But just finding it isn't enough if one does not accept it when it is found."

The expression that crossed his father's face suddenly drew several threads of the conversation together for Connyn. "Accepting the truth. Is that what the sunrise means to you and mother?"

An enigmatic smile lit his father's face. "That's where it started. That first day I actually learned the truth but still had to choose whether or not I would accept it."

"And now?"

"Now I believe you have a mate you need to find and apologize to. Keep the medallion." Dismissively, Cyn turned his back on Connyn and returned to the sitting room. He was settling back into the chair he'd been occupying previously when Connyn followed him in from the balcony. Gesturing to the items on the table his father said, "These you may pick up later."

"What do you mean I have a mate to apologize to?"

His father frowned. He recognized that expression. It was the same one he saw often as a child when he didn't grasp a concept or skill as quickly as his father expected. "Do you love her?"

Shock rocked through Connyn. *Love*. It was not a word he'd ever heard his father utter before. Ever. "I fail to see the relevance —"

His father rubbed his eyes. "No wonder your mother won. You are too much like me for her not to know how you would react." Before Connyn could respond, Cyn gestured toward the door. "Never mind. Find your mate. Fulfill your part of the prophecy. Work on understanding your woman." Wry humor sparked in his eyes. "That should keep you busy for some time."

Chapter Sixteen

"What the hell is going on here?" Wyc bellowed as he and Rordyc stormed into the inner courtyard of his private quarters. Wyc and Rordyc immediately moved to flank Connyn, staying close enough to be able to stop him before he could get to their mates, but far enough away to stay out of his immediate reach.

Connyn didn't care, didn't so much as flinch. He remained coldly staring at Bethany and Brooke standing shoulder to shoulder behind a line of Wyc's personal guards. "Tell your guards and mates to move."

"Not until you explain what the hell is going on. Bethany, are you all right?"

"No! I'm furious! Tell him to leave." She placed a protective hand over her stomach and looked meaningfully at her mate. "You know I'm doing my best to not become overexcited."

"Brooke, are you hurt?" This from Rordyc whose stance visibly loosened once his mate shook her head.

Wyc stepped in front of Connyn. "Do you mind telling me why you are so insistent on breaking into my bedroom?"

"Your mates have kidnapped Aurora."

"*Kidnapped?!!*" Bethany shrieked as she pushed between two of the guards. Wyc caught her around the waist and stopped her advance. "She came to us for help because you threw her out!"

Wyc frowned. "You threw her out?"

"No."

Turning to his mate, Wyc asked, "So why are we standing in front of the bedroom?"

"I didn't expect him to come *here*. Well, maybe to our home since I was with Aurora after the Council meeting, but he walked right in and commanded me to open *this* door."

Wyc returned his glare to Connyn. "You entered my home without permission?"

Another cord tying Connyn's impatience to his control snapped loose. "Bethany allowed me entrance," he snapped.

"Did you?" Wyc asked Bethany.

Bethany's expression was mutinous as she crossed her arms over her swollen belly. "That is not the salient point here."

Wyc glanced behind him at the closed door. "Aurora is in there?"

Tilting up her chin, Bethany clamped her lips shut and glared steadily at an indeterminate point over Wyc's shoulder.

With a sigh, Wyc's stance eased and his voice softened. "Babydoll, maybe this is a good time to tell you that Connyn can see through walls."

Bethany's jaw dropped and her green eyes rounded comically. "What?" Immediately she recovered her anger. "It doesn't matter. Aurora can stay here as long as she wants. Aurora was doing her best to protect her niece. *My* niece. And he called her a liar in front of the Council. Unmated her in front of everybody."

"Unmated her?" Wyc's lips twitched as he suppressed a smile.

Bethany's eyes narrowed to thin slits of fury. "Yes."

Wyc turned to Connyn. "I've heard different versions of the events this morning, but no one has mentioned vows being renounced."

"They were not." Connyn's voice was flat with the effort it was costing him to remain in place rather than tearing his way through flesh and armor to reach his mate he could clearly see standing at the far end of the bedroom on the other side of that door.

"Does Aurora believe you don't want her?" Rordyc asked.

"I don't know. I haven't been allowed to speak with her," Connyn growled.

"Well," Rordyc probed, "did you call her a liar?"

"There was a misunderstanding stemming from the sudden knowledge that my mate was not from Ilyria and had the power to hold the Prophets and Elders motionless against the wall while calling forth a storm of wind and fire in the middle of the Hall of Council."

Rordyc winced. "That would do it."

"It would *not* do it," Brooke insisted before Bethany's outraged gasp could change to words. "Besides, if he was truly sorry, it wouldn't have taken him so damn long to get here."

Connyn leveled his gaze on Wyc. "I had things to do. I believed I had failed my House."

"Things to do?" Bethany snapped. "What could be more —"

"Bethany." Wyc's voice cut across her newest rant, the warning in his tone severe enough to have two of his guards shifting slightly behind him. Without turning his back on Connyn, he signaled to the line of guards. They immediately exited the room.

"Wyc —" Bethany began, staring disbelievingly at the backs of the retreating men.

Brooke stepped forward to join the other three once the guards no longer blocked her from them. "He treated her abominably," she said. "He called her a *vystra*."

After a rapid look of surprise was exchanged between Rordyc and Wyc, Rordyc cocked an eyebrow at his mate's announcement and brushed it off with a slight, one-shouldered shrug. A decidedly stubborn expression settled on Brooke's face. "All I'm saying is that he shouldn't be upsetting her, especially in her condition."

Both Wyc and Rordyc tensed, turned and stared at Brooke. "What condition?" Rordyc commanded.

Brooke's eyebrows pulled together in worry. "She's pregnant, of course."

"*What?*" The roar came from all three men, but Connyn's overrode his cousins' as he took a threatening step toward Brooke.

Bethany and Brooke jumped at the men's shouts and backed up together against the door, now barring it not only from Connyn, but from their own mates.

Brooke found her voice first. "She didn't know because she didn't understand the portal jumping puking thing. And she's been wearing a patch—"

"A what?" asked Rordyc.

"A patch, you know, birth control."

"She tried to shield herself from me?" Connyn asked. He thought after all the revelations this morning, Aurora would be fresh out.

"Not from you particularly. Just *men*," Bethany explained.

"Men? What men?" Connyn's words snarled through clenched teeth.

"Oh my god." Bethany propped her hands on her hips. "You are missing the point. Again. You had to have known she was pregnant. She said she was deathly sick each time she stepped through a Gateway portal."

"She didn't tell me. And she was out cold when I brought her back from the last one."

Wyc looked at Bethany. "Are you sure? Absolutely sure?"

"Yes. But it doesn't matter," Bethany rushed on when Wyc took a step toward her. "She doesn't want to talk to him."

"It matters very much, babydoll. You should know that."

"You too," Rordyc said, taking Brooke by the hand and pulling her into his embrace. He wrapped his arms around her and whispered, "Remember the little misunderstanding we had? You should since you gave me a black eye over it."

"It's not the same thing," Brooke insisted, leaning her face away from him but not struggling enough to break free of his arms.

"True," Rordyc said. "She obviously hasn't head butted him in the face yet."

"I won't let him take her if she doesn't want to go," Bethany stated, her stance widening in defiance as her shoulders pressed against the door.

"No, of course not," Wyc agreed.

Connyn growled, his patience at an end.

"But now," Wyc said, reaching for her, "it's time for the man to talk to his mate."

Aurora heard the door close with a quiet *whoosh* behind her and then the heavy footsteps of a man. The muscles along her shoulders and neck tightened painfully, but she didn't turn around. She didn't have to. She knew who it was.

"Are Bethany and Brooke all right?" she asked.

"Of course."

"You didn't hurt or threaten them?"

"I did not hurt them. No more than I would hurt my own mate."

At that she spun around. "Well, we don't know what that means since you have yet to find your mate." He was surprised to see she was still wearing all the jewelry, though the dark smudges around her eyes seemed darker, deeper. Her face was pale and strained, her normally lush, soft lips drawn into a thin line.

His heart rammed against his ribs. He felt the pain of it crack through his bones with the cruel cadence of regret.

"What?" she asked when he didn't respond.

He couldn't stop looking at her. Absorbing her. "You're beautiful."

Aurora's eyes widened in surprise. And then she turned her back to him, straightening her spine. "You need to know I'd do it again for Chloe and Amy. In a heartbeat."

"I know," he said moving silently toward her across the large room. After living all his life labeled a zealot by his cousins, he did understand extremes. Understood the choices one had to make to fulfill or even create destiny. All the heirs understood to some extent.

Connyn covered the final distance to her in two steps and settled his hands on her shoulders. She stiffened and tried to shrug them off. He rested his forehead on the top of her head and inhaled the soft aroma of flowers that scented her hair. Though he kept his grip light it remained firm and unmoving. He knew he should release her, give her time to accept him and cool down but he couldn't bring himself to not touch her. "Forgive me," he whispered.

Suddenly the block of cold stone she'd become under his hands turned into a hissing, furious, twisting tornado. "Don't you *dare*! After the way you accused me!" Jerking out of his grip, she whirled around to stare at him, her wide eyes wild with dark fire. Fisting her hands she held her arms straight at her sides, tensed and vibrating with her fury. "A *joke*! You said I thought your world was a *joke*!" Tears rimmed her lower lashes. She blinked them away and tossed her head, throwing strands of her hair back. "Hell will freeze over before I forgive you."

"I can live with that."

For a moment she looked like she wanted to scream at him, then deflated before his eyes. Rage evaporated into an exhaustion that etched itself into her face as her entire body sagged. She rubbed at the line that had formed between her eyebrows, suddenly looking fragile enough to shatter at the slightest touch.

He closed in on her, needing to hold her, enfold her in his arms. In alarm, Aurora immediately started backing up. She didn't stop until she hit the balcony's railing. With a little waver of panic himself, he watched her glance over her shoulder, judging the distance to the ground. Before she had a chance to make a decision, he had her wrapped securely in his arms. She glared up at him and her words hissed out on the end of her anger. "Do *not* make fun of me."

Cradling her head with one large hand he said, "I wasn't making fun of you. In Ilyria, our version of Hell is frozen. It's already a done deal. Just like us."

"Jesus." Her head dropped to his chest. "We've already covered this. Remember?" she mumbled into his shirt. "I gave you your out-clause. You don't have to do this. I officially set you free to find a true Mystic. Now please go away. I'm tired and I don't want to talk to you," she said her voice weary and bleak.

He ignored her statement. Combed his fingers through her hair. "Brooke and Bethany were quite upset that I had called you my *vystra*."

"I might not have been clear about the tone you used."

"I gathered that," he said dryly.

"It's not like you've ever explained it to me and neither of them had heard the term either."

Taking a deep breath that lifted her head from where it rested on his chest, he let it out again on a deep sigh. "Vystra is the goddess of life, the giver of breath. The Vystral Virgins are priestesses who serve in her temple."

His fingers slipped up around her neck, caressing her nape.

"So I'm your priestess? That makes me feel *so* much better. Though the virgin part is pretty much a wash." The disgruntlement in her voice made him smile.

"When a man calls a woman his *vystra*, he's admitting that she's his breath, the very essence of his life. That he needs her to live." He used his thumb to tilt her head up so he could look into her face. "That *I* need you to live."

Her eyes were fatigued and dull as she stared up at him. "It's a little late for pretty words, don't you think?" Lifting her chin from his gentle grasp, she looked away from him. "I saw the look on your face when you realized, I mean really *got* it that I wasn't a Mystic. Wasn't your mate. It changed everything between us."

She shrugged and when her shoulders fell, it was as if her arms were yanked down by heavy weights. "It was inevitable since everything was based on a lie." Her voice cracked on the last word and she pressed her lips together when they started to tremble. Tears began to slide like liquid crystal down her cheeks. "I didn't mean for it to go this far," she whispered. "It never was my intention to hurt or embarrass you or your family. I hope you will be able to accept that. Eventually."

She shook her head and blinked away the remaining tears. Resolve edged into her voice as she said, "But it's all for the best, being out in the open. You can do a formal

disavowing or whatever you call it and get on with your life. I can start looking for a place for Amy, Chloe and me."

He felt it through the deepest part of his soul, a ripping, slashing scream, a total abjuration of her final words. For an eternity he seemed to stand there, standing against the rage that rocked through him, standing against a cruel twist that threatened to steal the future he'd fought and lived for. Cradling her head in his hands, he tilted her face to look up at him, making no attempt to hide the desire or emotions rioting within.

Lifting her hands, she held on to his wrists but didn't try to pull his hands away. She simply held on. "Don't worry. I'll make sure everyone knows it was my fault."

"You are missing several important pieces of information," he said. His gaze dropped to her mouth when he skimmed his thumb over her bottom lip. He wanted with his entire being to lay his mouth over hers and just let the desire take them both to where they belonged, but he knew it wasn't what she needed. Yet. "First, I never did plan to renounce you as my mate."

Her fingers tensed around his wrist. "But you —"

"Shhh," he interrupted with a frown. "You need to just listen for a moment, and then I'll let you make your choice. Agreed?"

Her expression clearly stated that there wasn't anything he might say that could change her mind, but she nodded and relaxed her death grip on his arms.

"Yes, I was angry. Very angry. Since the day I met you, you've turned my world upside down and inside out over and over. You drive me crazy, you keep secrets from me, you put yourself in danger and jump into other worlds without letting anyone know." He took a deep breath. "But that's not the point now. We accepted each other as mates —"

"But the Council —"

"Approved."

Aurora's jaw dropped. "They *what*?"

"Approved our match. With their blessing. My parents adore you and," he said, his voice growing rough as he placed a hand over her stomach, "apparently the gods approve too."

Knocking his hands away she said, "Is all this about the possibility of a *baby*?" Her voice cut through the warmth he had wrapped around them and filled the air with a decided chill.

"It's more than a possibility," he said. "And I'd be willing to bet my kingdom you know it."

"It's too early to tell," she insisted.

He smiled. "Maybe on Earth, but not on Ilyria. Stepping through a portal feels like stepping through a very thin layer of fabric. Time and space rip around you for a brief second. That's all there is to it unless you're a pregnant woman and then it makes you feel incredibly ill, or so I've been told. Common belief holds that it's because one isn't

allowed to go through a portal without his or her will in agreement, and a pregnant woman carries her child through on her own will. But that's an argument better left to the Elders and Prophets."

Threading his fingers through her hair, he brought her closer again. "So tell me, how were your trips through The Gateways' portals?" He skimmed his thumb over her jaw and could feel the muscles bunch there as she gritted her teeth.

"Well, you don't have to worry. If I do happen to be pregnant, I'm sure we can come to some agreement about custody —"

"Let me finish." Anger was not the direction he'd intended, but the woman had the unique ability to press him past his well-honed control.

"Fine," she snapped, back on the defensive. "Finish your lecture and then leave."

"This has nothing to do with our child —"

"Right." Once again she stepped away from him, crossing her arms in a defiant gesture as her eyes iced over in a cold glare. "Like you'd even be here if you didn't think I was pregnant. You know what? I've decided I *don't* care what you have to say. Save your breath and just leave now. I'll be sure to send you a birth announcement should the need arise."

"Enough!" Taking her by the shoulders, he gave her a quick, firm shake. "You will be quiet and listen. The reason I came for you is because you are my mate. With or without a child, you are mine. I didn't know about the baby until Brooke told me just minutes ago."

Her eyes widened in surprise, but she quickly recovered and frosted over again. "I see. That explains all the yelling."

He brushed her comment aside. "Do you know where I went after you stormed out of the Hall? Why I took so long to come for you?" He waited, but she refused to respond. "I stopped by my father's house to return the regalia passed down to me when I became old enough to rule. I would sooner give up my place in my father's house than you."

"You gave up your place as Heir to the Third House?"

"I tried. But my father wouldn't hear of it. And a Mystic, even from another world, is still considered a Mystic by the Elders and Prophets, something you proved to all beyond a shadow of a doubt. But even if they hadn't approved you as a Royal's mate, it wouldn't have mattered. I know that now."

With his finger, he gently traced a damp track down her cheek that had been left by her tears. "I was expecting the Council to give us what we already had the power between us to gain together." He rubbed the damp path gently away with his thumb from first her right cheek and then her left. "What you saw on my face in the Hall of Council, Aurora, was the realization that all I had lived and searched for up to that moment was the price I was willing to pay to keep what I had found in you."

"Connyn —"

"I know what I want. My *vystra*."

"But what about the mind link? Doesn't that prove —"

"Open your mind to me, Aurora."

"What? I don't know how."

Sliding his fingers into her hair at the temples he said, "You've been using your magic to keep me out. Try using it to let me in." Then he kissed her. Long and deep, breathing her in, tasting his mate and holding her close. Waiting. Opening his mind to her, he let her take from him what she would, what she could.

She returned the kiss, stroking his tongue with her own and easing in closer to his body. She softened against him, her body fitting in its perfect place against his. And then he felt the petal-soft touch of her mind against his.

He stilled, not pushing the connection but offering her utterly and unconditionally the full sweep and scope of emotions he held bound to her in his soul.

The touch came again, stronger, more confident. He could feel her surprise, her hesitation as she grazed against his thoughts. He held nothing back but opened himself fully to reveal his love and ultimate commitment to her. Her mind skittered back in shock and then leapt forward. Her arms reached up to wrap around his neck as she dove deeper into the kiss, deeper into his mind. With a gasp, she arched into him, surging against his body with a white-hot desire that flashed to flame instantly.

Lifting his head, he said, "Time to leave." Unwinding her arms from around his neck, he took a deep breath and a step back. Still, he couldn't completely release her. And so kept his hands resting lightly on her arms.

She blinked up at him incredulously, her brown eyes dark and shimmering with lust. "Now?"

"Now."

"But I'm not done."

His arms snapped straight to keep her from pressing her body against his again when she reached for him. He might have laughed if he didn't need to be inside her so desperately. "You are until we get home. I refuse to make love to my mate on my cousin's bed."

* * * * *

"Yes," Aurora whispered, letting her head fall back as Connyn's hands closed over her breasts. His wickedly erotic caresses were slowly erasing the awkward trip back to the Third House's sector. It had started with trying to explain her sudden shift to her sisters-in-law. Though both Brooke and Bethany were gently restrained by their husbands and so couldn't rush her the moment she exited the bedroom, worry had clouded their eyes as they searched her face and repeated invitations to stay with them for as long as she wished. She'd been warmed by Bethany's and Brooke's staunch

alignment with her and she'd had to swear she wasn't in any way being coerced by Connyn and was returning of her own free will.

Even as she reassured them, Connyn had propelled her toward the door until they were through the front gates and surrounded by his guards. As a unit they moved rapidly through the streets, the bulk of the soldiers blocking most of the interested stares. Word of her abilities had spread quickly and Connyn had warned her that many were excited to see a woman with manifested powers, something unheard of in recent memory.

Connyn squeezed and pushed her breasts up. When she looked down, she saw the crimson *rythra* pillowed between the two pale white mounds. Once they'd reached their own private rooms, her mate had efficiently stripped her of all clothes and accessories save the heritage stone she wore around her neck. Jewelry and clothing littered the inner courtyard and a good part of their bedroom as he was even less mindful of where his own clothes had landed than he was of hers.

Stepping closer, he bent down to kiss her neck as her arms went around his shoulders. The heat of his body generated an instant yearning within her own and when his cock pressed into her belly, she moaned softly, wanting that heat and hardness deep inside her.

She didn't wait for Connyn to encourage her to open her mind to his. Eagerly, she reached for him with her thoughts as well as with her arms, using her magic as a connection rather than a shield. Feelings, sensations, even specific words rolled through her consciousness that were separate from her own.

Untying the leather thong holding the two thin braids in place that bound back his long hair, she worked his hair loose while his thumbs flicked over her nipples. He lowered his head to tease her breast with his teeth as she continued to run her fingers through his hair until her fingers slid through the strands unhindered. Whispering his name, she cupped his head and let the magic flow between them, not trying to control or guide it.

Instantly the power between them rose like a hot tide and she saw the magic from Connyn's perspective. A shining, golden mist that flowed through her and swirled around her mate. Melding together the physical sense of pleasure, the rising arousal and the mental joining of mutual enjoyment. She felt as if she were swimming in a glittering sea of ecstasy. But it didn't simply surround her—it saturated her, pervaded every atom of her being.

His mouth moved to her other breast. She wished for the scrape of his teeth and immediately he was gently biting her nipple, dragging the sharp edges of his teeth over the peak before sucking it deep again. Suddenly new vistas of possibilities opened up before her. A soft moan wove between them. It came from her, from him. A blending of their thoughts, yearning together for each other.

"Connyn," she murmured. Curling her fingers into his hair, she urged him up, wanting to kiss his mouth, to feel his body fully against hers, wanting him *inside*.

"Soon." His whisper brushed over her breast and then he knelt before her, his hands sweeping down her back. His blatant craving for her taste shot through her with a shocking eroticism as he blew a cool stream of air over her mound, parting her curls and making her shiver. Suddenly she wanted the heat of his mouth to rid her of the faint chill.

His tongue pushed between her folds and circled her clit. Sensation collided with the *knowing* of being wanted. Of understanding that his fingers stroked a fiery pleasure across her skin for his pleasure as well as hers. His hands pressed into her curves out of his own need to have them filled with her flesh while he ate at her, his mouth greedy, his tongue hot and rough.

Not enough. More. Her. Him. His hunger fed her own and she rocked against him, gasping as her swollen clit grazed his teeth. Pleasure streaked out from her center in barbed streams, hitting the limits of her skin and rolling back onto itself. It filled her with a supplicating emptiness, a willingness to prostrate herself before him, for him.

She tried to step away, take a breath, find her balance.

He refused to let her, holding her in place with one firm hand splayed over her lower back while sliding the other down and between her legs to push two fingers up inside her cunt.

God! That feels so –

Wet. You're so fucking wet for me.

Her knees started to buckle and she would have fallen forward but he countered the pressure with the unyielding pressure from his mouth. The slick smacking of his fingers against her pussy as he pushed them in and out twisting and flexing summoned her to the edge of release within seconds.

A deep tremor in her muscles signaled the onset of her orgasm and she threw herself open to embrace it and found herself airborne as Connyn's hands wrapped around her waist and threw her backward. The heavy *rythra* thumped against her sternum and then slid sideways onto the bed.

Landing on the bed spread-eagle, she was immediately trapped beneath him. With his knees forcing her legs wider apart, his fingers threaded through hers to pin her hands to the bed beside her head. His mouth came down hard on hers and with a single powerful thrust of his hips, he fully embedded his cock deep inside her. Rocking against her body, his groin pressed on her clit, his cock filling and stretching her, his tongue possessing her mouth.

The blending of their souls was in the kiss. Her taste, his taste. Separate but united. A blending that bound and drove a deep channel between mates. Awareness flowed through it as her cunt squeezed him and she arched under him, tangling her tongue with his in a desperate bid for dominance, for balance or leverage. *Anything* to keep herself from unraveling completely at the surge of emotion that slammed through her at Connyn's abrupt onslaught.

He lifted his head and filled her vision with a face fierce with insistent desire, eyes stormy and features already handsome honed to a warrior's harshness. "Wrap your legs around me and don't block me with your magic."

With her mind reeling and her body rioting, she knew that even now she could resist. As deep as he was, she could push him back. With or without her magic, she could choose to close herself, accept him only on certain levels. She realized that it would always be her choice to keep her heart in some part protected, safe from the tearing that could rip to frightening depths lightning fast.

She hesitated for a moment that reached across time, vulnerable and open beneath him, with her life, her body, her love. And yet, not. Not yet. Not all.

Connyn shifted his weight so he could cup her face. "Aurora, I trust you. Trust me."

"I need more." She did. She didn't want to need more. Didn't want to let go of all she held right here for just one more piece of a dream. She had it all. She knew she did, *except* for one piece. The only one she had to have.

The inscrutability common in Connyn's gray eyes was gone, replaced by an unguarded will for her to see. "You have everything I have to give you. You've seen it in me. Accept it."

He didn't wait for her to reach for his thoughts. He pressed in on her, taking any quarter she allowed. Drinking it in, she let his thoughts flow over her mind like a healing balm. "You love me."

"From the beginning," he whispered.

"No," she said. "You said love and destiny, even lust are all the same to you. They're not."

"For me, they are the same when it comes to you."

The images and feelings his mind was conveying bore little resemblance to his words. Confusion began to stir under the weight of his thoughts and anger tinged the edges of her patience at his refusal to even consider how wrong he was. He smiled down at her.

"I'm not wrong. Love and destiny. Lust, want or need. It all means the same to me when it comes to you." He lowered his head until his lips brushed softly against hers. "Everything, my *vystra*. You mean everything to me."

Connyn knew the moment Aurora believed what he said. A shift took place between them. An elemental shift that opened her totally to him. She wrapped her free arm around his neck and drew him down for a kiss. Her mouth opened and her soul opened. Crossing her legs behind his lower back, she squeezed his hips with her thighs and arched up into him. He let go of her hand and slid his arms around her, one under her shoulders and the other under her back to hold her as close to his body as possible.

Taking him in, she challenged him and teased him as her hands moved over his back and she writhed beneath him. The magic he'd fought against and struggled

through flooded over him in an intense surge that didn't push him away or block him out. It pulled him into her the way a powerful undertow draws a person into the depths of the sea.

He fully opened his mind to her and she flowed in, stroking his fantasies and wandering through his thoughts. With silken fingers she caressed his mind, trailing the now familiar golden mist in her wake. She let him see the need and want he was pressing her to. Laid bare the sensations he brought to her body, how much she loved what he did to her. How much she loved *him*.

The directness in which she gave him access to her thoughts, to the inner recesses of her heart touched off a very primal instinct to protect and keep the precious gift of her, his mate. What she offered him and let him take was beyond what he'd ever hoped for in his most secret of dreams, the ones he'd not shared with anyone and quit believing in as soon as he was old enough to judge duty over emotion. From the conversations he'd had and overheard with his cousins, it was a peculiarity they'd all seemed to share until their mates, and his, brought duty and dreams together.

When he pulled back from the kiss, Aurora's brazen smile was full of challenge and she scored the rounded ends of her nails down his back in response. When he nipped her earlobe she raised her head and bit his shoulder. "Quit making me wait," she whispered.

Past the point of being gentle, he held her tightly and grazed his teeth up the side of her neck. "Hang on," he warned.

The ultimate willful giving of his mate had ripped away the layers of royalty, civilization and generations of education and progress, igniting a fierce demand to take her wholly. He kissed her with a hard possession of her mouth as the savagery in his soul rose and brushed against hers, testing and proving the link between them. Aurora leapt at him, encouraging, accepting, daring.

He lifted his head to watch her as he took her, crossing his arms behind her back and cupping her shoulders in his hands. In this position, he could hold her in place and keep the majority of his weight off her. Shifting his hips, he pulled back slowly, watching her eyes darken in anticipation. She clutched her inner muscles as the head of his cock came close to being withdrawn.

With one powerful and swift thrust he buried himself deep inside his mate. Aurora gasped and arched her neck as she jolted under him. Without his restraining hands on her shoulders, she'd have slid halfway across the bed. He pulled back and thrust in again and again. Her pussy was hot and wet around his cock, sucking him in and clutching him in its slick grip. *Mine*.

Yours. The word spun through his mind on her thoughts with the force of a desert windstorm. She took what he gave, yearning and demanding. Each time he drove into her, she tightened her arms, her thighs, her cunt. Seizing him as her body quaked, she skated the edge of an orgasm she refused to release herself to. Arrogantly she forced him, *dared* him to take and possess her.

Goaded by the way the friction and force of his taking spiked the sensations and need in his mate, he intensified the speed and power of his movements, urging her further into the fire. He reveled both in her heightened pleasure and her feral insistence for more. The wildness of her lust flew into him and lit his skin with the sparks of her ecstasy. Sensations pressed on her from all sides and she threw them back at him, enveloping him entirely in both his own and her feelings.

His body bucked and drove into her, inflamed by their combined desire. Abruptly he felt her hesitate, uncertainty pulling her back from the sharpness and force of the primitive emotions consuming them.

A snarl rumbled out of his chest as he struggled to halt the onset of his climax. "Stay with me," he ordered and plunged into her again, flattening himself against her body, crushing her breasts under his chest and grinding against her pussy. He called to her from within the wild, hedonistic clamor they'd summoned together. Riding her hard in both her body and mind, he demanded her submission and commanded her into the abandonment of all restraint.

Her body stiffened, tense and tight for the breath of a moment. Suddenly she threw herself into the ravening euphoria. He willingly followed her into it.

Their worlds became each other's. Possessed, held, known. A fury of color and sound consumed them. Scent and sensation spiraled through them as the deep places repressed by centuries of civilization rose and stretched. The climax rolled over him and through him, dark joy mingling with a world of promise and destiny. He wrapped himself around Aurora as she clung to him with her body and soul, bound herself to him as he took her in, driving into her heart as she seized his. Together they flew into the ecstasy, into the promise, into their future.

* * * * *

Aurora adjusted the tie on her robe and leaned on the balcony's railing to look up into the velvet of the Ilyrian night. A vast array of endless stars was cosseted by a dark purple so deep it looked nearly black. The shade lightened around the glow of the two large moons hanging heavy in the sky. Beneath her, the soft muted twittering of the night birds floated up from the canopy of trees ringing this side of the complex.

She stared out past the torchlight lining the outer wall but could only see shadowed mountains past the hills of the outlying city. Connyn had told her that the windows of the private rooms of each House faced toward their own lands though they were much too far away to actually see. They'd travel by portals and visit his homeland soon, after nine months or so.

"It's late." Connyn's low voice reached her seconds before his arms slid around her, crossing under her breasts and gently pulling her back against the warmth of his broad chest. He dropped a kiss on her hair. "Why are you out of bed? Are you feeling all right?"

She brought her hands up to hold on to his arms. "I'm fine. Just thinking." Slowly she ran her hands over his biceps. She loved his arms, the strength that was there to hold her, keep her safe. God, she loved this man. Once Chloe, Amy and Ellen arrived, her family would be complete again.

"Thinking about...?" He prompted when she remained silent, drifting on her own thoughts.

She shook her head, trying to clear her mind. "I thought Amy and Ellen would have been here by now. Do you think something's happened to them?"

His long silence did nothing to alleviate her fears. Finally he sighed. "If something had happened, Shy would have gotten a message through to us."

"So why aren't they here?"

"I think it's been adequately proven that I am not the one to ask about the whys and wherefores regarding the schemes of Magdalyne's daughters."

Aurora grunted. "It's not as if the plan went anything like what we had intended. At least my part in it."

He turned her in his arms, brushed her hair back. "Just what was your intention?"

"Ellen knew Amdyn was coming for her and Amy felt it would probably be safer for both her and Chloe in Ilyria. *If* she were allowed to bring Chloe that is. They'd survived one Predator attack a month before but Amy wasn't sure if they could survive many more by themselves."

"What?"

Aurora tilted her head back to look up at Connyn's face, surprised at the shock and anger she found there. "You didn't know?"

"You didn't tell me."

"I wasn't there. Until the Riverwalk, I didn't really understand Amy's fear, only that it was very real and very motivating in her decision to leave Earth." Her slight shrug was paired with a small, embarrassed smile. "The way she described the attack and the Predator seemed unbelievable at the time. I thought maybe she was exaggerating, you know, because she was so upset and scared for her and Chloe's lives. But she had to know that Chloe could come with her to Ilyria. We didn't know how things worked and —"

"I made things worse."

Sliding her arms around his waist, she stepped into his embrace and laid her head against his chest. "You didn't exactly make things easier. But what I was going to say is that Ellen has a strong distrust for the entire Kilth clan. She never actually tried to talk Amy out of returning to Ilyria, but she never encouraged her either. Basically, she just presented options."

"And you masquerading as a Mystic was one of those options?"

She thumped his breastbone with her forehead. "Never once did I claim to be either a Mystic or Amy. You made an assumption and ran with it. I had to do very little to keep you moving in the direction we needed you to go."

Connyn growled and Aurora hid her grin. "There wasn't much of a plan that took us past the meeting at the Riverwalk. Amy was hiding in the crowd to watch you and Amdyn when you were told that one of the Mystics you were looking for already had a child. After we saw your reactions, we were going to settle on a definite plan of going or staying. Ellen was sure she and Amy would be taken back through the portals, but didn't know about me and Chloe."

"I see." Connyn was silent for a long moment, holding her close.

Aurora brushed at his mind and found a deep contentment at having her in his arms and an equally deep concern about the Predator attack she'd mentioned.

Finally he said, "Tomorrow we will talk to Wyc and Rordyc about the attack. If it truly was a Predator, he found Amy before we did. We'll ask for a report from the Elder in charge of the official telepathic contacts between Ilyria and Shy. If he's heard nothing within the last day or so, we'll ask him to contact her immediately and find out what's going on."

She hugged him tighter and tilted her head to look back up at the moon. "Since the day Chloe was born, I've felt a special connection to her. I know she's still alive. I can *feel* her."

Connyn's fingers combed through her hair at the nape of her neck. "Can you feel anyone else?"

"Besides you?" she asked with quiet laughter in her voice.

"Yes, besides me."

She stilled, suddenly serious, suddenly nervous. "One."

"Who? Amy?"

"No." Aurora took a deep breath. "Our daughter."

Connyn's chest stopped moving with his breath. His muscles locked into place and the weight of the night air against her skin suddenly pricked cold and heavy.

"Are you sure?" His question was hoarse, his words barely audible.

"As sure as I am about anything at the moment," she said, pushing out of his embrace.

He didn't let her go far. Grabbing her by her upper arms, he held her out in front of him, searching her face. "Our child?"

She nodded. "Don't act so surprised. You were all sure of yourself earlier."

"It's different when someone tells you what they think than when your mate confirms it."

"Well, if you're wondering, it's a girl."

This announcement seemed only to increase his shock. He looked so thunderstruck it suddenly occurred to her that this might not be good news from his perspective. So before he could say anything, she rushed on. "I will not give her up so if the fact that she isn't a firstborn son changes anything, then—"

"It changes everything." He pulled her back against his chest. "And nothing."

Arching away to breathe she shook her head. "You're confusing me. Should I start packing or not?"

He loosened his embrace enough to be able to look down into her face, a frown on his own. "Why would I want you to leave?"

"Ummm...the whole heir to the throne thing. We had a king on Earth go through six wives trying to get a son."

"You are giving me an heir. A daughter."

"But all the heirs are sons. Magic and the males, remember?"

An enigmatic smile settled on his face. "Just because something is doesn't mean that's the way it's always been or will be in the future."

Aurora *humphed* and crossed her arms. "Well, that just makes it all clear as mud for me."

His smile deepened and he cupped the side of her face. Pure joy flowed out of him, swathing her and their child in hope and security. "One of the curses my ancestors laid on our land was the removal from our women the ability to manifest most powers, which is why the gods have been generous in every generation at granting sons as heirs for the protection of our lands. They are lifting that curse through you. The shame that has been on my House from the Five Brothers is being pardoned. A daughter as a firstborn seals it."

With the utmost care, he splayed his broad hand over her belly. "Do you think she'll inherit your powers?"

"If generations as far back as memory serves prove it, then yes, without a doubt. Actually, I think she'll inherit both of ours and be even stronger. I'm not sure what this world does to magic, but mine seemed to surge the moment I stepped through the portal."

The triumph cleared from his expression and he held her gaze with such deep emotion it made her ache with the love she had for him.

"You need to know that to me, our child isn't just a divine assertion of a prophecy," he said, "and you're not just a destiny."

She covered his hand with hers. "I know. I've always believed in the promise of both love and destiny."

Tenderly he brushed his lips softly over hers. "This is more than a promise. The truth is—"

Aurora blinked up at him when he lifted his head abruptly, breaking the kiss.

"Yes?" she asked. "The truth is what?"

He stared down at her, suddenly knowing that holding her in his arms—everything she was, had been and would be—he held his entire world.

“I accept you,” he said, fully aware that the words were too few, too small to give him any hope that she would understand what he was truly trying to say even before the sound of them had faded into the night. He shook his head. “More than that. You are my life. All to me. Everything.” He stopped. He was rambling and had yet to find the words that could capture what he felt. He closed his eyes in frustration, searching for another way to clarify this *reality* he needed her to know. When he opened his eyes, prepared to try again, the look on her face eradicated every last fear, every last need to explain.

Her smile was the dawn he’d been living his entire life in darkness waiting for. Her words illuminating as the sun itself rising on his soul. They echoed through her opened heart and found their certain home in his. “I love you too.”

Epilogue

Amy cradled Chloe in her arms, singing the silly nonsense song that her daughter loved as she rocked her to sleep. She paused to kiss the soft red curls on her baby's head and Chloe murmured sleepily, clutching her blanket and pressing her sweet angelic face into Amy's breast. Working hard not to let her panic seep into the song, Amy continued to rock and make up verses along the theme Chloe had picked tonight, a brave knight who rode a big pink bunny and collected balloons for children.

She glanced over at Jordyn, the man who had grabbed both her and her child and rushed them away from the Riverwalk. He'd been gentle but unyielding as he guided them away from the Predator, but she didn't for one moment believe they were safe. He'd perfunctorily introduced himself but had said little else. Not that he'd had the chance over Chloe's wailing. It had taken quite some time to get her settled down enough to stop crying, fed and asleep.

They'd been ushered into the hotel room and he'd ordered room service, making a few phone calls while she cared for Chloe. Now, with the lights turned low, he reclined in another chair across the room with his eyes closed, but she knew he wasn't asleep. She doubted he ever slept very deeply. In that way, he reminded her of Andrew.

The thought of her husband, though dead now over two years, still had the ability to tear at her heart. He'd been such a good man. A soldier to his very marrow, loyal and solid, and had loved her like no other. He'd have loved Chloe the same way if he had been given the chance. Her voice caught and trembled over the words of her song.

Jordyn opened his eyes and looked straight at her. Accented by his thick, dark lashes, the silvery gray of his irises seemed to gleam with a hot, intense light all their own. An unbidden awareness fluttered to life low in her belly. The sensual sensation slowly unfurling and spreading under her skin surprised her and then alarmed her. She hadn't had sex or the desire for it since Andrew had died.

Abruptly she looked back down at Chloe and took up the song again, though the child had fallen fast asleep. This feeling wasn't sexual. It couldn't be. She wouldn't let it be. It was the aftereffects of having adrenaline pumping through her body from the flight from the Predators. Not that the man sitting across the room from her wasn't sexy as hell in a very strong and silent way. Not to mention in a slightly scary way.

Good god. All the Ilyrian men she had seen today were scary, their gorgeous faces and god-like bodies not withstanding. But a handsome face and cut abdominals didn't mean a woman could trust a man. That was a lesson she'd learned early and taken to heart.

What had she been thinking? They'd been foolish to plan an escape to Ilyria and she'd been the most foolish of all. After the Predator attack, she'd been so damn

frightened that she'd jumped at the chance to take Chloe to a place where Predators were guarded against. A place where when you tried to explain what one looked like when it attacked, the authorities didn't look at you as if you might need a visit to the closest mental facility.

But after today, that had all changed. Ellen had been right not to trust the Kilth. The look of horror on the man's face was unmistakable when he saw her daughter and Aurora holding her. The shock at finding what he thought was one of their precious Mystic daughters already "mated" told her all she needed to know. Her daughter would not be welcomed in her mother's homeworld and Amy would not leave her behind. She might have to fight off Predators by herself in this world, but she had and could. At least she wouldn't be fighting against a royal family whose power reached throughout an entire world.

She snuggled Chloe closer, inhaling the smell of baby powder and hotel shampoo. Glancing up, she stole another look at Jordyn. His eyes were once more closed. Escape would be easier without a toddler in tow, but it was not impossible. The soldier the Kilth had sent after her and her daughter appeared to be a formidable opponent. Strong, fast and intelligent, he was still just one man. She had faced and won against worse odds when the stakes weren't nearly so high.

Relaxing slightly, she pressed her shoulders back into the chair, trying to find a more comfortable position. She'd always been good at thinking on her feet, adjusting her plan and improvising. One thing today had taught her, Ilyria was not the safe haven she had hoped and even *longed* for it to be.

She pushed the yearning for her homeworld resolutely away. It didn't matter. The only thing that mattered, truly mattered, was that she and her daughter were alive and together. She'd reinvented herself several times through the years, always reaching for a better life. So once again, she'd build a new life and hope again. Only this time, she'd have her daughter to share it with.

Phoebe's End

"Is she dead?"

Frowning, Captain Kilth leaned over the woman crumpled at his feet and checked her pulse. "I'm sorry to report," he said straightening, "she's not."

"She'll live?"

"Unfortunately." He motioned forward several of his men who had appeared with him and formed a circle around the scene. They picked up the woman and carted her gracelessly back into the house. "Though you gave it your best effort from what I saw."

Unsure as to whether that was meant as a compliment or reprimand, Phoebe glared at the man she thought she had left behind several days ago. "It was never my intention to do permanent damage. I was simply trying to escape." She glanced around at the four men still ringed about them.

"There's no need for that now," Captain Kilth assured her, taking her by the arm and firmly guiding her down one of the garden paths that ran behind her family's large country house. Both held their silence until they were well-hidden behind the shrubbery some distance from the back windows' view. "This is your primary residence?"

"It used to be. It belonged to my father but was left to my uncle upon his death."

He stopped and turned her to face him. "And upon your uncle's death?"

She shrugged and tried to dislodge her elbow from his hand but he held her firmly. "Is there any particular reason for this morbid line of questioning?"

A strand of hair had come loose during her struggle with her uncle's mistress and now was hanging over her left eye. Very slowly, he reached up and curled it around his finger. Impatiently, she tugged it off his finger and tucked it behind her ear. She didn't trust the look on his face.

"Why was that woman attacking you?"

"My sudden reappearance from death garnered a less than enthusiastic reception from my uncle. Apparently he had plans for my inheritance that my untimely reemergence from the grave impeded. At least according to his mistress. My uncle seems to have fled with any number of items from the house early this morning."

"The woman you were fighting with is your uncle's mistress?"

"Yes. Vile woman." Anger rose anew in her breast as she recalled Margaret's screeching allegations this morning and the look of horror on her uncle's face last night. "She accused me of ruining them when I was the victim of a brutal kidnapping –"

"Brutal? I believe you were treated quite well."

"And murder plot," she continued ignoring his interruption as if he had never spoken. "And she blames me for Edward's misery and financial straits." She looked up at him, fury still

pounding in her ears. "He had meant to have me killed on that ship! He lied about my betrothal. It was all simply a ruse to get me aboard. Did you know that captain had actually been hired to shoot me?"

"I did know that."

That piece of news startled her. "What? And you didn't tell me?"

"So you could do what?"

She glared up at him. He looked far too arrogant for her peace of mind. "I would have done something..." Her voice trailed off as his confession registered. "Wait a minute. How did you know?"

"When he raised his revolver to shoot, the man aimed at you and not me. Plus, I was paid to kidnap you and make sure you never returned to England, so it didn't come as a complete surprise to find out that mine was not the only arrangement set up to ensure your imminent demise."

"You were paid to kidnap me?" Phoebe's voice rose in disbelief. "Paid to...to..." She gestured to her body as her tongue suddenly felt twisted and unresponsive.

"Paid to get rid of you. The details were up to me. That I enjoyed your body as well was wholly my choice." He paused and watched her face. "That upsets you?"

Phoebe jerked her arm hard to free herself from his hand. She felt lightheaded and slightly ill. Taking a deep breath, she pushed the feeling aside. "Of course not. What else should I expect from a pirate?"

Brusquely, she brushed out the wrinkles in her skirt from her skirmish with Margaret Chadwick and sidestepped around the hulking man in front of her. Immediately he moved to cut off her exit.

"Would it improve your disposition to know that there is more to the story?"

"No." Phoebe gathered her skirts and stepped around him again and took off down the path at a brisk pace. "And my disposition is fine," she snapped without turning around. Considering she'd just been attacked by her uncle's mistress, discovered that her only living relative not only wished her dead but had planned quite extensively to accommodate that desire and been manhandled by Captain Kilth again, she was quite pleased that she hadn't turned into a raving lunatic.

He drew even with her in two strides. "It seems to me that your disposition is a little shrewish today," he commented matter-of-factly.

She whirled on him, wishing for one furious moment that she were a man and could knock him flat to the ground. "By all means feel free to leave this estate and remove yourself from the range of my unpalatable temperament." Turning on her heel, she quickened her steps away from him.

His abrupt, genuine laugh surprised her. "By all that is holy, I have truly missed you."

Fast as the crack of a whip, he caught her from behind, spun her around and wrapped her in his arms, pinning her to his chest. His mouth came down on hers in a kiss that consumed her thoughts and blazed through any objections. Resisting the kiss, protesting the possessive sweep of his hands down her back or defying the heat of his embrace was not a thought or an option.

Before she had started breathing again she was falling into the kiss. Into the endless passion that swallowed her each time she was in his arms. Time spiraled around her and instantly she was far removed from the nightmare her return home had become.

Abruptly he pulled back, looked down at her, his gray eyes dark and intense. "Marry me."

Phoebe frowned up at him, finding it hard to focus on his words with her carnal senses rioting wildly. She blinked and stared up at him, knowing she couldn't have really heard the words that she thought she had. Surely there wasn't a man alive who would have the gall to propose marriage after all that he'd done.

He gave her a little shake. "Marry me."

"What?!" Phoebe's shriek startled a flock of birds from a nearby tree as she struggled against his hold. Every last shred of desire shot out of her, replaced first by shock and then by fury. She twisted out of his hands and stumbled backward into a large bush. He steadied her and turned her to face him, at the same time positioning her so she was cornered against the thick wall of shrubbery. "That's why you're here?"

His eyebrows rose and he nodded calmly.

"You are insane," she said. "Completely so if you think there is even the smallest chance –"

Suddenly she found herself pressed hard against his body and being kissed again.

When he finally lifted his head, she sucked in a deep breath. "Stop that!" she hissed as she tried her best to catch her breath and her wits.

With a smile he said, "Not for at least fifty years or more, my love."

His words, so coolly stated, started something shaking deep inside her. Pummeled at her resistance and dared her dying hope back to life. A hope she had recognized as the infantile and foolish fantasies of an innocent grasping at ridiculous dreams. Life and homicidal relatives had a way of removing fanciful expectations.

Nervously, she glanced around. Edward had let go nearly all of the estate staff and even if she did scream, the only probable people to hear would be Kilth's own men. "Are you planning to kidnap me again?" she asked.

Since he was still holding her quite tightly against him, his shrug lifted her own shoulders up to her ears. "It's not my first plan of action."

The tension tightening around her spine loosened a fraction.

"Your uncle owed me a large amount of money –"

She shook her head with such vehemence one of her hair pins flew out and struck him on the cheek. "He won't pay ransom. So you –"

"I don't need his money. I have plenty. And my men have taken care of Edward. He's no longer a concern of yours. I'm simply trying to explain so that your head will accept me."

"My head?"

He leaned forward and kissed her softly just beneath her ear, creating a shiver that started there and then ran the length of her body.

"You can't allow yourself to accept the man you think I am. But you love me, Phoebe Ballantine."

"What?" She gasped so sharply, so deeply that her head went dizzy. "No. You're delusional. And if you –"

He kissed her again, on her mouth, her cheek, her throat. Kisses that were demanding and giving, scorching and sweet. Against her will she was melting into him, arching against him, opening and heating for him.

Gently he pulled back. "Phoebe?"

"Hmm?" Her bones felt as firm as warm wax.

"Listen to me, sweetheart. I head a consortium of investors and your uncle, using your father's good, extremely good, name, attempted to swindle a lot of money out of some friends of mine. On a hunch, I came here to investigate. By the time I got here though, your father had passed and your uncle had decided the easiest way to your fortune was to rid himself of one very pretty niece."

Phoebe turned her face away from the fingers tracing over her cheek. "That's ridiculous. He had access to it all. My father left him in charge until I married and then my inheritance would be transferred directly to my husband. Until I wed, I was only to receive a small percentage upon my birthdays according to the solicitor that executed my father's –"

"I'm afraid he was bribed by your uncle as well in return for a portion of your estate. Your uncle was only to receive half of the family's estate that had been handed down from your grandfather to your father. The majority of your father's wealth he accumulated on his own. All of which was to come to you directly."

Phoebe was stunned. Disbelieving. "How do I know what you say isn't simply imagination and gossip? And if you aren't a pirate, why would you kidnap me in the first place? Not to mention keeping me hostage for months. I highly doubt a consortium would approve of such tactics."

For the first time since she'd known the man, he actually looked ill at ease with the conversation. She decided to push her advantage. "Do they even know that you kidnapped me?"

"I don't answer to them. And your situation was unique."

She snorted.

"Woman," he growled, "if I hadn't kidnapped you, you would have been taken by someone else far less trustworthy –"

"Trustworthy!"

"Damn it, Phoebe. I couldn't let you go, not until I knew exactly what your uncle was up to, what the danger was to you and how far his reach extended. I wasn't going to let you go until I knew you would be safe."

"And seducing me was part of this gallant plan of yours?"

His lips tightened and it took him a moment to answer. "No. Initially, I only intended to remove you from the situation until I could deal with Edward."

An unexplainable rush of disappointment rained through Phoebe. "I see. And now because you took advantage of me, you feel you should make an honest woman out of me. How very chivalrous of you," she said with the strongest disdain she could muster with her lips still tingling from his kisses.

"It's not chivalry. It's desperation. I don't want you running from me again. Do you know what it did to me when I found you had climbed out of the window at the inn?"

She smiled with satisfaction. She'd had to strip down to her chemise and push the rest of her clothes out the window ahead of her so she'd fit, and even then it'd been a tight squeeze. "Sorry to have ruined your fun and games –"

"I am running out of patience. All I have told you is true and you have yet to answer my question."

"What question? Marriage? Ha! I don't even know your real name."

"Lord Connyn Kilth."

Phoebe nearly choked. "Lord?"

He nodded.

"You've given me no proof. I don't believe you." Easier that than to believe she had unwittingly played courtesan to a man of such high ranking. "Now let go of me before I –"

"Before you what? Announce to the world you've been my mistress for the last twelve weeks and then were asked to become my wife? Besides the envy of a multitude of women, what would you expect to gain?"

"Mistress! Mult – what?" A fiery fury snapped up her spine. She swung at him with all her might, aiming for his head, his chest, anything she could reach. "You are such a horrible man. I detest you with every final fiber of my being down to the last strand of hair on my head and I will never –"

Dodging her flying fists, he kissed her again, swift and hard. "Don't say anything you'll soon regret," he warned before kissing her again until she was panting and clutching at him. His hands molded her body to his, sweeping down her back to cup her bottom. Pressed against him in such a manner, she felt the need he had for her. Conditioned by weeks of desire fulfilled, her body yearned for his, to feel him inside her, filling and stretching her. On a moan, her head dropped back when he dipped down to kiss the swell of her breast above her bodice.

She could not fight him off, could not fend off his sensual advances. There was only one thing she could do. With shaking hands, she framed his face when he looked up. "If anything you say is true, if you care for me at all, you will let me go."

* * * * *

Phoebe only smiled when her betrothed growled his vows and the minister raised his eyebrows in silent admonition. By this point, she was used to his growling. He had kept his word, let her go and verified every last word. And, at her request, he had proven his true desire to make her his wife by not bedding her again until after they had wed. But as the days passed, he grew increasingly curt and ill-tempered with all those around him until everyone they encountered was looking forward to the day of their wedding.

The wedding breakfast was beautiful and elegant and very well attended, to her new husband's chagrin since the social expectation was that they at least make an effort to greet all present. By the time he was escorting her away from the crush, his grip on her arm was like an iron shackle.

"Are you sure we greeted everyone?" she asked. "I think we missed an entire table."

"We didn't."

"Where are we going? Aren't we supposed to finish – ?"

"No."

She bit her lip to keep from laughing at his abrupt responses. She had made sure the planning for the wedding had lasted a full week longer than the time she had spent on his ship and had managed to innocently flaunt her womanly assets quite often in front of him during those weeks. If she were truthful, she was as ready to leave the wedding party as he. Her revenge had cost her as well.

Rounding the corner of the house, he ushered her quickly up into a closed carriage that had been kept hidden from general view. Tossing her onto the seat, he barked an order to the man sitting on the box and the carriage jolted into motion before Connyn had the door closed.

The shades were flipped down, leaving the interior shaded from the harsh light of the afternoon. He didn't waste breath on words, simply reached for her and pulled her across his lap. Eagerly she wound her arms around his neck and gladly met his greedy kiss with an equal and boldly exposed hunger of her own. His hands set to work on her dress and long before she was finished kissing him, he sat back and yanked down her loosened bodice to expose her breasts. She struggled to pull free of the sleeves, but he laid his hands on her arms to stop her.

"Not yet," he whispered, his eyes like searing brands on her flesh as he held her in place in front of him.

Glancing down, she watched her breasts bounce as the carriage made its way over the uneven ground. The lust on his face sharpened as her nipples visibly puckered into tight points that pulled her breasts into perfectly round globes just inches from his mouth. She discovered that she was holding her breath, waiting.

He looked up at her and the expression on his face melted away the world outside the small confines of the coach. His gray eyes softened as they settled on hers. The love there, so strong and unquestionably honest, lay between them as an offering, an affirmation, a promise. It banished any lingering doubt hiding in the dark corners of her soul and liberated her to trust him without reservation. His fingers brushed over her cheek as he leaned close. She met him halfway with a kiss that that met and matched the purity of devotion flowing from him.

Giving and tender with its possession, his mouth was gentle on hers as his hands held her steady and kept her from falling against him. The carriage listed suddenly to the side as one of the wheels rumbled over a large rock and her nipples brushed the front of his coat sending fire streaking under her skin from the tips of her breasts. She pressed in, pushing her tongue between his lips, needing more. Needing more now.

Stroking his tongue with hers, she enticed and teased, tasted and taunted. She sucked his lower lip into her mouth and nipped it sharply before whispering against his lips, "Touch me." An order no less commanding for its softness.

With a deep groan, he wrapped his arms around her and crushed her to him, taking her mouth in a fierce, demanding kiss. Her breasts flattened against his shirt, aching as the warmth of his chest heated her sensitive skin through the fabric of his clothes. Her mouth opened willingly under the onslaught as his tongue dominated hers, repeating the motions with which

she had previously teased him. But his was not an enticing kiss. It was forceful and exacting. Sending swirling sensations spinning through her body and heating her skin until she was ready to claw her way out of the restraint of her dress and all its accoutrements.

She became frantic as she writhed against the constricting material. Though amused at her efforts, he finally deigned to help and she was at last able to yank her arms out of the binding her sleeves had become. But before she could wrap her arms around him, he bent her backward over his forearm and focused that wonderfully talented mouth on her breast. Sliding her fingers through his hair and anchoring him there, she forgot about everything but the lust boiling in her veins. Unexpectedly he raised his head and looked down into her face with a wolfish grin.

"Personally, I love the way you moan when I put my mouth on you, but if you don't want rumors running rampant among our servants," he said gesturing with his head toward where the driver was sitting, "you might want to try to quiet your enthusiasm."

"Oh no," she said feeling an embarrassed flush crawl up her neck and over her cheeks. "You're right. We should stop before we get carried away."

His laugh was low and indulgent as he looked at her bare chest. "Too late. I'm far past carried away." To prove it, he flipped up her skirts and began caressing the smooth skin of her thighs, moving steadily upward until his fingers were teasing the covering curls at the junction between them. "I haven't had you for far too long and if you think I'm waiting another minute," he said as he pushed her legs apart and thrust a long finger deep into her cunt without further prelude, "you are quite mistaken."

She gasped at his boldness, at the rush of liquid heat that streamed under her skin and flowed over his finger. Her head fell back as he lowered his mouth back to her breast and began to suck. She had to bite her bottom lip hard to keep from crying out when he pressed her nipple against the roof of his mouth and rolled it back and forth there.

Thrusting two more fingers deep inside her, he worked them in and out, twisting and rubbing her inner walls. Roughly, relentlessly pushing her toward a release she'd been needing since she snuck out of the inn months before.

"Wait!" she cried as he removed his hand and sat up. She grasped at his arm but he was adjusting her skirts and shifting underneath her.

"I've waited long enough," he said as he lifted her over his lap. "Straddle me."

"Here?" she squeaked in surprise.

He didn't bother to answer with words. Instead he repositioned her legs, pushed the layers of her skirts out of the way and thrust up. Instantly he was inside her, filling her and stretching her. His hands gripped her hips, keeping her in place as her fingers dug into his coat to maintain her balance with her knees on the edge of the seat. Her gasp was swallowed by the sound of his moan.

Guiding her forward, he urged her knees further apart. Following his directions, she settled firmly against his groin, impaled on his cock with her thighs spread wide over his hips. "Perfect," he hissed as she rocked forward with the movement of the carriage.

She tried to rise up on her knees but his hands restrained her movement and kept her locked against him. "Just stay still," he said. "Close your eyes and concentrate on how I feel inside you."

Licking her lips, she glanced down at their bodies as she interlocked her fingers behind his neck. Naked from the waist up, she felt like a sea nymph rising out of the voluminous waves of the frothy material of her gown. Poufs and swells of her skirt covered the rest of the seat and both their legs, hiding his hands holding her in place and the joining of their bodies. The man was a truly erotic genius.

She took a deep breath and closed her eyes. And then opened them with a sharp intake of breath when his tongue swiped over her nipple. "I thought you said we weren't going to move," she said.

"I told you not to move," he corrected. "Now close your eyes."

Once again, she shut her eyes and tilted her head back. Feeling the swaying motion of the carriage sliding their bodies together, an intimate rocking pressing him in deep and her clitoris against the springy hair at the base of his cock. Her inner thighs slid over the material of his trousers reinforcing the fact that he was fully clothed while she, for all purposes, was basically naked. Trying to relax into the rhythm of the carriage, she was thrown off her focus when his teeth scraped over the top of her breast right before he sucked hard on a spot just over her right nipple.

Instinctively her hips rolled forward and she arched her back. His tongue swirled over her nipple and his hands slid over her hips to grip the globes of her bottom, his fingers slipping deep into their crease. Remaining stationary was no longer an option.

She began to rotate her hips and grind against him, using the bouncing of the coach to add force to her movements. Her hands pushed up through his hair as she twisted on top of him, clenching her inner muscles around his cock. The heat and solidness of him within her spurred the desire she'd stifled for long months and she felt her cream slick his cock, making it easy to take him in as deeply as possible, to easily slide up and down and twist as she rotated her hips.

His groan was low and vibrated against her chest as he dragged his lips from one breast to the other. Matching her rhythm, he thrust up hard and high into her over and over. She rocked back and forth as the carriage swayed from side to side while he pressed up into her again and again. The full range of movement made staying silent a very real struggle.

With every kiss and every sway, quieting her responses while her body was spinning and surging into a madness of passion became increasingly difficult. The more severely she tried to lock down her reactions, the more intensely the sensations battered within her. She tightened her legs on his hips, dug her fingers into the fabric of his coat and hissed his name.

Pinching her nipple between his lips, Connyn tugged on it and spread her buttocks with his hands. He inched his fingers into her crease until the tips of his fingers pressed against the edge of her anus.

"Oh! Oh no!" she breathed as he pressed his index finger partially inside. Strands of her hair tumbled free of the confining pins and fell around her shoulders in loose waves. A bead of sweat slid from the hollow of her throat and down between her breasts, the wet trail tickling coolly against her hot skin.

He kissed his way back up her neck, his tantalizing lips teasing one shiver after another from her. When one of his large hands moved forward over her thigh until his thumb speared down between her opened labia and over her clitoris, she no longer cared about being discreet. She cried

out and jerked, but when she rocked forward, she increased the pressure of his thumb on her clitoris and when she rocked backward she increased the pressure of his finger in her anus. And every movement forward, backward, up, down and side-to-side drew attention to the fact that he was lodged, hard and huge, deep inside her.

Her lust ran into desperate need and she bucked against him, her cunt, clitoris and anus all stimulated at once. She began to writhe with the anguish of knowing the verge of ecstasy and not quite being there. He flicked her clitoris again with his thumb and she threw her head back, crying out and not caring who heard.

With a curse he pumped his hips, slamming into her as she rode him with reckless abandon, pins flying out of her hair, her breasts bumping his cheeks and chafing against the whiskers growing back from his morning shave. He pushed his finger deeper into her bottom, rubbed her clitoris fast and hard as she drove herself down on him.

Suddenly, her inner muscles seized around him and she gasped as lava-hot sensations flooded through her. They spiraled out from her anus and clitoris and licked like tongues of flame up her back and over her shoulders. Her body gripped his cock and milked him hard as her skin flushed with the rush of her orgasm. Connyn thrust up one last time, held her in place as he groaned and released himself into the midst of her climax.

Light and shadow burst apart in a stunning show of dazzling color as the reality of having him deep inside both her body and her life rose like the morning sun rushing to the sky with a heat and brilliance so intense, it drove out all the cold and dark left from the night. Truly and completely, she loved this man. After losing her father not long after her mother, she'd believed she would never feel pure joy in this world again. She'd been wrong.

Phoebe draped her arms over Connyn's back and dropped her head to his shoulder, resting her cheek there and taking deep breaths. He wrapped his arms around her and held her close. Letting out a deep but contented sigh, she said, "So much for curtailing servant rumors."

His chuckle thumped his shoulder against her cheek. "Don't worry about Matthew. All of my servants understand how much I value their ability to be discreet."

She jerked her head up. "But you said I had to be quiet because he would hear."

"I'm sure he did hear."

A hot blush of embarrassment stained her face. "But the rumors – "

"Will not start with Matthew."

"Then why – "

His wicked grin had her narrowing her eyes. "You did it on purpose just to make it harder for me," she guessed. Pushing on his shoulders she started to rise, but he grabbed her hips and settled her back down.

"Are you complaining?"

Lifting her chin, she propped her hands on her waist and tilted her head, running her eyes over his gorgeous face. "Oh no," she said with a smile of her own. "I'm planning."

His hands stilled from where they were stroking her skin. "Planning what?"

Sylph-like, she wound her arms around his neck and instead of answering his question, asked one of her own. "So, how much longer is this little carriage trip?" she purred next to his ear.

"Matthew has instructions to drive until I tell him to turn for home."

"That's good," she said and then traced the outer edge of his ear with the tip of her tongue. A thread of pure female satisfaction wove through her as she felt him start to harden inside her again. "Plenty of time to exact my revenge."

He groaned and nipped her shoulder. "Woman, you're going to be the death of me."

She kissed him softly. Remembered the words he'd spoken months before that had shaken her world to the ground with her disbelief and then put it on a firm foundation once she had accepted them. Whispered them back to him. "Not for at least fifty years or more, my love."

About the Author

I can't recall a time when I wasn't making up stories. As long I can remember, they've played like movies in my mind and I love seeing what will happen next.

Why did I decide to become an erotic romance writer? Easy. I didn't.

One day I was minding my own business, writing a nice sweet story, and suddenly this incredibly sexy, all-things-fantasies-are-made-of man just jumped out of my pen. He smiled at me, winked and told me to follow him. What could I do? My feet were moving before my brain had a chance to lodge any reasonable objections. Thank goodness!

I've been on this journey with my muse ever since. And I gotta tell you, I'm loving it! He's introduced me to some gorgeous alpha heroes and take-no-crap, sassy heroines and the adventure has just begun. I can't wait to introduce you to them and hope you'll have as much fun reading their stories as I have writing them.

Besides being whisked away by my muse, traveling, hiking and reading are in my top ten favorite things to do with a day, along with eating Mexican food and the most decadent chocolate dessert I can find. Drop me a line, I'd love to hear from you.

Eve welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her author bio page at www.ellorascave.com.

Tell Us What You Think

We appreciate hearing reader opinions about our books. You can email us at Comments@EllorasCave.com.

Also by Eve Jameson

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