

Linda Mooney

*Passion
of*
THUNDER

Thunder Series Book II

PASSION OF THUNDER

by

Linda Mooney

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WHAT THEY ARE SAYING ABOUT *LORD OF THUNDER*

"I will never look at a thunderstorm quite the same again. *Lord of Thunder* isn't just a play on words; it describes the main character of this fascinating new novel by Linda Mooney. A story of strength, determination, and love told with characters as rich as the Montana setting. Raw, intense and satisfying, are words that both describe the story and the romance. Reading Linda's work is an escape like no other. This is the second book I've enjoyed by Linda, but it won't be the last. Reading romance, always a guilty pleasure has now become a real joy!"

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My Strength, My Power, My Love
Lord of Thunder

Dedication

For Denise and Dee,
who believed in me from the beginning.
Thank you.

Chapter 1

The Storm

At first, Annie thought she was hearing things. The dark, rumbling noise was so much like the sound of thunder in her homeworld, her whole body automatically went into fear mode. Her stomach knotted and her blood felt like icy cold rivers running through her veins.

“No! Can’t be!” she murmured to herself. Maybe if she kept denying it, she would find out she had been mistaken. After all, she had been on this world for nearly six months, and there had never been a massive storm. Rainfall, yes. The occasional windy days, of course. Sizzling sunshine, most definitely, especially since Parra was graced with two suns. But a true, outright, lightning and thunderstorm? Never.

At least, not since I’ve been here.

The low growl echoed again in the distance. Curious, she hurried into the bedroom and glanced outside the slender window. There was no glass in the narrow slit, and when she had first been brought to this world and began learning about the planet that would be her new home, it had taken her some time to learn all the ins and outs and reasons why things were the way they were. And why ordinary items were so different. Like the teeny tiny windows with no glass.

But she understood now and it made sense. The little slits were placed in strategic areas throughout the apartment, so that when the front doors were opened, a cool breeze flowed from room to room. And on days when the temperature soared, the

windows kept the burning rays from penetrating. Yet there was always plenty of sunlight. Plus, she knew now where to find and how to pull down the little doors that sealed off the slits whenever it rained.

Leaning over the narrow sill, Annie glanced out at the inky clouds quickly gathering outside. The rumble of the approaching storm reached her, and a moment later she saw a quick flash of lightning—or rather, what looked like lightning, except it was orange instead of white.

Nevertheless, the sight of the massive black clouds was enough to start her heart beating in a furious rhythm. With hands already clammy from fear, Annie rushed around the apartment, closing every window slit in preparation for what was to come. Shutting them darkened the rooms, but as the clouds thickened enough to block all sunlight, the place became pitch-dark.

She had to hide. The warning bells in her head had gone from a mild ringing to an all-out clanging. The storm was growing closer. Either that, or it was growing bigger. Neither indication was a positive one.

For a second, Annie wondered if she should go outside and send up a flare. Her panicked side screamed yes, but her common sense told her no. She wasn't the only person being affected by what was coming. But why did this have to happen in the middle of the day when Rion was away at work? Why couldn't this thing have come during the night when he would be home, and she could burrow herself and her fear within the safe circle of his arms?

The air exploded with the sound of a rifle being fired at short range. Only it wasn't a gunshot. It was lightning striking one of the apartment towers, and it sounded close, too damn close. And in the darkness, it was nearly enough to stop her heart from beating. Annie shrieked, nearly falling to the floor. The next moment, a frightened wail started up in the second bedroom. The unexpected noise had awakened Kerr. The need to protect her son overrode

her sense of urgency to run and hide, and Annie hurried into the baby's room.

Kerr was sitting up in his crib, frightened and seeking her. Annie went straight to the crib, despite the lack of adequate light. Gathering the crying child against her, she went into the living room and tried to think above the terrifying circumstances. Where would be the safest place to ride out the storm? Built in an elliptical shape, the outer walls of the apartment were adjacent to the outer walls of the building itself. Every room had at least one wall abutting the outside, and every outer wall had at least one window. There were no inner rooms, no interior space or core to the apartment where she could seek shelter.

Frantically, Annie hurried back into the bedroom just as another resounding blast shook the air around her. Her eyes lit on the enormous bed, and an idea took shape. Maybe if she used the mattress as a shelter, and pulled herself and the baby into the center of it, perhaps it would insulate them enough.

Laying the infant boy in the doorway that adjoined his room and theirs, Annie began tugging at the bed to pull it away from the inner wall. Her plan was to drag the mattress over the headboard to where she and Kerr could huddle between the bed and the wall, with the mattress as a roof.

She had barely gotten the bed moved a few inches when the storm erupted with a vengeance. Annie snatched her son into her arms and crawled into the tiny space, abandoning her idea to seek immediate safety. Holding him tightly against her, she tried to rock the crying child with little success. The storm was too loud and too forceful. Even the floor vibrated in response to the wind's fury.

Another crackle of lightning nearly deafened her. Yet she continued to try and soothe Kerr's wails of fright, unaware that the tiny boy's tears were mixing with her own. She was at a loss. It had been a long time since she had felt this helpless against nature. Taking a deep breath, Annie tried singing as she prayed.

“Hush, little baby, don’t say a word. Poppa’s gonna buy you a mockingbird.”

The storm roared. Heavy rain pelted the outer bedroom wall, the thick drops sounding like cannon fire.

“If that mockingbird don’t sing, Poppa’s gonna buy you a diamond ring.”

She didn’t worry about Rion. She couldn’t afford to. She had enough on her plate, what with trying to keep the baby calm, not to mention her own frayed nerves.

“If that diamond ring turns brass, Poppa’s gonna buy you a looking glass.”

After all, Rion was used to these kinds of storms, wasn’t he? He had been trained to take on these huge thunder boomers, and he knew how to fly through them like they were so much cotton candy.

“If that looking glass gets broke, Poppa’s—”

“Annie!” The voice sounded far away.

She blinked and strained to hear above the gale. “Rion?” Sticking her head out from under the mattress, Annie tried again. “Rion! In here!”

Visible as a ghostly golden glow, Rion rushed into the bedroom to find her cowering behind the bed. He was dripping wet, but he was the most wonderful balm for her frazzled nerves. As he bent down toward her, a monstrous fist of wind battered the side of the apartment tower, and the entire bedroom, including furniture, shook. Annie cried out as she launched herself and the baby into her husband’s muscular arms.

He took no time to see if she was all right. “Why are you not in the safe room?” he gruffly asked her as he pulled her out from behind the bed. Annie started to answer when his question sunk into her brain. But she had no chance to ask him what he meant when she realized they were standing before the inner wall where Rion’s small bureau was recessed. Adjacent to the bureau was his closet.

His closet? Of course! She should have thought about crawling into the bottom of his closet—

Rion pulled open a drawer or panel in his bureau. It was difficult to see in the near-blackness, but he appeared to pull a lever, or flip some kind of switch. The screaming storm drowned out any sound coming from beyond the closet, but she was aware of another door opening. The next moment, he gathered Annie and Kerr, and led them into the inner room, pressing a hand to the back of Annie's head to help her duck beneath the low opening.

It was a narrow room, but a long one. As soon as they were inside, Rion closed the door behind them, and the effect was immediate. The storm's blast dampened to a low rumble. She could finally hear her own loud, raspy breathing and Kerr's whimpering.

"Are you all right?"

Annie nodded, and then realized he probably couldn't see her. "Yeah." She started to say more when Rion took Kerr. "Is there a light of some kind in here?"

He moved, and presently a candle was lit. Annie surveyed her husband who was soaked to the skin. Some of his feathers were skewed from flying through the buffeting winds, and stuck out like cowlicks. "You're dripping wet."

And then, like a stroke of lightning, it came to her. "You're not carrying a lantern?"

"I know my way home in the dark," he defended himself.

"Rion!"

"I had to come make sure you and Kerr were safe. Why were you hiding behind the bed?"

"You never told me about this little room." She glanced around and noticed a few items stacked at the far end of the narrow space. "What's that?"

"Food and water, in case we need to stay for any length of time." He rocked the little boy on his shoulder, who was growing drowsy. "Forgive me for not telling you sooner. When the storm

started, the only thing I could think of was how terrified you were of them. That is why I came home to check on you.”

She gave him a small smile. “I’m glad you did. Do you get these storms often?”

A distant boom punctuated her question. Annie gasped, unable to stop herself. In the next second, the entire room vibrated from the storm’s impact. Crying out, she threw herself into her husband’s strong embrace. Now they both were shivering—her from fear, and him from his wet clothing. A chuckle echoed in his chest.

“What’s so fu-funny?” Annie whispered.

“I was thinking I need to get out of these wet clothes and dry off, but you are such a sweet temptation, my Annie.” Rion laughed softly. “It would not be fair for me to undress without you reciprocating. Unfortunately, I do not think there is enough room in here for us to do any sort of romantic exploration.”

Annie giggled. He was right. His enormous wings took up a lot of space. If she also had wings, the room would barely fit them both. As it was, they were forced to sit and wait for the storm to dissipate, but not much else except converse.

“Why didn’t you tell me about these storms? Are they bad all over? I mean, do they appear elsewhere on your world besides over the city? Do they cause a lot of damage?”

Rion laughed aloud. The storms didn’t bother him. Flying through the worst weather was something he was trained to do. It warmed her to know it had been his knowing of her fear of storms that had caused him to return home.

Lifting a hand to caress her cheek with the back of his fingers, Rion gazed at her lovingly. “Forget the storms, my Annie. Now that you know about this safe room, you can come here whenever the *tosis* erupts. And I will feel better knowing you are in here.”

“*Tosis*? Is that what you call a tornado or thunderstor—”

She started to ask more, but he silenced her with a warm kiss. She loved his kisses, melting from the way they could send tingles down to the tips of her toes. His natural body heat was already drying his tunic and pants, but droplets still fell from his hair.

With his free arm, he lifted her against him. His honed, muscular body was rock-hard, and Annie spread her chilled fingers across his chest. His mouth continued to play with hers; his tongue teased hers, stroking and licking her inner roof and teeth. Slowly, seductively, he pulled her even tighter against him, until she could feel his erection pressing impatiently into the layered fabric of her gown.

Reluctantly, she raised her face from his to glance at their son.

"He is asleep," Rion stated the obvious. "Grab one of the pallets back there."

Annie found one of the bedrolls he mentioned. Opening it, she laid it on the floor where it nearly took up half the space of the tiny room. As she placed the baby on the pallet, she could sense Rion shifting behind her. Before she could turn around to see what he was doing, his hands slid around her waist, and she was gently pulled toward him.

Releasing his grip, Rion lifted the back of her skirt and ran his fingers up the back of her thighs. The subtle scrape of his blunt nails sent a pulsing desire straight to her abdomen. Annie gasped as the little room grew stuffier. When he reached her buttocks, he gave them a squeeze, then spread them slightly and began to guide her downward.

Annie glanced over her shoulder. "I thought you said—"

"Shhhhh."

The hard, hot head of his erection gently nudged the lips of her entrance. He teased her, finding her eager little nub and stroking it until her inner thighs were slick.

"Rion."

"Shhhhh."

“Now,” Annie whimpered softly.

The rigid pole slid into her, quivering and warm. Her guttural moan filled the room as he lifted her by the hips, and then lowered her again over his entire length. Up, then down, gradually adding speed as each thrust pushed him deeper and deeper into her.

Without anything to hold onto, Annie grabbed Rion’s thighs and used them for leverage. It was like trying to get a grip on two tree trunks.

The ramming continued, increasing in speed and intensity as they both sought to reach completion. Now she was tilting at an angle as the exquisite torture spiraled faster and harder. Behind her she could hear Rion’s soft grunts, and she could envision in her mind how his face would appear—eyes closed, lips parted, his entire face looking pinched as his body poised on the edge of his climax.

It overwhelmed her without warning. One second she was relishing the feel of him driving thickly inside her, and the next second an inferno combusted, sending scorching flames throughout her body. Annie stiffened and cried out at the onslaught. Rion continued to pound himself into her tightening channel, forcing himself past the wet, silken grip trying to hold onto him. Gasping for air, Annie arched beyond her peak just as her husband found his, and the ragged breath at her back was testimony to the richness of his orgasm as he finally slowed.

Wordlessly, he pulled her into his embrace, resting his forehead on the back of her neck. His hands reached into the bodice of her gown to find the hard nipples he loved to play with. He was panting as fast as she was. His hot breath on the back of her neck sent shivers through her. Astonishingly, their son continued to doze.

“Rion?”

“Mmm?”

"The truth. Did you come back to protect us? Or to get a little afternoon delight?"

The chuckle rolling through his chest was her answer. "You know me too well," he accused. His roughened hands cupped her breasts as his fingers continued to tease her nipples. "I love the way your nipples tighten when you come." He nipped her neck and shoulder, scraping the skin with his teeth, and then placing a kiss on top. "Actually, I came to give you some news."

"What kind of news?"

Outside the world growled as the storm progressed, but she could tell it was beginning to abate. The building no longer shook.

"In three days I will be presented with an Honorum," Rion murmured. "I want you to go with Chloe to buy yourself the most beautiful gown you can find, so that when I present you, you will be the most beautiful woman there."

"Flatterer." Annie giggled. "You know you can't make a silk purse out of a sow's ear."

He sighed. His warm breath tickled her sweaty skin. She felt his hands pull out of her bodice, and knew he did it reluctantly. Looking over her shoulder, she watched him manipulate something on the wall until the door slid open. The rush of cooler air felt wonderful.

"Do you have to go back?"

"I will not be gone long." He lifted her to her feet outside of the safe room. Annie adjusted her gown while he retrieved Kerr and handed the sleeping infant to her.

By the time she had the baby settled in his own bed, she heard the front door close. Her husband promised he would not be gone long and Rion always kept his word. Smiling, Annie went to open the windows as she wondered what to fix for supper.

Chapter 2

The Honorum

“Chloe? I have absolutely no idea what I’m supposed to do.”

Annie stood with her hands on her hips, feeling somewhat irritated and wholly lost. She hoped it was clear she had no inkling what the missive she still clutched in her hand entailed. She only knew it was supposed to be some kind of grand occasion and her husband was going to be in the spotlight. Which meant, of course, so would she.

“The council is giving an Honorum for Rion for his service. Past service,” the physician hastily corrected. “Rion asked me if I would take you into the market to find you a gown to wear for the occasion.”

“Yeah, he told me you were coming over.”

It had been nine months since Rion had brought Annie over into his world. A world filled with winged people. A world that had two suns.

It had also been six months since the birth of their son Kerr. During that time Annie had pretty much kept to herself, devoting her time to being a mother, wife, and helper to a husband who would forever bear the scars of what her world had done to him.

The few times she’d ventured down into the markets and city below, she’d been accompanied by Rion or Vadon or, more often than not, Chloe. It was still so new, so painfully different than what she had known on Earth, that she would beg off any further exploration they suggested. Homesick? That word alone couldn’t begin to cover how she felt.

What bothered her most were the other inhabitants of this world. Their reactions and the looks they gave her. The hesitant, almost fearful way they approached her, when they had to approach her. Annie wondered whether her difference was the real factor in their behavior, instead of the fact that she was an outsider. An “otherworlder”, or “outworlder”, as she was sometimes referred to.

After all, she was living on a world full of angels. Whereas she was a normal, wingless woman from another place and time.

“What is an,” she glanced back at the notice, “an Honorum? I’ve never heard of such a thing.”

Chloe gave her a smile. The woman probably thought it would soothe Annie’s invisible but definitely ruffled feathers. “The council will be presenting Rion with a plaque to honor his service when he was a warrior.”

“He’s still a warrior!” Annie insisted. “He just doesn’t go on the pathways anymore.”

Behind her the familiar rumble of a building rainstorm rolled in the distance. Compared to the storm that had hit yesterday, it would be minuscule. Rion explained that storms on this world were a lot like earthquakes on hers. After a *tosis*, smaller storms would plague the city, much like aftershocks. Annie knew her husband would be busy at that moment, preparing the next warrior for the dangerous journey ahead, despite the coming storm.

Up until a little less than a year ago she had been terrified of thunderstorms, terrified sometimes to the point of unconsciousness. Now, unless it was something like a *tosis*, storms no longer bothered her. Instead, they meant something more profound, and much more personal. After all, it was a rending thunderstorm which had brought Rion into her life in the first place. And it was a storm which had brought Rion back into her life as well.

Letting out a deep sigh, Chloe shook her head and bit into a cookie. “The council does not give out these Honorums on a whim.

In fact, I had to go to the historians to find out when the last one took place. Oh, my. These are good! What are they?"

"Cookies. Haven't you had cookies before?" Annie raised an eyebrow at the woman, a small smile playing over her lips. "I used to make oatmeal and honey cookies for Rion when we—" She stopped abruptly. *When we used to be on Earth* was what she meant to say. Nostalgia swept over her. But with it came the memories, and not all of them were happy.

Chloe nodded, understanding. Sometimes the past was meant to remain in the past. Especially such a painful and horrific one like Annie had faced prior to her coming here.

"Tell me how you made them," she asked, "and I will help you with that stew you have been wanting to surprise Rion with."

"Deal!" Annie agreed, before laughing softly.

"But we still need to go down into the market to buy you that gown. Something that matches Rion's uniform."

"His uniform is mostly black!" Annie exclaimed, wrinkling her nose. "If I try to match him, and he's wearing black, and me with this black hair, I'm going to look like a member of a funeral!"

Chloe laughed aloud at the visual imagery she'd gotten from her friend's description. "Trust me, Annie, no one will ever see you that way. Shall I meet you there, say, tomorrow? At four cycles into the first morning?"

"You're not working tomorrow?"

"I asked to have the day off."

"Will wonders ever cease?" Annie said sarcastically. "You angels work harder than anyone I've ever known. Even Rion said that his missions on the pathways were the only vacation he enjoyed. All right. I'll have a trap here at four cycles. Will you go down with me instead?"

"Not a problem," Chloe told her. Getting to her feet, the physician tugged on her sheer red gown, the symbol of her authority. The weather was beginning to get muggy and humid, and the thin

layers of fabric were prone to cling to Annie's sweaty skin, the same way they clung to the physician's. Annie looked forward to a cool shower that evening, and she wondered if Chloe was thinking of doing the same when she got home.

"Staying with Vadon tonight?"

Looking up, the physician blushed in response. Annie walked over to give her a hug.

"It's so good to know you two are back together and trying to work this out. I'm just wondering when you'll finally say your vows."

"That is...a ways off," the angel woman murmured.

"I don't care. I can wait," Annie whispered in her ear. "I want you to be more than my friend and my physician."

Chloe gave her a shy smile. If she and Vadon, Rion's younger brother, exchanged vows, that would make her family. And Annie desperately needed some sense of family to ground her. After giving the woman a quick kiss on the cheek, Chloe took her leave.

Annie followed her out onto the platform to watch her spread her glistening chocolate-colored wings and leap into the growing darkness. Below, a thousand points of light began budding like the iridescent flowers found on this strange new world. Lanterns and candles flooded various homes with warmth and light. The beautiful sight always managed to make her wistful.

Annie sighed as the storm intensified off in the distance. It wouldn't be as bad as the *tosis*, but it would still be a long night for Rion. From past storms she knew he wouldn't be able to leave his work until the warrior scheduled to pass through the gap had made it safely through, and any warrior overdue to return had been accounted for. And, like those on Earth, evening storms were most often the worst.

Once inside her sky home, she slipped out of the simple gown she'd been wearing. She opened a few of the windows on the far end of the apartment, facing away from the approaching rain

clouds, and hoped for a breeze to dispel the still stickiness that was making her perspire.

She had never pranced around before in the nude. Not until she had come here. It was almost a delicious little thrill to know she could walk around in front of another man and know that the sight of her body was enough get his blood boiling. And hers, too, for that matter. Rion had been right when he had told her his world didn't have very cold weather. At least, not like the weather in Montana. Here, it was temperate almost all of the time. Yes, there were seasons of cold and heat, but they weren't as extreme as they were back on her world.

Tonight, she felt stifled.

Naked, she padded barefoot into the nursery to check on her son, who was sleeping soundly in his bed. Reassured, she walked through the door adjoining the second bedroom to hers and Rion's bedroom, leaving the door ajar. After a quick, cool shower, she settled between the soft sheets in the enormous bed and tried to get some rest, and hoped she wouldn't have to wait long for her husband to return home.

* * * *

The clouds looked like thick, dirty clumps of wool, muddy and dark and full of burrs that threw out greenish spikes of lightning. They roiled in the sky, end over end, growling like disturbed bears. One flash of light spit its forked tongue through the clouds, and a sound louder than anything she'd ever heard in her life deafened the world into total silence.

With a jolt, Annie sat up in bed, instantly alert despite the fact that she had at some point finally fallen asleep. Her heart was beating like a triphammer as she gasped for air with rapid, little breaths.

The room was in total darkness. Belatedly, she remembered she'd neglected to light another candle before retiring. The one on the table by Rion's side of the bed had snuffed itself out.

In the distance she could hear the heavy shushing sound of rain falling. This storm was one Rion referred to as a “drencher”. Other than some minor flooding, it would do little damage. A gentle draft sent her the smell of ozone.

Reaching over the bed, she patted the sheets to find them cold and empty. Rion hadn’t come home yet. *How late is it?*

The chronometer was in the living area. Sighing, Annie crawled out from beneath the sheets, first checking on Kerr to see if the rain had awakened him. Standing in the doorway, she strained to listen, but her ears couldn’t detect any sounds of movement or restlessness her son was prone to make when he was waking up. Satisfied he was still asleep, she padded to the living room to check the time.

Blind in the absolute darkness, she reached for the shelf she knew always held candles and a lighter. Finding them Annie quickly lit one, squinting in the sudden small glare. Securing the taper in a holder, she held it up to the chronometer to see if she could read it correctly.

“Five...and three, four, five...five plus five cycles past the second sunset?” Annie straightened up. No, she couldn’t have read that right. That would mean that first sunrise couldn’t be more than a couple of cycles away.

The clouds rumbled again, but without the excruciating clap of thunder pealing overhead. Despite the fact that it was an offshoot from yesterday’s huge storm, the rain didn’t seem to be letting up any. *Drencher, my foot. It just might turn out to be a gullywasher.* But the fact that Rion still was not home did not help. She began to wonder if something had happened. Late nights were not uncommon for him, but into the next day was unheard of.

She hurried back into the bedroom, carrying the candle with her, and pulled out a short shift from her dresser. Slipping it on, she went back into the living room and unlocked the front doors.

They opened to the darkness with a whoosh of fresh, wet air, throwing her long hair over her shoulders.

Stepping out onto the platform, Annie could see the roiling clouds gathered overhead. The rain continued to pour. Despite the partial overhang shielding the doorway, the platform was slick, making footing treacherous for a non-winged person such as herself. It was a drop of perhaps a couple of hundred feet straight down.

“Rion, where are you?” she murmured.

Spread out beyond the tower the thousands of lights had dimmed until only a few remained. It was the middle of the night. No, more like the wee hours. Nevertheless, it was very, very late. Or very, very early, depending on one’s point of view. Something had happened; she was sure of it. Something had happened, and silently she prayed Rion was not directly affected.

An errant gust blew out her candle, but Annie refused to go back inside to relight it. Instead, she stood with her back against the chilly wall, knowing that if she tried to return to bed now she wouldn’t be able to fall back asleep. Not without her husband’s comforting presence near her, or the feel of his arms about her.

She had no idea how long she stood there, blending with the dark and listening to the rain slowly ebb. It was when she heard the faint sound of wings pounding the air that she turned to face the direction from where she knew he would be coming. The sweeping sound grew steadily louder. Presently a shadow emerged from the darkness, a shadow highlighted in aged gold.

Rion landed. His feet touched the platform almost without a sound. His dark blue tunic and pants clung to him; his long hair dripped from the rain. He stopped to wipe the wetness from his face, shaking his arms and wings as drops of water flew everywhere. Within moments Annie was soaked to the skin.

“Why did you do it?” she asked softly in a husky whisper when she was certain he could hear her.

Rion paused to listen, and then lowered his wings. "Annie?"

"It's pitch-black outside. Both moons are below the horizon. Yet you managed once again to make it all the way over here from work without a lantern. This storm is a baby, compared to yesterday's, but you should have waited for first dawn." She tsked her tongue. "Folly, Rion. Sheer folly."

She could hear the smile in his voice, despite the sting of his words. "What are you doing still up? The night is old. You should be resting. And you know how dangerous it is for you to be out here on this platform when it is raining."

He advanced in her direction, knowing she was somewhere in the darkness, away from the platform's sloping edge. She made his search easier, guiding herself into his arms when he got near enough. His kiss was wet but intense.

"You're shivering," she accused him.

"Then warm me," he whispered, dropping his voice.

To her astonishment, she felt him drag off his tunic and pants with his left hand while he still cradled her with his right. His fingers brushed her breasts, and she heard him chuckle.

"Pot calling the kettle black," he teased, using one of her phrases she'd often thrown at him. "You are as wet as I am." He then proceeded to remove her sodden shift, pulling her naked body against his to share their mutual heat. He was corded muscle and hot, smooth skin. She could feel her body trying to cling to him as she pressed closer.

"Well, you're the one who decided to shake himself like a little puppy and get me soaked. Besides, you haven't answered my question. I thought it was frowned upon for any of you to travel in the dark without a light, in case of a collision or something like that. Much less in a downpour like this one."

Despite the fear that shivered through her at the thought of him pulling such a dangerous stunt, she knew there was nothing she could do or say to sway him otherwise. This was her Rion; the

Rion of old who sometimes, unexpectedly, emerged without warning, then disappeared just as quickly. She knew he would brave this same sort of flight however many times he felt he needed to if it meant coming back to her.

He held her against him, nuzzling the silkiness of her neck and throat as he pulled his wings around them, enclosing them in their damp softness. The rain continued to fall, drenching them from head to toe. Without a word he carried her back into their home, taking her straight to the enormous glassed-in shower where he turned on the water until it became a fine, warm spray.

Pulling her on top of him, he sank down into the wide pool of water at the bottom of the shower, immersing his wings in the overflow. Annie knew he often soaked his back whenever he was hit by a spasm. She slid across his belly and chest, stretching out her legs until she encased his growing erection between her thighs. Pressing soft kisses to his chest, she sighed at the feel of his hands kneading the small of her back.

"Why do you pull such stunts, my husband?" she continued, knowing that all her henpecking was useless anyway. She felt his chuckle.

"If you had the choice between spending the rest of the night in an empty way station, or against the body of the person you love, which would you choose?"

She looked up at him, resting her chin against his breastbone. "And what if you had collided with someone? Is being with me worth further damage to yourself?"

"There was never any danger of me colliding with another tonight," he smiled self-assuredly.

"Oh, really? What makes you so damn sure of yourself?"

"No one else would be crazy enough to be flying out in the middle of the night in this weather," Rion told her, before laughing.

Annie stared at him wide-eyed. Well, damn. His logic hit the nail on the head. Of course no one else would be...stupid?...brash?...impetuous?...enough to pull such a stunt. Especially two nights in a row.

She opened her mouth to protest when he lifted her under her arms and slowly slid her up his body until he found her mouth. His kiss soon chased all other thoughts from her mind as Annie succumbed to his body and his lovemaking.

He rolled over, pinning her beneath him, submerging her body and most of his in the warm water. His large hand cradled the back of her head, protecting it from bumping against the side or bottom of the pool.

"Tell me again why you would rather have me still at the way station instead of here," he murmured as his teeth playfully nipped her neck and shoulders.

An uncontrollable trembling came over her as his other hand stroked her skin, and the water playfully echoed his touch. He found her breast, and Rion lifted her enough out of the pool, bending his head to let his mouth envelope the dark nipple, taste it, and finally suckle it.

Annie moaned, unable to stop the feelings weaving from the tips of her toes to the burning created by his mouth and tongue. Opening her eyes, she watched him cup the full globe and caress it harder. Her body involuntarily responded, and before she could stop him, Rion latched onto her with a hunger that morphed into a burgeoning desire centered between her thighs.

He took her milk, moaning softly as he drank from her. This was something he had done only once before, but not like this. It hadn't been anything like this.

"Oh...God...Rion..."

Feeding their son had that same, oddly erotic feeling to it. Only, Rion had taken it that one step further. Annie groaned and dove her fingers into his thick hair the color of old gold. Over his shoul-

der, she could see his wings distended above them and spread as far as they could inside the glass confines of the shower. That was an odd little quirk she'd learned about him back when they had become lovers in their tiny cabin in Montana.

* * * *

"Why do they do that?" she asked him. They were still panting, still sweating, despite the fact that the temperature had dropped at least thirty degrees outside, and the interior of the cabin had chilled almost as much.

"Why do what do what?" His voice was hoarse and muffled with his face buried against her neck and in her hair which lay splayed across the pillows.

"Why do your wings fan out, like you're about to take off?"

The moment she said it, the enormous appendages automatically pulled in as he tucked them into place against his back. To her, it seemed he'd lost himself, to the point where he hadn't been aware how his wings had betrayed him, and when she had pointed them out, he had hurried to correct the problem. The realization was funny enough to make her giggle.

Lifting his face to gaze down at her, Rion gave her a slightly peeved look. "Please tell me it was not our lovemaking you found amusing."

His insistence caused her to laugh harder. The peeved look became a more irritated look.

"Annie?"

"It's just... oh, sweet heavens to Betsy, Rion! Did you know that when you climax, your wings go as rigid as the rest of you?" It was hard to talk, gasping between breaths and her laughter.

"And you find that fact funny?"

Now he was genuinely puzzled, but a smile was beginning to creep onto his face.

"No. No, my love. I just find it adorable that I can tell your mood simply by looking at your wings. They're the biggest feathered tattletales I've ever seen."

* * * *

They were intimidating when they were spread their full length. Twenty-six feet from left tip to right tip, and rising more than a dozen feet when he brought them up over his head, with the largest feathers as long and as wide as his arm. Yet his wings were softer than anything she had ever touched, ever slept against, or ever made love upon.

Tonight they filled the shower with their golden radiance as Rion filled her with himself. He didn't suckle long, knowing that her nipples were almost perpetually sore from breastfeeding their son. At that moment his other hand went down to cup her buttocks and keep her from sliding along the tiles as he pounded deeper and faster into her.

Annie wrapped her arms around his thick neck, allowing her body to respond to his, to take him inside her and let him take her soul soaring across his world. The water sloshed around them, imitating the rocking motion of their bodies before splashing over the lip of the tub. Another groan of sheer pleasure slipped past his lips and reverberated inside the glass enclosure.

"My Annie."

There was no sense of time passing as they loved. Annie would have been wonderfully content to have him do this to her all night long. But the build-up to their release came suddenly and unexpectedly, starting as a tickling in her innermost core, before brightening with a fierce pleasure that tore through her, shredding her senses along the way.

Annie bucked her hips, arching her back when she froze in the moment of ecstasy, as Rion buried himself as deeply as physically possible. Faintly she heard a banging sound against the glass panel walls, and knew those mesmerizing wings were spread as far as they could reach. He was a solid, perfect heaviness suspended over her, his forehead pressed to hers. Annie wrapped her legs around him. She was exhausted and happier than she believed she had the right to be.

Passion of Thunder

Kissing the tip of his nose, she told him she loved him, and melted into sleep, held tightly against his chest.

Chapter 3

The Birth

It was barely two cycles into the first morning when a familiar mewling sound awoke her from deep sleep. Annie rubbed her eyes as she climbed out of bed, glancing over to the other side to see it empty. Sunlight streamed through the open window she hadn't closed the night before. It warmed her naked body wherever it flowed into the room. Sighing, she went to the bathroom first then walked into their son's bedroom to take the infant in her arms.

After changing him, she gave him her breast and took a seat in the rocking chair. It was one of the few things from her old life she had insisted on having in her new one.

* * * *

"Babies have to be rocked. It reminds them of the womb," she told him.

Rion tenderly ran his palm over her swollen stomach. The child was growing more active as the time of his birth grew closer. Annie was having more and more difficulty resting, and the strain was beginning to show on her. Already dark circles rimmed her eyes, and she seemed to be growing thinner, weaker. Unable to do anything except to sleep fitfully and eat. And even then she mostly picked at her plate.

Worried, Rion had gone to Chloe, seeking help. That was when Chloe told them of the physicians' decision. The birth would be difficult. There was even a slim chance it could prove fatal. She may not be able to go the full length of the pregnancy because their child was a mixture of their blood. The baby may be winged, or not. Either way, Annie's body was not capable of producing a full-term child of their world.

"She will need many of us to be with her at her time," the woman angel said. The more difficult the healing process, the greater the number of physicians who would be needed to help.

It was the middle of the day when the cramping began. Rion was at work. Annie was alone, a rare instance at the time. Normally there was always someone nearby in case she had a problem. Rion had seen to it a messenger of the House of Thunder would always be with her whenever he had to be away.

Today was Vadon's shift to be with her, and Annie was delighted to have him to talk to. She'd come to love Rion's brother as much as if he'd been her own. She could be open with him, and he with her, and they often shared childhood secrets and tales from their past. Her favorites were stories of how the happy-go-lucky younger brother used to torment his older brother, who—even as a child—bore the same stoic, temperamental attitude he displayed as an adult.

But just before noon Vadon was summoned briefly by the council for something. After promising he would return as soon as possible, or have someone replace him if he discovered it would take longer than expected, he flew away, leaving her on her own.

Exhausted, Annie curled up on the wide, round, padded sofa in the living room, hoping for a short nap until he returned. The contractions seized her without warning and without respite.

Paralyzed with pain and fear, she called out for help and realized she was still alone. Her water broke, and amid it she saw blood. She had no way of telling how long it took for her to get down from the sofa, and stumble her way out the front doors and onto the platform.

There was a small door set in the wall next to the main doors, located about three feet above the platform floor. Inside, on a recessed shelf, was a signal gun. Rion had shown her how to use it. How to load it and how to fire it straight up into the sky. The green ball was for assistance, without danger present. The red ball was for emergencies, medical or otherwise. There were no telephones on this world. The flares were simply how others

were notified whenever someone was in great need, and was unable to leave to seek help.

On her knees, Annie threw open the door and reached into the shelf, and managed to grab the gun. But her fumbling sent flare balls rolling everywhere, knocked from their container. Some fell out of reach and dropped over the lip of the platform. In her desperate attempt to grab one of them, by the grace of God, her fingers happened to close around a red one.

Another contraction came upon her, tearing her, squeezing all the breath from her, until she gasped for air. Tears coated her cheeks as her shaking hands managed to load the ball into the gun.

"Point it up. Point it up," she whispered through gritted teeth.

Rolling onto her back, she fired straight up as another contraction curled her into a ball of pain. She screamed as the gun fell from her grasp when she clutched her belly.

It was a messenger named Cord who got to her first. She remembered him, but the agony of childbirth kept her from acknowledging him.

At some point in their flight to the hospital she was handed over in midair to a pair of heavily muscled arms that cradled her like precious cargo. Semiconscious, she grabbed a handful of his amber gold hair, shuddered, and passed out.

When she finally came to, she found she had been heavily drugged by the healing power of eight physicians. Faintly she could hear and feel them working on her, trying to save her and the baby. Rion was kneeling beside her where she lay on the table and she could see tears on his face as he clutched one of her hands.

"Hold on, my Annie. It will not be much longer."

"Rion."

"You must be strong. We have a son."

"I already told you that," she murmured. She was beginning to feel extraordinarily sleepy. The healing properties of the physicians' powers were working their magic. She was warm and wonderfully painfree.

"He is beautiful," another voice drifted into her consciousness. It was Chloe, who gave her a joyous smile. "He looks exactly like his father."

"Aged gold? With wings?"

"With perfect wings," the physician assured her.

Rion kissed her hand, then her. "I love you, Annie. You are my life."

"Then get me a rocking chair," she gently jested before drifting off to sleep.

* * * *

Annie gave her son a loving smile as he continued to nurse. A miniature of his father, indeed, right down to his aged gold coloring and buttery wings. And blue eyes the color of the wide Montana sky from where he'd been conceived.

The rocker made soft croaking noises as she toed it forward and back. She hummed a little song in time with the rocker, one of many tunes she remembered from when her mama had been alive.

Before long the baby was finished, and she burped him before getting to her feet. Turning around, she was surprised to see Rion standing, arms crossed over his chest, in the doorway leading into the living room. He wore only a pair of breeches, and he had an unreadable expression on his face.

"How long have you been standing there?" Another thought immediately followed. "You didn't go to work today?"

"I will go in later since I worked a longer shift yesterday. No matter how many times I look at you, I am forever amazed by your strength and your beauty," he whispered. Walking into the room, he took Kerr from her and began to coo to their son. Annie giggled to see their playful interaction. Kerr seemed fascinated by his father's enormous wings which arched high overhead, and tried to reach for them as Rion bounced the child on his broad shoulder. So engrossed was she with their play that she never heard the door to the baby's room open again until someone cautiously cleared a throat.

"My Lady Annie? My Lord Rion?"

Annie's face went a deep red, and she hurriedly ducked behind her husband as Rion burst out laughing. Slowly she leaned over to peer around him at the woman angel standing there.

"Pella?"

The housekeeper held up a sodden mass of material. Annie immediately recognized it as her and Rion's clothing from the night before, and she blushed redder than before.

"I found these on the platform outside the front door. Would you like for me to have these cleaned?"

Rion turned around, still keeping his naked wife shielded from the housekeeper's view. "That will be fine, Pella," he told her.

Nodding, the woman turned and left. The door slid close behind her. The moment she was out of earshot, Annie swatted her husband on the arm.

"You were going to let me lie in bed and have her find me lolly-gagging without a stitch on?"

Rion chuckled, still amused by her embarrassment. "Hurry into our room and find something to put on. I will keep her occupied until you come back out."

"She found our clothes from last night where you'd thrown them by the door. Rion, she's probably thinking that we, you know, made love out on the platform in front of all creation!"

He paused and gave her a mischievous grin. "I must remember to keep that idea in mind for a later time."

Annie stamped her foot, still mortified over the fact that he hadn't told her it was the housekeeper's day to come to clean, and hurried through the connecting door to grab a gown from the closet.

Although Rion's life and lifestyle had changed drastically since he had brought Annie over into his world, a few things remained as they had been. One of those was having a trained and respected housekeeper come in once every eighth rotation to clean their home and do the laundry. When Annie had protested, saying she

was just as capable of doing the cleaning herself, Rion had firmly told her no, and she knew it was an argument she had no way of winning.

“For months I watched you bear the burden of cleaning and caring for me and the farm when we were in Montana,” he told her firmly. “You did labor many men would abhor. You have paid your dues, my Annie. Your sole job now is to love and care for me and our son. I will make sure our home and its contents are kept satisfactory.”

It wasn’t long before Annie discovered she rather liked having all the heavy cleaning done by someone who actually enjoyed and took pride in her work. Yes, there were times Annie still dipped her hands into suds—there were always dishes to wash, and she insisted on being the only one to rinse out Kerr’s little tunics, especially the ones she’d hand-sewed herself. But it was nice to return to the house after being away for a few cycles to find it sparkling and neat, and all their clothes ready to wear.

As she slipped on a raspberry-colored gown, she hurried to braid her hair, securing the ends with a jeweled clip Chloe had given her shortly after her arrival in their world. If Pella was here to clean, that meant it wouldn’t be long before the trap arrived and the physician landed to go below with her to the markets. She splashed water on her face before entering the living room where Rion was on the floor watching his son crawl toward him. Sounds from the kitchen told her Pella was already busy at work. She went in to grab a quick breakfast.

“What time is it?” Annie asked, walking back into the living room.

“Five and five before four cycles. Are you and Chloe going below today?”

Annie paused, a slice of dawbinberry bread at her lips. “If you already knew that, why’d you ask?”

Rion just gave her a smile in answer. He continued to play with Kerr as she finished eating. "What if I'm not back before you have to go to work?"

"I will take him to work with me," her husband announced. "It is time I got to show him off."

"Rion! You'll do no such thing!"

Grinning, he cooed at the infant who grasped his father's index fingers with two pudgy fists. Annie sighed aloud. There was no denying the deepening bond between father and son.

"Send me word if you're taking him to work, so I can come get him when I'm ready to come home?" she asked. Rion nodded in agreement. "And what will you do if he gets hungry before then?" she added with a twinkle in her eyes.

"Then I will come looking for you," Rion promised. "You need to hurry. And do not worry about cost while you are looking for something to wear to the Honorum. I want you to be happy and that will please me."

Annie gave him a soft goodbye kiss. "I thought I already did that last night," she teased, and quickly danced away before his hand landed a playful slap to her backside.

The trap was landing as she walked outside. A moment later Chloe stepped onto the platform dressed in a dark green short tunic and pants. The color accentuated her shining hair, which she had pulled back into a long braid lying between her wings. The spots of color on her cheeks and the brightness of her expression were unmistakable signs.

"Good morning, Chloe. You must have had a wonderful night." Annie winked at her and smiled. The physician laughed lightly.

"I do feel very good today, thank you. Are you ready?"

"Beside me?" Annie asked. It was a special phrase. One which Rion had asked Vadon on their flight home together for the first time. Chloe nodded, answering with Vadon's response.

“Always.”

Climbing inside the lift, Annie took her seat as the two angels on each end lifted off the platform with the physician keeping parallel. Together they descended into the city and markets below.

Chapter 4

The Questions

Annie watched out the windows as the trap slowly threaded its way between the tall spires and crystalline towers she knew were homes and businesses. No matter how many times she took this trip down into the city, the scenery always fascinated her. Traps were not uncommon on this world, and were often used to transport large or heavy cargo, as well as those people who were infirmed, incapacitated, or elderly.

It was not long before she landed at a large open meadow referred to as The Green. Annie thought of it more as a park situated in the middle of the city, with sidewalks radiating spokelike from its center to the businesses beyond. Despite the fact that this world's citizenry was winged, she'd discovered they also did a lot of walking.

Chloe was waiting for her when one of the trap carriers assisted Annie from the vehicle. She thanked the both of them, and then joined the woman angel to walk the rest of the way.

"I heard Rion had a late night, or rather, an early morning of it," the physician commented, making small talk.

Annie threw her an exasperated look. "Can you believe that man? Came flying in, no lantern, in the pouring rain! And when I tried to take him down a peg or two about pulling such a stunt, he just laughed at me. Told me he was perfectly safe doing it because no one else in their right mind would have been out."

Laughing, Chloe nodded. "I hate to admit it, but he was probably right. Where do you want to go first?"

They'd reached the first inner street of businesses which resembled brightly lit miniature towers, most of which sported small, colorful signs designating their specialties. Although the people here spoke a myriad of languages, and conversed in practically every one, depending, of course, on who was doing the talking, Annie had found that the most commonly used method of communication was the pure and simple language of pictures. It hadn't taken her long to figure out what was what and she pointed to a shop across the way whose sign was a bowl filled with a liquid emitting a thin stream of steam. It was a small eatery they often visited.

"I would love a hot cup of brocade."

"Mmm, sounds like a good idea," Chloe admitted. "And a sweet bun?"

Annie nodded, and they went inside to find a table. They made themselves comfortable while a waiter took their order.

"I have missed our get-togethers," Chloe admitted, "but work has been extraordinarily hectic these past few days."

"I know. Vadon came over for supper the other night and told us. It seems more and more warriors are coming back through the gap with injuries. Are the storms getting worse? Or is it their assignments? Rion's been mum and that's not like him."

Nodding, Chloe leaned over the table and lowered her voice. "He is concerned that some of the news may disturb you, which is why he has been reticent." She gave her friend a firm look. "Are you still suffering from nightmares?"

Annie hesitated. Although she wanted to admit to the negative, she knew she would never betray Chloe's trust in her by lying. Sighing, Annie gave a halfhearted shrug. "Some nights, yes. Rion has been very understanding, but I know he worries." She gave the angel woman a searching look. "They *will* go away, right?"

Chloe reached over the table to take her friend's hand. "Yes, but not for a long, long while. You suffered a great deal, mentally,

physically, and emotionally. It will take time to heal. You just have to be patient."

"I hope so."

Their order was delivered, which Chloe paid for by signing a voucher. Once the waiter had left, Annie pointed out that fact.

"I've wanted to talk to you about something. And now that we're on ground level, so to speak, and I know I can trust you like I've never trusted anyone else, except for Rion and Vadon, of course." She paused, taking a sip of her hot beverage. "Will you explain something to me?"

"Of course," Chloe nodded. "If I can."

"Tell me about money. I mean, I never see any money being exchanged. All I see are these vouchers. I've seen Rion signing vouchers, but he doesn't let me read any of them, not that I *could* read any of them. They're not written in any language I know."

"They are written in our language," Chloe explained.

"But Rion told me once that your language faded away a long time ago."

"That is true. However, some vestiges still remain. They must, or else our historians would never be able to read the ancient texts of our ancestors."

"That still doesn't explain your system of money. I mean, I know Rion gets paid for doing what he does. Everyone gets paid. You get paid for your services. And Vadon. But where are the banks? How much money does Rion have? How will I know when I want to buy something if we have enough to pay for it?" She bit into her roll, waiting for an answer.

Chloe smiled. "What did Rion tell you?"

"He said not to worry about cost if I found the gown I wanted to wear at the Honorum."

"Ah." Smiling, the physician leaned back in her backless chair and drank some of her own brolade. "Very well. I will see if I can make some sense of this for you. These vouchers, you could say

they are our currency. They are a promise, I guess would best describe them. An agreement between you and the person you are doing business with. When you sign a voucher, it is taken to a bank, and that amount is deducted from whatever your holdings are.”

“Don’t you have money? You know, coins and bills?”

“Why? You can sign a voucher for as small an amount as one quarter of a mark.”

“All right,” Annie acquiesced. “So, tell me about being paid. I don’t want to buy something that would...” She stopped, unable to figure out how to explain, when Chloe gave her a knowing wink.

“You want to know how much Rion earns, am I right?” the angel woman guessed.

“Well, yes,” Annie laughed softly. “He has a housekeeper who comes in to clean. He always has a trap ready at my disposal. Things appear at our home as if by magic, things he’s bought and had delivered.” She sipped the last of her drink. “Chloe, is he over-extending us? Or are we well off? Or...what?”

“Annie, how much has Rion told you about his father?”

Annie glanced upward at the iridescent ceiling of the shop and tried to recall what little her husband had told her. “Not a whole lot, really. Why? What has that got to do with—”

“Everything,” Chloe interrupted. Leaning closer, she dropped her voice once again. “Dramon was devastated when Andara died.”

Annie nodded intent on what the woman had to tell her. “She died of Perrin’s disease, right?”

“Yes, that is correct. Her death, and leaving him alone to raise two young sons, the man became driven. He began to take assignment after assignment, barely spending any time with his family between pathways. I guess he was trying to escape his grief.” She sighed. Annie continued to wait for Chloe to make her point, knowing she would eventually.

“As you have probably guessed by now, a warrior’s job is one of the most difficult and most dangerous. You have probably also noted that there are not many Houses of Thunder.”

Now that she mentioned it, Annie realized she was right. “How many are there?”

“Less than three dozen,” Chloe told her.

Annie felt the blood rush from her face. “Is what Rion did *that* dangerous?”

“If a warrior dies without progeny, the house is dissolved.”

“But, what if Vadon was to have a son? Wouldn’t his son become a lord?”

Chloe shook her head. “It does not work that way. Only a lord can carry the title over. Kerr will bear the burden of keeping your House of Thunder intact. Now do you understand why Rion was ecstatic over his birth?”

Yes, it made a lot more sense to her now. Regardless, though, of the fact that their House of Thunder would continue for another generation, there was no denying the deep love she knew her husband bore for their child.

“What if a warrior has only daughters? What then?”

“Then the house is considered in stasis until the next male child is born to one of the daughters. At that time the house regains its honors, and that child becomes the next lord. At present there are five houses in stasis, one of them for two generations.”

Another thought passed through her, and this time Annie felt a cold chill accompany it. Chloe saw the paleness in her cheeks, and reached for her hand.

“What is wrong, Annie? Are you unwell?”

“Dramon went on the pathways to escape a future void of the woman he loved. His death was accidental, but Rion was there to become the next lord. But when Rion went on the same sort of self-destructive path...”

Rion had been pushing himself relentlessly when he'd encountered the thunderstorm which had nearly killed him over on Earth. If Annie had not found him when she had, he would have died from his wounds, if not from the elements or wild animals.

She glanced up to find Chloe searching deep into her eyes. The woman waited until Annie finally comprehended the future that could have been. With it came a cold chill as Chloe voiced her thoughts. "In his own grief over the loss of the father he idolized, Rion went out to destroy himself. Had he not met you, he would have died. Without an heir. And another House of Thunder would have been no more. Annie? Annie, look at me. You and you alone are responsible for keeping alive this House of Thunder. You understand that now, right?"

"And Vadon?" Annie barely managed to whisper. "What would have happened to Vadon?"

Giving her a small smile, Chloe answered, "Fortunately, nothing drastic. He would still be a messenger of the House of Thunder. That can never be taken from him. But his children would be reassigned upon their births."

"Reassigned?"

"Given new life choices. Yet they would retain all the past honors of having the blood of the House of Thunder in their ancestry."

Annie mulled over this bit of news as the waiter replenished their cups. Once they were alone again, she looked to Chloe to finish. The woman angel nodded.

"For every pathway Dramon traveled, he was paid a certain amount. How much exactly, I cannot say. But know that the more dangerous the pathway, the more a warrior is compensated."

"Dramon didn't travel the most dangerous pathways," Annie reminded her.

"No, but he went on more than a hundred assignments, more than any warrior we remember in recent history. And he used very little of that pay. He was rarely home."

"Who raised Rion and Vadon, then?"

"They had a nanny. Her name was Emelie. They loved her like a grandmother."

"Where is Emelie now?"

"She died soon after Dramon, but by then Rion and Vadon were old enough to be on their own."

"So, if Dramon earned all this money..." Annie's eyes widened.

Chloe smiled. "When he died, that money went directly to Rion and Vadon. That is when Vadon moved into his own home and left Rion the family home."

"Then Rion went on six very dangerous missions."

"Missions are given ratings, based on their probability of danger. The most dangerous missions pay sometimes three times the amount than the lesser ones. Dramon traveled those usually in the lower categories, mostly fours and fives. Rion went on the highest. The ones. But not for the money. He never took them for the money."

"He took them hoping to die. Not caring if he died."

"Yes."

"But now he's no longer a warrior," Annie argued, feeling slightly faint.

"Rion will always be a warrior," Chloe corrected her. "He just does not travel any pathways any longer. It would not matter, anyway. What he was given when Dramon died and what he earned after that, there is nothing Rion cannot give you." She smiled. "If he were to stop working this very moment, you would never want for anything for the rest of your lives."

"Oh. My." Annie swallowed hard. It was a discovery that literally left her breathless. "Oh, my," she repeated.

"Will you be all right?"

Nodding, Annie smiled although her hands were shaking. "Yeah. I mean, yeah, I'll be all right. It's just that I've never been, you know, rich before. All my life I've had to fight and struggle for every little thing, every scrap of food, every..." She drew a trembling breath.

Inexplicably it all became a bit too much to handle, and she sobbed softly into her napkin. Chloe reached over the table to clasp her upper arms, sending a warm tide of calmness through her. Annie began to feel as if sunshine was pouring over her.

"I'm sorry," she apologized softly, hiccupping. She wiped her eyes as her friend shook her head.

"Do not apologize. Never apologize."

"But you don't understand. I'm living in a dream. Don't you see? One day I'm going to wake up and find out that all of this has been nothing more than a dream. Or that I've gone completely over the edge of sanity, and I'm living in my own little make-believe world." She took another shuddering breath. "I have nightmares I'm still in Montana and I'm all alone. All...alone. And Rion never existed. And all I have to face for the rest of my life is waiting for Foster to come...to come back..."

The tears and the horrors that had never been completely erased now all came back to her. Chloe tightened her grip, closed her eyes, and forcibly willed her healing gift into the woman unraveling before her. As quickly as Annie had begun to lose her grip on her emotions, she was able to shake off the terrors like shredded tissue.

"Let's get out of here," Annie whispered, suddenly aware of the other patrons in the shop. Chloe nodded and, keeping a firm hand on her arm, helped her outside. The fresh air and sunshine helped to clear her mind.

"I think...I think I need something to keep me focused." Annie laughed shakily.

Suddenly, without warning, Chloe slapped her hard across the upper arm. Annie winced and gasped from the pain. She glanced at the red welt rising on her skin. Giving Chloe a puzzled look, she asked, "Why did you hit me?"

"Focus," the angel woman replied curtly. "The answer to pain is reality. You are not in Montana. You are here. Foster no longer exists. He can no longer hurt you. Your life is no longer one of betrayal and loneliness and hardship, and one day you will finally be able to accept that. And when you do, the nightmares will stop." Immediately the physician's tone of voice softened. "But you have also had to accept as truth a very different life. A new world. A husband different from anything or anyone you have ever known. To be honest, Annie, I do not know if I would have been able to cope with what you have had to adjust to if I had been in your place." She glanced up at the suns arched overhead, then back to her friend. "We have been blessed, Annie. Like you, I am in love with a gentle and caring man, and I want to look as beautiful as I feel today. We came here to find us gowns for an Honorum, and perhaps ones which will put some fire back into our lovers' eyes. Are you ready now to see what you can do to lift Rion's libido?"

Annie gave her an amused grin. "Trust me. There isn't a thing wrong with Rion's libido," she answered her, "but it'll be interesting to see if such a thing is possible."

Chloe laughed and led the way to her favorite dress shop.

Chapter 5

The Image

Like so many of the other shops, there was not much difference between this building and the others around it, except for the fact that the sign fastened over the door bore a picture of a gown. Chloe led Annie inside. Across the room a man stood behind a counter. Bolts of material were splayed over the countertop in front of him.

“Bonjour!” he called out.

“Coranum! Can you assist us in finding suitable gowns for an Honorum?” Chloe inquired.

“Indeed,” the man replied, shifting languages. He walked around the counter toward them when he stopped to stare at Annie. Seeing the man’s reaction, Chloe made the introductions.

“Coranum, have you met Lady Annie, Lord Rion’s wife? Annie, this is Coranum. He is a creator, and in my opinion his taste in styles is probably the best there is.”

Annie managed a smile, although it would take a while for her to get used to the stares she still evoked whenever she left her home. “Good day, Coranum. I’m pleased to meet you.”

The male angel’s face erupted into a huge smile. “Lady Annie? My shop is blessed! Thank you for coming! Thank you!” He stopped to think. “The Honorum for your husband, right? Yes, I think we can find you both the perfect gown. Come. Come back into my dressing room. We will get started on what you are looking for, and if we do not have anything you prefer at this time, I promise I can have it ready for you in time for the event.”

He gestured at them, and they followed him into a large, circular room lined with mirrorlike crystalline sheets. A half-dozen backless chairs sat to one side near a low table. Inviting them to each take a seat, the creator disappeared behind one of the sheets, reemerging moments later with a small box. He placed the box on the table, opening it to pull out paper and pen and, to Annie's amazement, a measuring tape.

"Lady Annie, if you do not mind, please stand here."

Giving Chloe a quizzical glance, Annie stood and walked over to the center of the room. Coranum quickly took several measurements, jotting down numbers on paper. During all this, a woman entered from behind another panel. She bore a tray with a pot and several cups, which she placed on the low table before discreetly leaving.

"Lady Annie, may I say your coloring is the most..."

"Unusual?" Annie offered.

Coranum smiled. "Unusual, yes. Although I was prepared to say unique." He stared. "You have green eyes."

"Yep. Erin green. My grandpapa had the same color eyes."

"How exquisite."

Despite the man's flattery, Annie was beginning to feel confident that the angel knew what he was doing. Every now and then he would comment about a color or style that would or would not do her justice, and she believed him.

"Lord Rion's uniform, it is black on black with the tunic, am I right?"

Annie nodded.

"And you, with your pure alabaster coloring and black hair and green eyes, all you will need is a gown that will emphasize that coloring without making you disappear or look washed out when you stand next to him." Stepping back, the man studied her intently. "I believe I have something already that may work." Looking

over at Chloe, he asked her, "Will you be wanting a gown in your house?"

The physician shook her head. "No, Coranum. Not this time. I am with Vadon now."

"Vadon!" The creator brightened. "Oh, my! Then you will need something to go with his white on white." He hurried out of the room, leaving the two women finally alone.

Annie grinned. "You're 'with Vadon now'? Does this mean what I think it means?"

Chloe paused, but the blush rising into her cheeks betrayed her. Laughing out loud, Annie ran over to give the woman a hug. "When?" she whispered, almost nose to nose.

"Soon. We will announce soon. Please, Annie, keep this between us for now."

"I promise." She giggled and gave the woman another hug.

Moments later the creator reentered the room, several gowns in his arms. He began to lay them out across the floor for the women to examine. Annie was particularly drawn to a pale gold dress that was almost a match to Rion's coloring, until Coranum walked over to her with a gown draped over one arm.

"Lady Annie, with a few little adjustments, this gown, I believe, is the one that would do the most justice to your beauty." He held it up for her.

At first it was difficult to tell what color the gown was. It shimmered a deep blue so intense it seemed to be silver one moment and icy black the next. The creator showed her to a small alcove directly across from them where she could change. Wordlessly, Annie complied.

The gown felt like cool water sliding over her skin. It clung to her body, and the woman staring back at her in the crystalline wall was not the woman she had known back in Montana. Holding her breath, she stepped back into the circular room to get their opinions.

Chloe was examining a pearl white gown when Annie reentered. Both angels looked up and literally gasped.

"Sweetest heavens, Annie, you are *beautiful*!" The physician smiled.

"It looks all right on me?" she questioned.

Taking her by the shoulders, Coranum turned her around so she could see her reflection. "The coloring is perfect. And so is the vision of the woman wearing it," he whispered in her ear.

The sleeveless gown outlined every curve, every roundness, leaving absolutely nothing to the imagination. The neckline plunged downward to hang in soft, draped folds over the swells of her breasts. When she moved, the dress sparkled in the light as if it contained a thousand jewels. Annie liked the way it felt on her. The material was soft and sensuous to the touch.

Turning around, she glanced over her shoulder to see how low the back went, knowing the dress was made for a winged woman, when the sight of her skin made her blanch. She felt tears sting her eyes as she looked back at the couple watching her.

"I-I'm sorry. I love the dress, but..." She made a gesture toward her back. "Do you have anything else? Or can you make another one like this, but with the back covered?"

Chloe looked confused. "Why, Annie? The dress is perfect for you!"

"Yes, but...oh, Chloe, I can't. My back," she finished in a soft voice.

Walking up to her, the physician placed her hands on the woman's shoulders so they both were in the mirror's reflection. "What about your back?"

"It's...all those scars. They're so ugly."

"Does Rion think your scars are ugly?" Chloe asked her.

Annie shook her head. "No, but—"

"But what? Are you worried what others will think when they see them?"

At Annie's nod, Chloe laid her cheek against her friend's. "Annie, what makes you think everyone does not already know how you got them?"

The color drained from her cheeks. "Oh, Chloe, no!"

The woman angel was quick to reassure her. "No, neither I nor Mannion said anything. I promise you. What we saw, what we did to heal you on that day stays with us and only us. But you have to remember how many people saw you when you first arrived. They saw you covered in blood, bearing all the marks of the beatings you took. Yet you fought to be with your husband. You fought to stay with him, although you were nearly as gravely injured. To us, Annie, these scars are your badges of courage and strength. They are a testament of your love for Rion and for Kerr. You should bear them proudly. Never, never be ashamed of how you got them."

"Do you think this dress is really the right one?"

Laughing, Chloe ran her hands down the woman's arms. "How do you see yourself, Annie?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, when you look at your reflection, who looks back at you? Describe her for me."

Annie made a face. "I see me. Not as flat in the chest as I used to be, thanks to having a baby. A bit bigger in the hips, *no* thanks to having a baby. Same black hair, although it's a lot longer now because Rion refuses to let me cut it. And there's nothing that can be done about my freckles. Why? Is that enough description?"

"Do you want me to tell you what I see? And what others see?"

"I know what Rion tells me, but he loves me. That tends to color anyone's judgment, in my opinion. Even yours."

Chloe shook her head. "Trust that I will tell you the truth. When you first arrived on our world you were thin and impossibly fragile. Your bones jutted out in places, and I cried to think of how your life must have been."

“Chloe—”

“Hush. Let me continue. Love has changed you. Rion has changed you. Kerr has changed you. Your skin is soft, and you glow. You are no longer pale and colorless. You walk into a room and you are like a candle, bringing light and warmth with you. That is why people stare at you.” She touched the woman’s hair. “You have become a woman. You have a woman’s hips, a woman’s breasts, a woman’s body. Your hair is like a mantle of night. Your eyes are this incredible green, unlike those of anyone else. When you wear this dress, every man at the gala will look at you and their hearts will fall at your feet. They will envy Rion, knowing he is the man you have given yourself to, and knowing he is the man who has made you like this. And they will know he will get to take you home and make love to you that night, and every night thereafter. And Rion...Rion will fall in love with you all over again. I promise.”

Annie reached up to give her hand a squeeze. “You’re not just saying these things to me because you’re my dearest friend, are you?”

“I have never lied to you,” Chloe said.

Annie kissed her cheek. “Very well. I’ll take the dress. What do I do now?”

Coranum walked up behind them. Although he had heard their exchange, he made no mention of it. “There are a few places where I want to take it in so the gown more closely follows your figure. If you will allow me to take a few more measurements.”

Chloe stepped back so the man could make a few adjustments, noting them on his paper. When he had finished, he smiled. “That should do it. If you will, Lady Annie, remove the gown so it can be made ready for you. I promise to have it delivered tomorrow.”

“That’ll be fine,” she told him.

Quickly she went back into the dressing room to change back into her own dress. When she returned to the outer room, the

woman who had served them was there with a portfolio and a voucher. Annie raised an eyebrow. "Chloe, how much are they charging me for the gown?"

The physician glanced over at the paper. "One hundred eighty-four marks."

"Is that expensive?"

"It is... a large sum."

"Think Rion will object to me spending that much?"

Chloe grinned. "Not in the least, especially after he sees you in it."

"That's good enough for me." She signed the voucher and sat down to wait on Chloe to make her purchase, pouring herself a cup of what she thought of as tea on this world.

The angel woman was quicker to make her decision, going with the pearl gray gown with the short train. Coranum also made notes to tailor it to her specifications. Once it was also paid for, the two women left the shop.

"I hope I don't regret my choice," Annie confided, glancing back at the shop.

"I cannot imagine you wearing anything else," Chloe assured her.

"So, is there anything else I'm going to need? A hat? Some gloves? How 'bout a stick to beat off the competition?"

Chloe burst out laughing. "A stick? Why? You are unpredictable! What do you say we go looking for footstraps to match our gowns?"

"Foot-what?"

The physician led her to a shop over on the next street where the sandal decorations were sold. It was while they were there that a courier angel found them and let Annie know she was needed at home for her son's feeding—or would she rather have him brought to her? It only took a second for Annie to make her decision. "Have him brought to me," she said.

"This must be a first," Chloe commented as the courier took off.

"What do you mean?"

"You are actually willing to stay in town and do more shopping, rather than retreat back home. What has changed your attitude?"

Annie shrugged. "Maybe I'm seeing myself through different eyes. For some reason the funny looks and the stares aren't bothering me like they usually do."

"I am glad to hear that. So, do you think the black ones will work? Or what about these sapphire ones?"

They only had to wait a short while once they had finished their second purchase for the courier to return with Kerr wrapped in a quilt Annie had sewn for him. There was also a note from her husband.

I am delighted to know you feel comfortable enough to stay in town. I have gone to work. I will see you tonight. Early. You are my heart. Rion

"Come," Chloe told her. "We can have something to eat while you nurse Kerr."

She led them to an eatery that served full meals, and the waiter seated them in a booth in the back. By the time he drew the curtains for privacy, the baby was growing fussy from hunger. Annie soothed him with soft, shushing noises, and gave him her breast. She watched as he calmed down, clutching a strand of her hair that had come loose from the braid. Chloe ordered for them both.

"He looks so much like Rion."

"Yes, and he has a lot of his father's temperament as well," Annie smiled. "The apple didn't fall far from the tree."

"Ap— what?"

Annie laughed. "Never mind. I want to thank you, Chloe, for all you've done. You've made today a good day for me. You've

helped. But something...there's something I hope you don't mind me asking."

"What?"

"Why do you spend so much of your free time with me? What about your other friends?" She knew the angel woman was an only child. It must have been lonely having to grow up without the companionship of siblings.

"I spend time with them when I can." The woman traced an imaginary line along the table. "I think you have changed me, Annie. I used to think my work was my world. My friends, those I called my friends, their lives revolved around things I no longer consider important. But being with Vadon, and getting to know Rion and you, and the sacrifices you both have made, it has enlightened me in many ways." She gave a gentle smile. "All you ever ask of life is to be happy. You never cared for riches or material things. You live each day as if it is a blessing. I found I want the same. Vadon has helped me find that kind of happiness. Rion has taught me much about patience and dedication. And you, every time I am with you I find something else to inspire me. Given the choice between spending my precious free moments with those friends I no longer have anything in common with, or with you, I would much rather enjoy your companionship."

An angel approached their enclosed cubicle with drinks. Annie shielded Kerr with her hand until the waitress had left. Several minutes passed in comfortable silence. As Annie switched her son to her other breast, she nuzzled his soft cheek and kissed him on the forehead.

"Chloe," she asked in a soft voice, "do you think I'll ever be able to get pregnant again?"

"When your body is ready, you will."

"Yes, but will I? Really? I mean, Kerr was a difficult birth. What if something inside of me got damaged or something, and Kerr is all I'll be able to give Rion?"

"I am only a physician. I work miracles of healing. I have no way of knowing if you will or will not ever conceive again. Only time will tell. Have you spoken to Rion about this?"

Annie nodded. "Yes. He wants more children. So do I. But each month when I get my period..." She paused then gave a lopsided grin. "Listen to me. Here I've already given Rion his heir, and now I'm lamenting over not getting to wash out any more dirty diapers."

Chloe laughed and reached over to pat her shoulder. "You have such a way at looking at life, Annie. Take each day as it comes, just as you have in the past. And, like I said, when your womb is ready to cradle a new life, it will."

"It should be interesting," Annie added.

"Interesting? How?"

"To see if you and Vadon get married before I get pregnant again. Wanna make a wager over who'll be first?"

When Chloe's eyes widened at the thought, Annie waggled her eyebrows at the woman angel and laughed happily. It proved to be a very good day, indeed.

Chapter 6

The Rival

The gown was delivered the next morning as promised, after Rion had left for work. Annie hung it, still encased in its protective wrapper, in her closet. The Honorum was to be that evening, at the rising of the second moon. Because she had no idea how long the event would last, she decided to spend as much time as she could resting.

First, however, she washed her thick hair and tied it in leftover strips of cloth from her sewing basket, letting the strands air dry in the warm breezes which passed through the house. One of the things she found she had missed from her world was her needlework, particularly her quilting. Somewhere Rion had found a merchant who sent her a package of scraps, and she had immediately set out to make little tunics and leggings for her new son, including a quilt and coverlet for his bed. Every so often another package of fabrics would appear at her doorway, and the variety of strange and unusual materials would challenge her to come up with new ideas.

Having made sure Kerr had nursed until his little belly would pop, Annie had rocked him to sleep, singing softly to him while she waited for Rion. Once the baby was safe in his cradle, she took a quick, cool bath, making sure her dried hair didn't lose its curl.

Rion was home when she stepped out.

"Come back inside with me," he murmured against her mouth. He'd shed his clothing but was too late to join her. Pulling her tight against his naked body, she was tempted to take him up on his unspoken offer, but managed to resist.

Annie laughed. "I can't! It took all day for my hair to dry. If I get back in with you all that will be wasted."

Her husband gave her a playfully petulant look but relented and took a quick shower by himself. Annie took the time to apply the small amount of cosmetics Chloe had given her. That done, she removed the strips of cloth from her hair, carefully uncurling the long locks and combing them loose with her fingers.

From beneath her dark lashes she watched as her husband got dressed. The black pants were cut close to the skin, emphasizing his long legs and muscled calves and thighs. Not to mention his absolutely cute posterior. From where she sat, she could see his relaxed penis outlined through the thin but sturdy material. The sight of it reminded her of the first time she had studied it, back in that tiny cabin in Montana. Rion had been unconscious and severely wounded. As she had cleansed the mud and grime off of him before dressing the ugly puncture near his hip, she had wondered if most men were that size or if its thickness and length were a deformity.

Annie smiled to herself. Rion was only the second man she had ever made love to. Her first husband could not compare, even when his had been fully extended. If Rion was deformed, who did she have to thank for it?

Like the pants, the black, long-sleeved shirt also draped across his well-developed shoulders and arms like a second skin. Once he slipped on the gray-black tunic, Annie felt a little thrill go through her. She'd never seen him wearing his uniform before, at least not this one, the official one, the one used strictly for ceremonial purposes. Fortunately for them both, the tunic ended at mid-thigh, affording him some small amount of privacy if one thing managed to lead to another tonight. Just the thought was enough to make Annie bite her lower lip and smile again.

Once he had brushed and pulled back his long amber-gold hair to clip it with a large black enameled hasp-and-jeweled pin, she wondered how she could not have seen how magnificently hand-

some he was the first time she'd set eyes on him. Of course, he had been covered in a ton of mud, leaves, and blood after his fall through the woods.

"Will you be much longer?" he asked her, a mischievous smile dancing around his lips. Annie shook her head. "Good. I will check to see if Vadon and Chloe have arrived." He lightly brushed his lips across hers before leaving the bedroom. Annie shivered from his touch. She could tell it was going to be a very interesting night. Already she was craving him after seeing him dressed in the colors and symbol of his house. She knew she was a sucker for a man in uniform and knowing that Rion was hers and hers alone just got her pulse to pounding a little bit faster. She hoped he wouldn't be disappointed in her choice.

With Coranum's alterations the gown fit like it had been poured over her. Annie took a deep breath and watched as her breasts lifted from the neckline, the tops of the creamy globes peeking out from beneath the soft folds. The cut was low and dramatic and definitely sexy. She would have to be careful about bending over, or else the fabric could slip and she would end up showing more than she should.

The back of the dress dipped to her buttocks then curved around them. The flow of the material over her slightly rounded belly and hips and thighs was like midnight-colored milk.

Hurrying, she took out the footstraps from their box and slipped them on her feet. Unlike sandals with soles, they were basically jewelry—two strands of dark blue sapphires circled her ankles before arching over the tops of her feet, to be anchored at a ring on her second toe. Other than them, Annie chose not to wear any other jewelry. No necklace, bracelets, or hair clasps.

Walking over to the mirror, she stared at herself. A stranger stared back at her. The woman in the mirror could not be her. The woman in the mirror was incredibly beautiful. Her hair flowed in waves and ringlets over her arms and back, curling endlessly over

and down past her breasts, like thick black streams of smoke. Her emerald green eyes, lined by long black lashes, looked huge. Her lips were a deep rose color. And her body...in this gown...

When you wear this dress, every man at the gala will look at you and their hearts will fall at your feet. They will envy Rion, knowing he is the man you have given yourself to, and knowing he is the man who has made you like this. And they will know he will get to take you home and make love to you that night, and every night thereafter. And Rion...Rion will fall in love with you all over again. I promise.

"I hope so," she whispered. Her hands felt sweaty, and she wiped them on the bedcovers. Nervously, Annie walked out of the bedroom and into the living room where the others were waiting for her.

It was Vadon who spotted her first. "By all that is holy," he said, unable to take his eyes off her.

Chloe smiled and nodded. She had known.

Rion had his back to her. As he turned around, Annie got to see his reaction. She could swear she heard him gasp.

"Well, I'm ready," she told them, somehow managing a timid smile.

"Annie." He made her name sound like a prayer. Walking over to her, he hesitated to touch her, until she laid a hand on his chest.

"Who would have known that the bloody angel I found lying underneath that pile of brush could look as handsome as you do now?" She smiled at him.

Rion reached down to gather her in his arms, pulling her up into his embrace as he kissed her with a passion that nearly left her faint. His hand at the small of her back branded her with its heat. The hand holding the back of her head kept her prisoner to the demands of his mouth, until low, soft moans escaped from deep within her. It was too much and too promising and her nerves were already on edge from the upcoming Honorum.

"Rion, we'll be late," she managed to murmur, breaking reluctantly away from the persuasive power of his lips.

"They can wait," he replied, seeking her neck. "You are...so...breathtaking."

"Later, my beloved," she told him. Taking his face in her hands, she wanted to lose herself in his Montana sky blue eyes, and in the delicious exhilaration of his lovemaking. But that would have to wait until later. But until then, she breathed in his ear, they could fantasize with each other, making pretend love throughout the evening, and that would allow their waiting to be almost like foreplay. Then, when they got home, they could take the rest of the night to recreate those fantasies as far and as often as their bodies would allow.

"Is Michi here yet?"

"In Kerr's room," he murmured. Michi had arrived by the setting of the second sun, as she'd promised. The young angel was the daughter of one of the council members, who was also one of Rion's rare close friends. The few times Rion had been able to coerce Annie into going into town in the evening and leaving Kerr behind, Michi had babysat for them. The young woman was intelligent and hoping for a career in teaching.

Kissing the bridge of her nose, Rion whispered he was holding her to her promise of what the later hours could bring, but he never released her. Instead, he strode outside onto the platform with her still in his arms. Spreading his wings, he launched them into the bright one-moon night with Vadon and Chloe close behind them.

Below, Annie could see the shadows and glints of lantern light that were other angels flying to and from wherever they were heading. Rion held her tightly to him, at one time dipping his face to nuzzle the velvet valley between her breasts.

"It's going to be a long night," she said in his ear. Again, she could feel her body responding to his touch. She knew that all she had to do was to say the word and he would sweep her away and

make love to her in the deepest part of the moonlight. The thought was intoxicating, yet she fought the urge. The waiting would be their aphrodisiac.

He gave her a shadowed look and then kissed the hollow of her throat.

“No fair,” she protested weakly. “You have access to me, but I can’t reciprocate.”

“You can reciprocate until the morning,” he promised. “I am speechless after seeing you like this.”

“Chloe told me this gown was expensive. I hoped you wouldn’t get angry with me for going ahead and getting it.”

“If every gown you bought cost as much, and made you look this way, I would let you get a hundred of them.”

She smiled and leaned up to kiss his cheek. Behind them, in the downward sweep of Rion’s powerful wings, she could see Vadon and Chloe not far behind. Vadon carried the lantern that signaled their flight path to others.

The Honorum was taking place at the Council Cathedral, a multitiered structure with numerous towers of cloudy green, jade-like glass. The main hall, with its many platforms, was lit with what seemed like a thousand torches. There was no electricity on this world, Annie had quickly discovered, but the systems of lights they used—torches, candles, and lanterns—were often more than adequate. The platform Rion led them to was already filling with others arriving. To the far side Annie could see traps arriving, bearing some of the older council members and their spouses.

Once they were firmly grounded, Rion reluctantly placed her on her feet. “Nervous?” He smiled at her as she tidied her gown and hair. She nodded, not trusting her voice. Lacing his fingers through hers, he led her into the main hall and into the brightly lit interior. This would be her second trial by fire. Not since her first one, when the council had forced Rion to prove Annie’s worth in being

among them, had she been faced with having to be among so many prestigious members.

As he guided her through the gathered assembly of uniforms and robes of honor, Annie was acutely aware of them turning to stare at her. She glanced up at her husband, who simply squeezed her hand and kept walking.

Presently they reached the main room with its enormous vaulted ceiling. Annie stared up at the carved statues and stained glass windows in awe. She had never seen such beautiful scrollwork in all her life. And to think this is where Rion went to work every day. Why hadn't he told her how incredible it was?

"Lord Rion, Lady Annie." An elegantly dressed man approached them. Annie vaguely remembered him as one who had been among those council members who had tested her when she'd first arrived.

Rion nodded, letting go of her hand but placing his palm at the small of her back. His fingers gently brushed her bared skin, yet the gesture, while intimate, was also very obvious.

"Councilman Dimarkus. Annie, this is Councilman Dimarkus. You might recall him."

Annie managed a shy but warm smile and held out her hand. "You're the one who wanted to know what my name was," she told the older angel.

Dimarkus smiled in return, taking her hand to bow over it. "It is Annabel Lee, but your friends call you Annie. May I call you Annie?"

"Yes, as long as you don't ever have second thoughts again about sending me back," she replied, half in jest and half seriously. She added an upraised eyebrow to emphasize her point. The Councilman chuckled.

"Banish that thought from your mind, Annie. You have proven yourself time and again. If ever a woman was worthy of being the wife of a Lord of the House of Thunder, you are. Rion, have you

forgotten your ill-trained manners? You have yet to get her anything to drink. Annie, have you had any of our slightly intoxicating beverages?"

She shook her head, aware for the first time how her long, curled hair swayed down her back as well as over her breasts.

"I will be right back," Rion told her. He smiled at the Councilman. "Enjoy the moment, Dimarkus, but remember she is with me." Annie watched her husband stride over to one of the long tables scattered throughout the giant hall.

"How do you like our world, Annie?" Dimarkus asked, seeing her expression as she gazed about.

"I see something new every day," she replied, sweeping her arm outward to emphasize their surrounding, "but this...this place is *huge*! And all that artwork, the statues and the glasswork. I never dreamed a place like this existed. It's too beautiful for words."

"As are you," Dimarkus complimented her. "If I were but fifty festivals younger." He sighed loudly. "It is quite ironic that Rion would find someone such as you, when we all had given up hope his lineage would survive."

Annie looked at the older man. "Were you once a warrior?"

Dimarkus nodded. "I am still a warrior, although I turned my lordly title over to my son a few years ago."

"I'm sorry. Forgive me. I-I'm still learning the ins and outs of titles and whatnot." She blushed. The Councilman hurried to reassure her.

"Quite understandable. And never apologize for trying to learn. Sometimes I still manage to blunder."

Rion reentered the conversation bearing two glasses of a rose-colored liquid. He handed one to his wife. "This is silinn. It is an intoxicant, but mild. Made from sili berries. Remember when I first brought you some?"

Annie nodded. She remembered. The grapelike fruit ranged in taste from lip-puckering tart to sugary sweet, depending on when they were picked.

* * * *

"What are these again?" she asked her husband. He had come home early from work. The days were hot, with little chance for a storm developing. When he'd entered the kitchen where she was trying her hand at making dinner, Rion had come up behind her and dumped a small bag of berries on the counter in front of her before wrapping his arms around her waist and kissing the side of her neck and shoulder. Over the past few weeks she'd gotten quite adept at preparing their strange and slightly exotic food.

"Sili berries. Try one."

"The red ones or the pink ones?" she asked, opening the bag further. "Where did you get these?"

"I had to run an errand at the market and saw them at one of the stalls. Vadon and I used to beg Emelie to make sili tarts."

He reached out to pick a dark red, oval-shaped fruit from its stem, and then held it up to her lips. Annie was very aware that his other hand had shifted upward to cup her breast, sending the heat of his hand through the thin fabric. She opened her mouth and let him feed her. She teased him by tonguing his fingers. Rion responded by cupping her other breast as well and gently nibbled her ear.

The fruit was incredibly sweet. Pungent. Definitely unlike anything she'd ever eaten.

"You like?" he breathed against the skin under her ear. His thumbs were playfully teasing her nipples, making them grow taut. She shivered as she felt his lips on the back of her neck.

Annie nodded, knowing he meant the berries and not his foreplay, although his hands were making it hard to keep focused on dinner preparations. "Are they seasonal?"

"Are they what?" Now his hands were gently massaging her breasts. She tried not to moan in response.

"You know, seasonal. They only grow during certain parts of the year. They're not available year-round."

"Yes. Their growing season is short. Would you like another?"

"If you want me to try making tarts, we'll need to save the rest of them," she admonished him. To her surprise Rion plucked another one, but this time he turned her around and lifted her up to sit on the edge of the counter, facing him. Lowering the straps on her gown, he squashed the soft, ripe berry over her breast. As the juice ran down over her nipple, he proceeded to lick away the sweetness with long, slow, deliberate motions of his tongue.

Annie groaned and entwined her fingers in his hair. His mouth worked magic with her body. It was only a matter of moments before she felt him pull up the edges of her skirt to wrap her legs about his waist. He entered her, his hands cupping her buttocks as he began to make love to her, his mouth and tongue having her for dessert as he laid her back across the counter.

The berries he'd brought to her that day never made it into tarts.

* * * *

Annie blinked. From the look on Rion's face she knew he also was remembering that hot afternoon in the kitchen. She realized he was already making love to her in his mind, using their memories to excite her as well, just as she'd promised him before they'd left home. In response, she felt her body tighten with anticipation.

She took a sip of the drink to find it sweet, but with an unusual aftertaste. "Are you planning on getting me drunk tonight, husband?" She smiled puckishly at him.

"I plan on many things, dear wife," he replied, taking her hand. Rion excused them and they left the Councilman so he could introduce her to other members of the council.

Annie tried to remember all the faces of the people she met, but she never did have a good memory for names. A few of them she recalled from past encounters. For them all she tried to be the elegant lady of title and hoped Rion would not find fault with her

manners. It was difficult, considering she'd never had to be the kind of person she now was. To her, she was and always would be the earthy farm girl who could milk a cow, chop firewood, and sew together a wound as easily as stitching a seam.

There had to be over three hundred people here. All of them were gowned or draped or uniformed. Three hundred titled people, important people, and some of the women were stunning beyond compare. Sipping her second drink, Annie watched her husband conversing with another couple a few feet away. Already the silinn was racing through her blood, making the room seem warm and slightly off-kilter.

She lowered her eyes to his waist, undressing him in her mind, and envisioning the wide, rippling muscles in his arms, his chest, and his thighs. She remembered how his buttocks would quiver under her palms as her hands followed his movements. She knew the length and breadth of his manhood, and how he could take her in countless ways, and she wondered how much more of the intoxicant she could take before she let her defenses drop. There were enough little alcoves and hideaways tucked into the remote recesses of the room to allow for some serious hanky-panky, and all she would have to do is whisper something unexpectedly naughty in his ear to get his full attention.

Taking another sip, she felt her own moistness between her legs. There was still the dinner to come and the presentation. No telling how long that would take. Would one of these affairs last until dawn?

She groaned softly. It was going to be agony for them both.

"Annie?"

She looked up to see Chloe walking over to her. She looked around for Vadon, to no avail.

Sensing her question, the physician smiled. "He is over by the buffet table talking messenger business with his fellow workers,"

she told her. She leaned closer. "What is going on between you and Rion?" she whispered.

"Why do you ask?" Annie smiled in return.

Chloe tapped the glass in her hand. "Is that silinn?"

"He said it was a mild intoxicant."

"It is," Chloe nodded, "but your system is a little different from ours. He may be getting you drunk on purpose."

"Fine by me." Annie giggled.

Chloe's eyes widened. "How long do you think it will be before one of you caves in?"

"I don't know, and, honestly, I don't care." Annie shook her head slowly. "But the suspense is going to make it all worthwhile. I have never felt so sexy in all my life. You were right, Chloe. I think he's falling in love with me all over again." She gave her friend a warm smile. "I'm sorry. I meant to tell you earlier, back at the house, but you are very, very beautiful tonight."

"Thank you. Vadon loves the dress, but I think you may have made him jealous."

Annie gave her a puzzled look. "Jealous? Vadon?"

Chloe motioned toward the others in the room around them. "Not to mention a dozen of Rion's coworkers. Do you realize that with you two making love with your eyes and gestures and secretive smiles, you are creating quite a commotion?"

"I don't understand."

"Your skin is flushed. Your eyes are bright. You are literally radiating heat. I would not be surprised to hear that more than one man tonight would give his soul to trade places with Rion for a night with you."

Annie softly laughed. "You're exaggerating."

"No," Chloe whispered. "I am not."

"Chloe?" Rion had come up to them, taking the physician's hand to kiss the palm. "How is it going for you?"

"I am doing very well, thank you. But you need to watch Annie to make sure she has no adverse reaction to the silinn." Leaning closer, she added, "The night still has a ways to go. Are you two going to make it?"

Rion chuckled throatily. "That is questionable. Why do you ask?"

"Some are already placing their bets."

Throwing back his head, Rion laughed aloud, causing several to turn and stare in surprise. Even Vadon had to join them to find out what had brought about his reaction.

"What have you done to my brother?" he teased Annie.

She shrugged and pointed to Chloe. "It's her fault this time, not mine. I didn't do anything except stand here like a good girl and drink this raspberry-tasting stuff. Why? Did we have another un-Rion episode?"

Instead of answering her, Vadon turned to his brother. "I do not know or understand what Annie has done to change you, but I am beginning to be frightened of the power she holds over you," he commented with a grin.

Rion laid a hand on the younger man's shoulder. "I have yet to understand it myself, little brother. But whatever her power is, I pray I remain enthralled for the rest of my life."

Their little group was interrupted by an elder Councilman named Huron. "Lord Rion, the council wants to have a few words with you before the ceremony begins."

Rion turned to Annie. "Will you be all right while I am away?" She nodded, and he followed the Councilman to another part of the hall. Annie watched him go, heaving a deep sigh.

Vadon grabbed Chloe's hand as he spotted someone he wanted to introduce her to. They left, leaving her completely alone.

Noticing the drink in her hand was almost gone, Annie went in search of the buffet table. She found it without trouble, but the

array of dishes on it were as strange to her as they were tempting. She was debating whether to try one of the delicacies when she felt someone come up behind her.

“May I?” a deep voice inquired.

She looked up to see a warrior standing only a few feet away. He was tall and heavily muscled like Rion. His brown-black hair and wings were a startling contrast to his solid black uniform and tunic.

“You are Lady Annie.”

She noticed he had dark brown eyes. “Yes. And you are...”

The warrior took her hand and bowed over it. “Lord Byric.”

Annie started. Where had she heard that name before?

“Preparations are being finished now. Byric will take you back to where you came from at the next storm. The council has spoken. The council’s word is final.”

He was the one mentioned by the council, but she had never met the man until now. Gracing him with a warm smile, Annie nodded. “I am pleased to meet you. What did you say earlier?”

Byric motioned at the table. “You were looking confused. I take it there is still a lot about our world that bewilders you.”

She chuckled softly. “Oh, boy, you could say that again. Just when I think I know what something is, another version of it comes along, and I’m back to square one.” At Byric’s questioning look, she waved off her comment. “Never mind. I was just curious as to what all this stuff is.”

“May I?” the warrior inquired. At her nod, he reached over the table to spear a slice of something totally alien to her. He held it out to her, and their fingers touched when she took the miniature fork from him. She was aware of him watching her intently as she tasted it.

“Mmm. Not bad. A bit on the spicy side, though.”

“You do not like spicy?”

“Oh, I like it, but it doesn’t like me. This is fine, though. What is it?”

“Tip of tarell. Braised, not smoked. Personally, I do not care for the smoked. Would you like your drink refreshed?”

She handed him her glass. “Thank you.”

“What are you drinking?” He took a tentative sniff. “Silinn?”

At her nod, he excused himself and left. Annie amused herself by trying some more of what was on the table, one small nibble at a time. Presently Byric returned with a fresh glass. Annie thanked him.

“My pleasure. I have been wanting to make your acquaintance all evening. You are, in a word, extraordinary.”

Annie lifted an eyebrow, surprised by his remark. Was this man trying to flirt with her? The thought made her blush. She remembered what Chloe had warned her about, but to actually have it happen...

“I had no idea the other world had women such as yourself,” Byric continued, unaware of what she was thinking.

Now the man appeared to be gushing and that was enough to make her feel uncomfortable. Compliments were one thing, but to have a total stranger act like he was coming on to her was another. The last thing Annie wanted to do was to appear interested in his offer, or to make him think she was even tempted. Quickly, she tried to change the topic.

“Have you been on many missions, Lord Byric?”

“Please. Call me Byric. Yes. I just returned not two days ago from my twenty-eighth pathway.”

“Wow,” Annie breathed over her glass. “Twenty-eight. And how many of those were ones?”

Byric started. “Missions classified as a one are rare, but when they occur, the council has only those warriors they feel capable of accomplishing them draw lots.”

“So, I take it you’ve never been on a one mission?”

"I expect to take that numbered pathway soon."

Annie nodded, sipping her drink. Rion had gone on six missions, only six—seven if she counted his going back to get her and bring her to his world—but all of them had been ones. All of them. And he had not given the council the chance to draw from the lottery.

Her eyes swept the room as Byric continued to talk about the places on her world he had visited when she spotted her husband near one of the exits to the great hall. He was speaking to one other person, a woman. Annie froze.

A breathtakingly beautiful woman.

Annie felt her breath catch in her throat as her eyes locked on the woman angel's perfect body and face. Her gown was like snow, all white and semitransparent enough to see the creamy shape of her thighs and full breasts beneath the material. Her hair was the same shade of white, and she wore it swept up, with cascading ringlets over her cheeks and down the sides of her neck. Annie paused, unable to tear her eyes away from the flawless skin and delicate features.

"Byric?"

The warrior paused in his discourse. "Yes?"

She nodded toward the couple. "Who is she?"

The warrior glanced up, and then smiled. "You mean the one speaking to Lord Rion?"

"Yes. Her. The pretty one in the white gown."

"That is Anitra. You mean Rion has never spoken of her?"

Annie gave him a cautious glance. Something in the man's tone of voice immediately put her on the defensive. "No. Why would he?"

The warrior gave her a sympathetic smile. "Forgive me. I thought you already knew about her. Lordess Anitra and Lord Rion lived together for almost nineteen lunar cycles. Lord Rion was going to say his vows with her until he met you."

Annie could feel the blood rushing from her face. Nineteen lunar cycles? That was more than a year and a half on her world. Suddenly all the subtle foreplay she and Rion had been teasing each other with vanished into a cold void. Duplicity reared its ugly head.

When they had been on Earth, Rion had told her that women shunned him. That there was no one back on his world he cared about. Why had he lied to her? Because he believed she'd never find out?

Anitra laughed at one of Rion's comments. Her voice was low, sultry, the voice of a movie queen or siren. The sound of it sent a spear of pain through Annie's heart.

How could any man resist this woman's allure? How could anyone not see how this woman looked and carried herself? Even her sparkling white wings looked as though they'd been shaped by a master sculptor, carved from the purest white marble. There was not a flaw anywhere on her.

Worse, watching them together, Annie couldn't deny how perfectly matched the two were—Anitra with her ethereal, almost pearl-like beauty, and Rion with his dark blond, aged gold masculinity. They were a couple who literally epitomized the ultimate standards Annie was certain every angel wished to accomplish.

The perfect couple. An elegant, handsome lord and his exquisite lady. No, wait. A phrase came back to her. *Lordess Anitra.* She was a Lordess?

"Byric, what house does Anitra belong to?"

"She is of the House of Law."

"In other words, she's a council member?"

"Yes. She is a member of the council."

Annie swallowed hard. She wanted to ask, needed to ask, although deep down she already knew the answer. Still... "Byric, was Anitra one of the members who voted to have me returned to my world?" Behind her she could hear the warrior sigh. She turned

around to see him watching the interplay between Rion and the Councilwoman. "Well?"

"Yes. She was one of the most vocal against your staying," he replied. "Of course, it was understandable."

Annie turned back just as Chloe came up to her. The physician greeted the warrior pleasantly until she noticed Annie's paled features.

"Annie? What is wrong?"

Numbly, Annie pointed in the direction to where her husband stood. Anitra had moved closer to Rion until their bodies almost touched. She was laughing, being playful, and making it very clear how intimately familiar they were with each other. And obviously not caring how others saw them acting, either.

She was nearly as tall as he was. As the woman angel ran a manicured nail down Rion's cheek, Annie could not help her imagination from running over a hundred scenarios of the angel woman and Rion passionately kissing. The two of them entangled in the sweaty grip of lovemaking, limbs entwined on the very bed where she and Rion now made love. Rion, poised over her soft body, pressing his thickness between her thighs. Diving into her mouth as he took her countless times in the year and a half they lived together.

"They lived together for almost nineteen lunar cycles. Lord Rion was going to say his vows with her."

"Chloe, I need some air. Please," Annie begged. If the silinn was making the room sway, then this new bit of information was enough to pull the rug completely out from under her.

How could Rion leave that woman, that stunning creature, for the likes of her? What had happened between them before Rion left for Montana? Had he broken off their engagement? Or argued over something childish or petty, then parted before reconciling?

Unless...

The thought sent a flash of dizziness pounding through her skull. Unless Anitra had left *him* and Annie was his rebound romance. His second choice. A distant and so totally opposite second, whose appearance would not remind him of what he had lost. A woman who looked nothing like her, the greatest poets' vision of angelic beauty.

It would explain so much—his bitterness, his anger, and his frustration when she'd first found him.

The physician hurried her out through the nearest breezeway, a large balcony which overlooked a part of the city below. Annie walked over to the railing and gripped it with icy fingers. Overhead two moons cast their two-tone lights over the spiraling towers, but the beauty the sight once held for her was gone.

"What did Byric tell you?" Chloe demanded once they were away from the guests.

Taking a deep breath, Annie told her. "Is it true? Were Rion and Anitra lovers?"

Her friend came up behind her and clasped her shoulders. "Oh, Annie. Yes."

"For more than nineteen lunar cycles?"

Chloe nodded. "Yes, but it is not what you think."

Annie shook off her touch and stepped away, turning around to face her. That thin, ripping sound echoing in her ears had to be her heart shredding from the pain. No wonder she felt like throwing up.

"What am I supposed to think? Especially when I see the both of them standing over there, together like that?"

"Annie, Anitra left *him*."

Anitra left Rion? Then it was worse than she'd imagined. Rion must still want her, must still dream about her. The mere thought of being a substitute or surrogate twisted her gut.

"Rion lied to me. He told me women shunned him. He told me there was no one on this world waiting for him." She swiped

angrily at the hot tears falling on her cheeks. Breathing was becoming difficult. That tight fist around her heart and lungs was starting to squeeze all the blood from her body. She had to get out of here. Away from here. Somehow.

Chloe tilted her head. "Rion did not lie to you, but I can see he never told you the whole truth, either."

"Well, I want to know the whole truth. *All* of it!"

"Annie, you do not look well. Let me help you." She reached out a hand to heal, but Annie slapped it away.

"Tell me, Chloe. All of it. Now."

"No." The physician stepped back, rubbing the hand that still stung. "Rion needs to tell you himself. After all, he owes you that much."

"Owes what?"

Annie whirled around to see her husband entering the breezeway. Immediately Rion could see the tears glittering on her face.

"What is wrong, Annie?"

"Anitra," Chloe said. It was all she had to say. Lowering her head, she left the two of them alone.

Rion took a step toward his wife, but Annie also took a step back, keeping the same amount of distance between them. He gave her a puzzled look. "What have I done?" he whispered.

"Tell me about Anitra."

"What is it you want to know?"

"I want to know why you lied to me. I want to know why you told me women shunned you, and why, when I asked you back in Montana if there was anyone waiting for you over here, you told me there wasn't." A sob caught in her throat, and Annie felt her knees go weak. Why did he have to glow in the moonlight? "You and she were lovers, weren't you?"

His answer was soft. "Yes, we were."

"She's...so beautiful. You would have made a lovely couple."

"Annie, I did not love her."

Annie laughed softly, humorlessly. "You did not love her, but you were going to say your vows with her?"

"It would have been a mistake. But, yes, at some point I had thought—"

"Did you make love to her in your home? In our bed where we make love?"

There was a long pause before he answered. "Remind me to turn that mattress over when we get home."

"No. That won't be necessary."

"Why not?"

"Because I'm not going home with you," Annie whispered, retreating from him.

"*What?*"

"I saw you talking to her," Annie snapped bitterly, curling her hands into fists and beating them against the stone railing. "I saw the two of you together, and I saw how she touched you. I know you were together for over a year and a half, and I know you were going to say your vows with her before you left on your last mission. And now you want me to believe... What else have you kept from me?" The tears were flowing now, falling on the deep silver-blue gown like raindrops. Annie stumbled and clutched the railing again for support. When Rion tried to reach for her, she backed away. "No. Don't touch me. Don't...not after..."

She shuddered, biting her lip to keep from sobbing, even though the pain inside nearly had her doubled over. Her hair slid over her face, shielding her grief and heartache as her shoulders shook. "What was I, then? Second best? Something to occupy you while you tried to get over her?"

"Annie, you are not talking sense. I did not love her!" His voice was shaking. With fear or anger, she couldn't tell. She didn't want to know, anyway.

"And I'm supposed to believe you *now*? After you lied to me? After you led me to believe you had been alone while you lived

here, before you met me? So what do you do when we're making love? Think of her? Wish I was her?"

"Why would I do such a thing?"

"Look at me! Have you looked at me lately? Have you noticed I look nothing like her? Where she's so beautiful, so white and perfect, here I am, dark and scarred and—"

A knot in her gut twisted with sharpened knives, ripping what was left of her heart from her chest. Annie let out a little strangled cry of pain and started to sink to her knees.

Before she was aware of what was happening, her body was slammed backwards, lifted, and she gasped as he flew them higher and higher, racing above the main hall, above the glittering towers at a dizzying speed, and against the backdrop of two buttery yellow moons.

She wanted to put her arms around him, but she couldn't find it in herself to forgive him. She struggled in his grasp, but he held her firmly, at times almost hurtfully. Annie knew she was no match for his strength. Defeated, she ceased trying to escape his embrace and waited to see what would happen next.

He didn't fly them far. They landed in a small grotto near The Green. Once their feet touched down, Rion released her. Annie shook herself from his grasp and fell onto the soft grass. Pressing her face to the earth, she allowed herself to cry, muffling her sobs with her fists.

"I could not take the chance of you falling over the railing," he told her in a hollow voice. Kneeling down beside her, he tried to touch her shoulder, but she shrugged him off.

"Annie, I have never lied to you, and I never will. What was between Anitra and me, it was over before I found you. I was in the throes of my drive to destroy myself. Anitra believed she could change me and keep me from committing a grave error. I balked, and the more I resisted, the more determined she became. It became a wrestling match between us. We fought constantly.

"Yes, we were lovers. And, yes, for a very brief period I believed I loved her. I tried to talk myself into believing I did, even though I knew beyond a doubt I was deluding myself. It took me a long, long time to understand that, if I truly loved her, there would be no reason to fight. There would be no reason for me to want to keep pushing myself beyond my own endurance. If I loved her as I thought I did, that love would have been enough to satisfy me. So, yes, I asked her to exchange vows with me. I told you in Montana there was a woman I thought I had loved. Anitra was that woman."

"And you want me to believe *she* left *you*?" Annie whispered, still facing the ground. She couldn't look at him. Not when every cell in her body ached for him and wanted to trust him completely. Wanted him to soothe her broken heart with his promises.

Promises she wanted to think she could no longer trust.

"She left me because she finally realized she could not control me. She left because she saw she had no power over me. That what she kept calling love had never been real love, and that not only frustrated her, but it made her look bad in the eyes of her friends and family. She tried to use sex as a weapon, not for love."

"I didn't see any of this when I watched the two of you," Annie told him.

"I learned the hard way that Anitra does not like being on the losing end," Rion whispered. He brushed tendrils of hair from her face with a trembling hand. Annie finally felt a faint glimmer of hope and she didn't turn him away. Every word she heard felt sincere.

"She knows I belong to you now, and for some reason it irks her, especially now that she has seen you. Be wary of her, my Annie. Yes, she is extremely beautiful, but it is a cold and empty beauty. Anitra will never love anyone but herself. She will never care for anything except to worry about how to keep her beauty out there where others will see her, and admire her, and desire her. What you saw was her feeble attempt to seduce me. She wants

to draw me back to her so she can claim a final conquest. What you did not see was the fact that her sweet enticements could not touch me. She has no power over me, Annie. She has betrayed me time and again, and I always took her back. No longer. Nothing she does will ever affect me again. But you... I have broken your heart, and that guilt is tearing me apart. My Annie." He tried to lift her into his arms. She allowed him, but she remained as unmoving as a carved statue. "Speak to Chloe. Speak to Vadon. They will tell you."

"They will lie for you," Annie said softly.

* * * *

He held her against his chest, unable to cry, unable to think, unable to figure out what to do next. For only the second time in his life he was afraid he was losing her, only this time it wasn't because of an ax.

He had faced many difficult obstacles in his lifetime, but none had frightened him as much as what he felt right this moment. There was no future without Annie. There was no life without her.

Rion rocked her gently in his arms, terrified that if he let her go again she would leave him permanently. He had never anticipated this kind of reaction from Annie, although he knew that sooner or later she would have found out about Anitra. Vadon had warned him, as had Chloe. Both of them had told him that Annie's past treatment by her ex-husband had almost completely eroded her self-respect. Worse, it had almost destroyed her sense of self-worth.

"You had better tell her soon," Vadon had advised. "Or else Annie will be so hurt, you could lose her, perhaps forever."

"Annie is not the jealous type," Rion countered.

Vadon had answered with a dark scowl. "Jealous, never. But Annie will never trust you again, or trust her feelings for you. Another man tried to destroy her. You must work twice as hard to prove how much you love her."

Twice as hard? I will work three times, four times harder if I must. Vadon and Chloe had been right, but he had been too obstinate to listen. And for that sin, he was about to lose the one person who meant more to him than his own life.

Pressing his lips to her soft hair, Rion tried to think of something he could say that would bring Annie back to him. Words that would erase the damage brought upon them tonight, and set the world spinning again. But all he could think of were the words to a poem he had memorized while in Montana. Kissing her hair once again, he began to whisper, “*But our love it was stronger by far than the love/Of those who were older than we— /Of many far wiser than we— /And neither the angels in heaven above, /Nor the demons down under the sea, /Can ever dissever my soul from the soul /Of my beautiful Annabel Lee.*”

He held her tighter, kissing her forehead where it rested against the collar of his tunic. “Tell me what I must do to make you love me again,” he softly begged in a voice ragged with emotion. “Tell me. I will do anything, my Annie. My beloved. My w-wife. Just...do not abandon me. If I must spend the rest of my life proving to you how much of my soul you command, I will. Please. Just...” He tried to continue, but his own tears in his throat choked him. He held her even tighter.

“You alone changed my life. You alone steered me away from my self-destruction, and you did it without threats or angry words. I love you, Annie. I will always love you, and there will never be anyone else I will let carry my heart in their hands.”

He felt her cold hand reach up to touch his tear-stained cheek. Looking down at her, he held his breath, his body frozen in anticipation.

“What did she ask you?” Annie asked in a small voice.

He heard the hope in her question. “She asked me if I was happy with my decision, or had I allowed my pride to overrule my judgment.”

“What did she mean by that?”

“She wanted to know if, because you were carrying my son, I married you solely for the sake of having an heir.”

“You married me in Montana,” Annie whispered. “I wasn’t pregnant then. When you repeated your vows here, it was only for the benefit of the council, right?”

“I told her the same thing. Anitra was not convinced. So after she tried to woo me back with the unspoken promise of her body, I told her that if I ever saw her around you, or speaking to you, or in any way trying to hurt you, I would personally use every conceivable means I have at my disposal to have her permanently removed from the council.”

Annie’s eyes widened. “You can do that?”

Rion nodded. “I am a very powerful man, Annie. That much I have kept from you, only because I did not want anything to change your view of me or the way you feel about me.”

“And when you told her that, when you threatened her, what did she say?”

“I do not know. That was when I saw you run from the room with Chloe behind you. I walked over to Byric and asked him why you left so suddenly, but he only smiled. What did Byric tell you? Was he the one who told you about me and Anitra?”

“He seemed concerned.”

“He is one of Anitra’s pets. He sought you out to see what you were like. To learn your vulnerabilities. A true warrior’s tactics.” Rion sighed, promising himself to show the man the full extent of his displeasure.

Annie got to her knees and turned to face her husband. She reached out, cradling his face in her hands. In the moons’ light he knew the look of fear and worry on his face was undeniable. “You know what they say on my world when two people who truly love each other have had an argument?” she asked him gently.

"No. What?" He didn't dare hope. Didn't dare to breathe as he waited for her answer.

Reaching under her arms, Annie lifted the gown over her head, and then lay back on the thick, velvety grasses, raising her arms toward him as she bared her body. "They say that making up is always the best part."

"You...believe me?"

"I love you, Rion. I will always love you. And right now I need you to make love to me. I need to take you into my body and into my heart, and trust you'll never betray either one." Squeezing her eyes tightly shut, more tears rolled across her cheeks. She shuddered, despite the warm night.

"They are waiting for us back at the main hall," he reminded her, although he had begun to remove his own clothing.

"They're not going anywhere, not without you." She gasped and moaned throatily when his body brushed hers. The ache in his heart could not compare with the ache in his loins.

"You are coming home with me tonight, my Annie," he whispered in her ear before he lifted her knees and entered her, sliding deeply into her warmth and her arms as he reached for her lips to claim them with his own. "I am never letting you go, no matter what you believe."

* * * *

His possession of her was absolute, leaving Annie with no other thought than the knowledge that he needed her as desperately as she needed him. Their bodies whispered across the soft, blue-green grasses. Mutual hunger burned in them, turning them into lusty, empty vessels seeking to be filled with the star-bright, glittering brilliance of their orgasms.

She forgave him. He had known her heart would give her no other choice. Rion had never condemned her for making love to Foster, her first husband. It was in her past, and it didn't affect how

they felt for each other now, or how they would live their lives together in the years to come.

By the same token, he didn't love Anitra. He never had. He loved Annie, and only her. In Chloe's eyes, Annie had seen the same truth, although her jealousy and hurt nearly destroyed them.

Repeatedly, she promised herself to him, promised to love him forever in tight, whimpering words in his ear as he rammed himself over and over into her willing body. High above in the nearly cloudless sky, two moons cast their gold and amber gleams over his wings which were spread like a canopy over them.

At the last second, before she lost all thought and all sense of reality to the merciless power of the explosion rippling outward from inside her body, it looked as though his pinions had captured both orbs within their feathery confines, and were holding them aloft, allowing them to shine across their panting bodies.

Chapter 7

The Presentation

Vadon found Chloe standing on the empty breezeway. He walked over to her, concerned by her stoic silence. “Where are Rion and Annie? What happened? People are whispering. There is a rumor going around saying there is not going to be an Honorum tonight. Do you know what they are talking about?”

To his surprise, she turned around and sought solace in his arms. She was cold and trembling and Vadon immediately felt alarm. “Annie found out about Anitra,” she whispered.

Vadon closed his eyes, bringing her closer against him. He was afraid it would happen, especially tonight, when the woman angel would definitely be among the invited. “It had to happen sooner or later. Who told her?”

“Lord Byric.”

“*Damn* him. How did Annie take it?”

Chloe shook her head. “She was devastated. She would not take any comfort from me. She would not accept any explanation from Rion. I left them alone but I stayed back behind the curtains to make sure they were all right. She collapsed against the railing, and then I saw Rion grab her and fly off with her. I have not seen them since. Oh, Vadon...Vadon, what if...”

Sighing loudly, Vadon stroked her neck and back. “That woman needs to be publicly whipped. And Byric, he does not deserve his lordly title.”

"But what will happen now? What happens if Rion and Annie..." She stopped, unable to go on, unwilling to believe such a thing as them breaking up could happen.

Glancing up at the man she loved, the look that passed between them echoed the same thing. Rion would never leave Annie. But if Annie left Rion, it would kill the man.

A swelling of noise came from inside the main hall. The couple hurried inside to see what was causing it. Councilman Dimarkus stood in the center of a small, open area in the center of the hall. He raised his hands for silence. "Let us all make our way to the banquet hall!" he announced loudly with a smile.

Vadon stared at Chloe. Quietly and quickly, they followed the crowd into the next chamber where everyone was being seated for the dinner. As the brother of the guest of honor, Vadon knew where his and Chloe's seating would be. To their astonishment, Rion and Annie were on the other side of the room and approaching the dais at the head table. They appeared to be flushed and slightly out of breath. If Vadon didn't know better...

As he guided Chloe to their own chairs, Rion helped his wife into her seat before taking his place beside her. Vadon quickly noticed how they slid their chairs closer to each other until their legs were touching.

Taking his seat next to his brother, he waited until Rion turned to face him. "Chloe was in tears!" he whispered. "She thought...we thought that you and Annie...I mean, people saw you leave, and everyone was saying—"

Rion patted his brother on the arm. "I just learned a very remarkable thing that Annie brought with her from her world," he whispered in his ear.

"What is that?" Vadon asked.

"That making up is always the best part of a misunderstanding."

Vadon sat, stunned, for several moments, and stared at the soft smile on his brother's face. "Then you and Annie..."

"Eternally," Rion told him.

Sitting beside Vadon, Chloe leaned over to hear what he had been told. At Rion's remark, she placed a hand over her mouth to hide her smile. She leaned back in her chair and glanced past the men at Annie, who saw her looking at her. At the woman angel's mute question, Annie smiled and reached over to whisper something in Rion's ear, but Chloe could not miss the way she pressed her breast against his arm, or the way her hand slid slowly over his leg, to the inner part of his thigh. It was a gesture no one else would have seen, but Annie had meant for her to see it. The physician let out a huge sigh of relief.

"Well?" Vadon asked, seeking another opinion with hope.

She nodded. "We underestimated how strong their love is. Pass me some of that turay. I am famished."

* * * *

The dinner continued without any further problems. Annie stayed away from any more silliness, believing that it had been partially responsible for lowering her defenses and making her more vulnerable to Byric's verbal attack.

At some point during the dinner, Rion pointed out where Anitra was seated. As a Councilwoman, she had an austere setting near the head table. And parked right next to her was Lord Byric.

"They're not happy we're back," she murmured to her husband.

"I do not care what they feel. All I care about is what you are feeling." Cupping her cheek so he could look in her eyes, Rion smiled. "And how are you feeling tonight, my Annie?"

Annie smiled in return. "Sore," she replied. The remark made Rion almost choke on his drink. He gave her hand a squeeze where it rested against his inner thigh. What they had thought would be a gentle lovemaking in the grass had turned into lusty sex that had

left them still hungering for each other as they redressed. As Rion picked out bits of grass from her curls, he ran his fingers over her body, pressing his slightly wilted erection against her buttocks. It took most of their flight back to the main hall for his body to cool down enough to afford him some dignity.

It was nearly a full cycle later when Councilman Huron rose from his seat and raised his hands to gain everyone's attention. The noise in the banquet hall died away.

"Fellow council members, Lords and Under Lords of the Houses of Thunder, special guests, and historians. I want to thank you all for attending tonight's event, the likes of which have not been held for over three hundred lunar cycles. We are here tonight to honor one man, a warrior, whose strength and conviction and dedication has surpassed anything we have ever known in recorded history.

"And, for the first time ever in the history of our people, we also honor a woman. A woman who is not of our kind. A woman of another world, whose strength and conviction and dedication is only equal to that of the man she loves."

Annie sat in shock, unable to believe what she had heard.

A woman of another world.

They didn't mean her. They couldn't.

"But you have to remember how many people saw you when you first arrived. They saw you covered in blood, bearing all the marks of the beatings you took. Yet you fought to be with your husband. You fought to stay with him, although you were nearly as gravely injured. To us, Annie, these scars are your badges of courage and strength. They are a testament to your love for Rion and for Kerr. You should bear them proudly. Never, never be ashamed of how you got them."

Annie turned to see her husband smiling at her, and then she knew. He had known all along this was going to happen. He had known and kept it secret from her.

"Tonight," Huron continued, "we are here to honor Lord Rion. He has shown unparalleled bravery in taking one-rated missions without thought of sacrifice. And when he became severely wounded, he continued to walk the pathways in order to save the life of another. Lord Rion has paid the ultimate price any warrior could pay for his courage. He has lost his right to take any more missions, but that has not stopped him from continuing to teach and enlighten other warriors and instilling in them the same sense of purpose and dedication."

Turning to Rion, the Councilman gestured for him to rise. Rion stood amid thunderous applause.

"A word, Lord Rion?"

Waiting until the noise had died down, Rion thanked them for the honor. "I am not an orator. I am a warrior," he said in his deep baritone voice. "Forgive me if I stumble in my thanks."

Annie closed her eyes and smiled, knowing that not long ago that same voice had been whispering titillating love words in her ear.

"I have followed the teachings of my father, Lord Dramon, and I will dedicate my life to instilling those same teachings in my son, the next Lord of my House of Thunder. What you honor me for, I did not do for accolades. Rather, every act I committed was done in the name of love. Love for my father." He turned to look at Annie. "And love for my wife." Glancing back over the crowd, he caught Anitra's eyes and held them.

"I believe a warrior is part seeker and part believer. A warrior seeks to find what he never knew to exist, and then he must believe that what he has found is worth any price if he is to keep it. That is why, tonight, I thank you for your acknowledgment, but more than that, I want to thank you for what you are about to bestow on the woman I love. You see, I firmly believe that if I had not found her, I would not be here today. My son would not be here. And my House of Thunder would be closed forever."

Looking up at Councilman Huron, Rion nodded to let him know he could continue, and then he stepped back. Councilman Huron motioned for Annie to stand.

“Lady Annie.”

Annie rose to applause that was deafening. Glancing over at her husband, she smiled amid her tears.

“Lady Annie, you have shown sacrifice greater than yourself. Although we may never know the extent of what you were made to endure, you have shown courage and bravery far beyond what we imagine,” the Councilman told her and the room. “You came into our world beaten and bloody, yet you had no thought for yourself. With tenacity like any warrior, you fought to remain by your husband’s side, and you fought for the life of the child you carried. You came willingly to a strange new world, knowing you could never return to your own. You came, and you made a home for your husband and child. You never complained, you never ridiculed, and you never caused others to feel slighted or less worthy. And all the while you tried to adjust to a world that is so totally different and complicated and potentially dangerous for you, even while you knew you would never really fit. Knowing that you would always be a stranger. Physician Chloe, what was the phrase she used once about herself?”

“A wingless wonder.” Chloe smiled.

The room laughed. Annie blushed.

“Ah, yes. A wingless wonder. How apropos,” the Councilman said softly, looking at her. “Wingless, yes, Lady Annie. And a wonder? Oh, most definitely. You *are* a wonder. A wonder of grace and gentleness. A wonder of unflinching dedication to your husband and child. A wonder of beauty beyond compare. You are a rare and valuable wonder, Lady Annie. Lord Rion, keep her close to you and never let her go. Most men spend their entire lifetimes searching for that piece of heaven that always appears to be beyond their reach. You were lucky to find yours closer to the earth.”

"Yes, but I had to fall from grace to find her," Rion commented, his hand unconsciously going to his side where the large scar would always remain with him.

Huron nodded. Turning back to address the gathering, he said, "In one lunar cycle a plaque will be erected near The Green, one that will bear both their names. Hopefully, as time passes, and we have all turned to dust, someone will look upon it and become inspired to keep alive all the qualities that warriors, and their ladies, have shown. These are the qualities which make us who we are, and what we are. Lord Rion. Lady Annie. Thank you for letting us know that such qualities will always exist."

People began rising to their feet, applauding loudly. The noise grew, becoming almost deafening, until Annie felt a touch of the old fear she'd once had of thunderstorms. Walking over to her husband, she sought his embrace. Rion lovingly took her in his arms.

The dinner was over. The presentation was over. All that remained was for the celebrating to continue as long as everyone was willing to stay.

Countless people came to congratulate them. At some point Annie began to feel overwhelmed. Rion saw her weariness and helped her over to a chair. "Would you like something to drink?"

Annie shook her head. "No. Maybe if I splashed some water on my face."

Rion nodded. "It has been an eventful evening." Slowly running a thumb over her moist lower lip, he added, "And the evening is far from over."

She stared into his eyes, at the promise she saw within his blue gaze, and the promise she knew his body was giving hers. Nodding, she stood and made her way to the women's facilities at the far side of the main hall.

Once inside, she walked over to the long mirror at the opposite end of the room and splashed some water on her face from the

fountain flowing from the middle of the floor. The cold water helped to clear her mind although she was beginning once again to feel the familiar throbbing in her lower abdomen. Smiling, Annie realized she wanted nothing more tonight than to go home and make love to her husband until both suns were high in the sky. She figured Rion wouldn't object if she suggested it.

She started to leave the lounge when voices on the other side of the wall echoed over to her.

"She *is* nothing. She *has* nothing. If he was to remove her title, where would she be?"

"But he loves her, Anitra," another voice commented.

Annie's attention immediately perked up.

"It is only a temporary infatuation," the voice Annie now associated with Anitra announced. Like the woman, the voice was sultry and sensuous, exactly as Annie had thought it would sound.

"It may be temporary, but remember she has given him an heir," a third voice chimed in.

"Rion has better sense than to dump the woman who has guaranteed his lineage," Anitra said. "But that does not mean he has to stay with her. I spoke to him tonight. I could see it in his eyes. He still desires me. After all, it was I who taught him the all ways to make love to a woman."

Annie's eyes widened.

"So what do you plan to do now? How do you plan to approach him? That woman is always near him," quizzed voice number three.

"Oh, that will not be difficult. She is gullible. She is also a stranger to many of our customs. It will be very easy to separate the two of them. I only need a little time to get what I want."

"And what is it you want, Anitra?" Annie asked carefully, walking into the outer lounge where the woman and two of her friends sat conspiratorially.

The three women blanched upon seeing her. Anitra recovered first. "How dare you intrude upon a private conversation?" She seethed.

"It's not intruding if I'm the topic of discussion," Annie bit back. "I thought members of the council were bound by a code of ethics." Actually, she *didn't* know if such a thing existed, but after Huron's speech earlier, Annie thought it would make a good bluff. Besides, her whole life up to this point had consisted of her playing whatever hand she'd been dealt.

The code of ethics remark seemed to strike a chord. However, Anitra stood her ground. "My one and only concern will always be the welfare of this citizenry. When something or some *one* upsets the balance of our way of life, it is my job and my responsibility to try and correct that balance."

"Oh, I get it," Annie nodded, crossing her arms over her bosom. "That correcting of the balance, that includes stealing other women's husbands, right? That includes tearing families apart? I'll bet that also includes a whole slew of other vices that on my world would be considered illegal. And I'm willing to bet a bunch of them aren't well respected on *this* world, either!"

Walking closer to the woman, Annie was secretly surprised to see her move slightly away. She tucked that bit of information in the back of her mind. "I'll tell you what, Anitra. I'll make a deal with you. You leave my husband, my son, and my home alone. Just move on and pretend you've had nothing ever to do with them. You do that, and you know what I'll do for you in return?"

The woman angel fidgeted. "No. What?"

Moving closer still, Annie lowered her voice so that her next words would be taken in the proper context. "In exchange, I won't beat the living crap out of you."

It was nice to see how the threat of an old-fashioned beating could turn even the most beautiful woman as gray as a ghost.

Annie walked out of the lounge feeling much better. In fact, she practically danced over to where Rion stood with two other men, Vadon included. They were talking business, which didn't interest her, but it did allow her the chance to look around the room.

It wasn't long before she tugged on Rion's sleeve with her free hand, her other one already intertwined in his.

"What?"

She pointed at the small entourage gathering a short distance away. It was Anitra and her friends, which now included Lord Byric. All of them were talking and motioning in her direction. Rion eyed them carefully, and then asked his wife, "Did you accost her? Or say something to her?"

"What makes you think—"

"Annie."

She shrugged. "I just threatened her with a major whupping if she ever tried to interfere with us again."

Vadon and the others reacted to her statement with wonder and shock. Rion, however, got a cold look in his eyes. Annie instantly knew that look, and knew that coldness which made them go from sky blue to frosted ice.

Vadon also knew that look. "Rion, do not start any trouble."

"I did not start the trouble, Vadon. *He* did when he almost managed to turn the woman I love against me." Suddenly flashing him a wide smile, Rion clapped him on the shoulder. "Do not worry, little brother. I will not hurt him too badly."

"Rion!"

Annie took all of two seconds to decide where she needed to be, then hurried to catch up with him. This wasn't just his fight. It was also hers. When he glanced down to see her beside him, he took her hand and squeezed it.

Surprisingly, it was Byric who stepped forward to confront them. "We ask that you stop the harassment and threats toward us immediately," he announced loudly and formally. A crowd had ga-

thered, and it was obvious Anitra and her band were going to play out their charade as long as they could.

All around them the great hall grew quiet.

Rion gave them an ingratiating smile. "Very well. Let me see if I have this figured out. *You* approached my wife and began to slander me, hoping to turn her against me. While *you*," he pointed to Anitra, "made sure Annie saw your useless attempt to seduce me. You tried to make her believe that *we* were the ideal couple, that there was something still between us, and that *you* would have been my lady had I not gotten her pregnant."

"Rion," Anitra pouted, acting all the bit like the wronged party. She reached for him, but he angrily pushed her hand away. She yipped as if he had slapped her.

"No. Now it is time *you* listened. Your timing, by the way, is off as usual. Not to mention your facts. I did not find Annie. Annie found me. I was dying. I went through the gap and was hit with a major wind shear that wrenched my wing so badly I plunged head-first into a grove of spiked trees. Want to see the hole in me she helped to heal?" He jerked up the tunic and the black shirt so all could see the ugly scar the size of a small fist just above his right hip. "She found me and took me in, despite the fact that I looked monstrous and terrifying. People like us, we are not considered normal on her world. We are feared. Sometimes hated. More often, we are hunted. But Annie took me in and fed me, and tended to me without fear. Without any thought to her own welfare. Totally and completely trusting I would not cause her harm or retribution."

By now the entire hall was listening intently. Annie felt his hand squeeze hers.

"Here was this woman, by herself, alone, in the middle of nowhere, trying to subsist on the most meager goods. And do you know why she was there?"

"Rion, perhaps—" she whispered.

"No." He turned to her, his voice urgently pleading. "They must know. They have to know, or we shall never be at peace." When she finally, reluctantly, nodded, he turned back to continue.

"Annie was already married to another man."

It was as if he had struck them with a bolt of lightning. Shocked looks were replaced by loud murmuring. Annie could see the smile erupting on Byric's face and she wished she could claw it off.

"Let me finish," Rion asked the crowd, who backed off to wait. "Annie married to escape a life of poverty and worthlessness, only she chose wrong. The man she married had just one plan for her. He took her into the wilderness and left her there to fight and fend for herself while he left to seek fame and fortune elsewhere. He left her alone to take care of his holdings and ensure his property. He never wrote to her. He never contacted her. He never had anyone check on her. He never cared enough to find out whether she was alive or dead. He simply expected her to be there, where he had left her, whenever he decided to finally return. She was there for three years. *Three years. Alone.* That is almost fifty lunar cycles on our world. Try to imagine living by yourself, trying to survive for that length of time, in a place where there are deadly creatures roaming the nights, with very little food, and where the weather could kill you if you remained outside for more than a cycle."

Annie felt tears stinging her eyes. She had thought she had escaped her old life for good, never to be forced to relive it, but Rion was right. To keep what they shared, they had to make a clean breast of it.

"Day after day I watched this woman do things many men would not do. Day after day she managed to keep me alive, although I was an extra burden to her. Food was scarce. The weather alone was devastating. And then, one day, she nearly died herself. The ax she was using to cut up firewood, firewood being our only

source of heat and light, went into her leg. She was bleeding. She was dying in my arms. And that was when I knew how much I had come to love her. Annie? Would you please?" He gestured toward her leg.

Slowly, Annie lifted the skirt of her gown so they could see the deep, long gash along her calf. The crowd remained quiet, mesmerized by Rion's confession.

"I gave her my blood. I saved her, just as she had saved me. And then I asked to be her husband." Rion took a deep breath, the memories still as painful for him as they were for her. "She turned me away. Do you know why? Because somewhere on her world there was another man she had promised herself to. Even though she had no idea if he was alive or dead, she felt the need to honor her commitment to him. Even though he had abandoned her, she wanted to remain faithful. Even though she had come to love me...she turned me away."

Silence lingered for several moments, until someone called out, "Did her husband ever return?"

Rion gave them a sad smile. Giving her hand a tender kiss, he continued. "It was my fault I made Annie break her vows to her first husband. I told her she either had to accept me in all ways as her lover or I would have to leave. Again, I was being selfish. The blame is totally mine. We became husband and wife in soul and body, and then we exchanged our own vows. I told her that when the next storm opened up the pathway to my world, I would return to get permission to bring her here. And then, at the very next storm path that followed, I would come back to get her.

"We spent what felt like an eternity learning about each other, about our worlds, and that time alone together allowed our love to deepen. I could only hope that when I had to leave her that the love I had given her would help her through the waiting period until I returned. The last thing she needed was to be abandoned twice in

her life. That day eventually came, and you know what my actions were when I returned the first time.”

Around them heads nodded.

“It was while I was here that what we had feared would happen did happen. Annie’s first husband returned. But what none of you knew, until now, is that Annie was carrying my son...and she had never told me.”

The crowd reacted with surprise.

“Had I known she was with child, I may not have come back here. She knew that, which was why she did not tell me. I did not belong on her world. It was too dangerous for me to stay, but she was willing to sacrifice herself for my sake. She truly believed I was not returning, but she was not going to use the baby to coerce me otherwise.”

The next part would be the most difficult. Annie pressed her cheek against his arm and closed her eyes.

“Her husband returned. He expected her to be there, as if nothing had happened. He offered her no explanation, no reason for his long absence. Annie was not a wife to him. She was a possession, like the house and the animals. But Annie had changed. I had changed her. Our love had changed her. She was no longer a meek and defenseless person. She had grown stronger. Resilient. It was something her husband hated. He hated the change because he knew he could no longer control or dominate her. And then...and then he discovered she was pregnant.”

“Rion...*please*...”

He leaned over to kiss her gently on the forehead. “He beat her repeatedly with a heavy, metal-studded belt. He tore her flesh, not caring how much pain he caused her. Not caring how much she bled. He tried to beat the baby from her womb. He kicked her, hoping she would miscarry. He beat her with his fists. He pounded on her face and head. He ripped into her because she was no longer his, and he could not accept the fact that she had not stayed faithful

to him. And when she still resisted and begged him not to hurt the baby inside her, he tried to rape her.”

Annie cried silently against his arm. Rion drew her into his embrace and kissed the top of her head. Around them others also wept.

“A neighbor, a man who had become a friend of mine and Annie’s, came to the cabin to try and stop this man. Instead her husband pulled out a gun and shot him. He was aiming the gun at her belly, determined to finally destroy our child, when the gap between our worlds opened. I...I cannot begin to tell you of the rage that went through me when I saw what was about to happen. My training took over and I hit him. I hit him so hard I broke his bones. I struck him until he bled from the mouth and the gut. I wanted to kill him, but I could not. For Annie’s sake, I could not be the one to kill him, even though everything in me screamed for me to tear him apart. It was when I reached for her to bring her back with me that I saw what he had done to her. And I saw for the first time she was carrying our child.”

Holding her next to him, Rion felt a cleansing go through him. Glancing over his shoulder he saw Chloe, tears rolling down her cheeks, with her hands pressed to his back. He gave her a grateful smile. Beside him, Vadon clasped his brother’s shoulder and slowly nodded.

“I picked up Annie and had lifted into the air when he pulled out the gun once more. That was when he shot me in the back.”

He closed his eyes and pressed his face to her forehead, feeling her warmth and her heartbeat as her breasts pressed against his tunic. He knew that the others could now see the permanent scars across her back.

“I do not remember much after that, or how I managed to bring us back through the gap. I vaguely remember waking up in the physicians’ care with Annie kneeling before me, still bloody, still weak and ill. I remember asking Vadon to mark her, and tell-

ing her I loved her. And that...that is our story. The rest you already know."

The room was unnaturally quiet as Rion's words sunk in. They also knew the depth of the deception that had been attempted on the couple's lives. But there was no way they could know how far Rion's planned retribution would reach in the days to come.

Turning back to Anitra he gave her an accusing look. "So go ahead and spread your vicious rumors and lies, Anitra. We no longer care because we know the truth. And now, *everyone* will know the truth. And, Byric..." His expression became like stone, his voice deathly cold. "If you so much as say another word to my wife, if you *ever* again try to turn her against me, I will personally see that your House of Thunder is burned and buried, and that all history of its lineage is destroyed. This I promise you on the life of my son. Am I clear?"

The man turned pale and trembling. Without answering, he walked out of the main hall, never looking back. Anitra glanced around at the dark stares directed toward her and she also bolted from the hall. Councilman Huron watched her leave, shaking his head sadly. Turning to the couple still wrapped in each other's embrace, he placed a consoling hand on Annie's arm.

"On my word as a member of the council, Anitra will never be able to harm you like this again."

"What will happen to her?" Annie asked.

"She will have to face the other council members and explain the charges we are bringing against her. But this much is certain. Her house will probably be placed in stasis until a new council-member takes her place. Oh, and, Annie?"

She turned toward him to see a gentle smile on the older man's face.

"Welcome to our world. We are blessed to have you here." He leaned over to kiss her forehead, then, with a sweep of his robes, turned and left the hall.

“Rion?”

He looked down at her. “Yes, my beloved?”

“Take me home?” These past couple of cycles had taken a lot out of her. She looked and sounded exhausted.

He responded by lifting her into his arms. Chloe walked around to say her goodbyes.

“Annie? I think you will no longer have any more nightmares,” she said with a gentle smile.

“Thank you, Chloe,” Rion told her. Giving his brother a glance, he added with a wry smile, “By the way, when will you two hurry up and say your vows? We are getting tired of waiting.”

The couple burst into laughter and followed him out of the hall and onto the platform. They waved goodbye as Rion lifted into the air, carrying the love of his life.

As they were swallowed up by the night, Annie glanced around. “I think we forgot to bring along a warning light.”

“Do not worry. We will not be airborne much longer.”

“Huh?”

“We are not going home,” he told her, grinning. “Not yet.”

“Why not? Where are you taking us?”

“Back to the grotto,” he whispered against her cheek, and then kissed her. Her lips still tasted of silinn. Afterward, she nuzzled the underside of his jaw.

“Okay. I give. Why the grotto?”

“Soft grass. Warm breezes. Tonight is ours and ours alone. We have physically healed from the past, but I have yet to finish making up with you for what we endured tonight. And I am not going to spend it in a bed that I should have realized is tainted. Tomorrow, I will have us a new bed delivered.” He looked down at her and saw the gentleness in her eyes he had been missing. “Starting tonight, my beloved wife, we will begin a new life. I promise you. The past is now forever dead. You are my only future.”

Passion of Thunder

Annie smiled. From the glow on her face, Rion knew at last she believed him because she finally understood that he had never lied to her. His heart had never belonged to anyone but her.

And it always would.

Chapter 8

The Chaster

The sky began to pale, changing from indigo to a faint orange. First dawn was not far away, and already the city was beginning to rouse itself for another day.

Rion was first aware of the feeling of warmth and the steady breath gently brushing against his bare chest. He opened his eyes, noting the coming light. Carefully he moved his legs, untangling Annie's limbs from his, before he sat up.

The morning air was cool. The grass around them was wet with dew, as were they. Nearby their clothes lay in a disorderly pile where they had dropped them in their haste to consummate their passion on the fragrant lawn the night before.

He smiled and rolled his neck around his shoulders. How much sleep had they gotten? It couldn't have been more than a cycle or two. Certainly no more than three. It had been late when they had left the Council Cathedral after the Honorum, but there had been many hours still left in the night when he had brought her back to the small grotto.

Rion's expression immediately changed and his face hardened. He had much to do today and he needed to begin as soon as possible. Before he did, however, there were a few more important details to see to.

"Annie. Annie, my beloved, wake up." He gently shook her, placing soft kisses across her cheek and lips. She murmured, stretching slightly. Leaning closer, he whispered, "If we are to get back home before someone finds us here, I suggest you awaken now."

The reminder of the fact that they were lying completely naked in a public park, albeit in a more secluded area, was enough to make her open her eyes.

“Rion?” She lifted up on one elbow and glanced around.

He handed over her gown from the evening before. “Hurry. It is almost first morning.”

“Already?” She hastily slipped on the dress, stifling a yawn in the process. Looking up, she saw her husband already standing, holding out a hand to assist her to her feet. He had donned his pants; the rest of his uniform he had draped over one shoulder.

Rising, she laced her arms around his neck as he rose into the air, his enormous old-gold-colored wings pounding the air as he lifted the both of them from a dead standstill.

She buried her nose in his neck and placed kisses under his cheek. “Good morning, husband,” she breathed in his ear as he carried her through the warming air, above the towers just beginning to teem with others getting ready for the new day.

Rion smiled down at her. “Sleepy?” he inquired.

Annie nodded, yawning again. “Long night.”

“Complaining?”

He laughed gently as she shook her head. “Aren’t you tired?” she asked him.

“Yes, but I have some things I must do first.”

She gave him a quizzical look. “Like what?”

“Like some new furniture?” Kissing her before she could reply, he lifted her in his arms as he prepared to land on the platform outside their front door. Without missing a beat, he swept her through the black obsidian doors and into the living room where he gently laid her on the big round sofa in the middle of the room.

Annie sat up to watch him disappear into the second bedroom. He emerged seconds later.

“Michi?” she asked softly.

“Asleep on the divan beside Kerr’s cradle,” he told her.

"Let her sleep," Annie advised. "It's still early. She can go home when she wakes up. Is Kerr stirring yet?"

Rion nodded as he headed for their bedroom. "He will be awake before long. You just lie there and get some rest. I will bring him to you shortly."

Glancing down at the expensive gown she had bought for last night's occasion, Annie opted instead to follow him into the bedroom to change clothes. To her surprise she found he'd gotten into the shower for a quick bath.

She ran a hand through her tangled hair. Last night it had looked beautiful, all curly and falling in ebony waves and ringlets down her back and over her shoulders and breasts. Now it needed a good shampooing. There were still bits of grass clinging to it. Smiling, she slipped out of her dress as a little voice in the back of her mind informed her that she'd probably spent more time last night taking the gown off than she had wearing it.

The immense crystalline enclosure was already beginning to fog up from the steam. Rion's back was to her as she surreptitiously slipped inside. Grinning, Annie encircled his waist with her arms and pressed herself against the vulnerable softness between his shoulder blades. Close to her cheek she could see the long, jagged stretch of skin next to where his right wing emerged from his back. The scar where the bullet had caused its damage.

Rion pressed his hands against the shower walls and lowered his head, letting the streams of hot water course over his head and neck, making his own long hair flow like molten gold.

Scooping a handful of liquid soap from the dish behind her, Annie began to lather her husband's back, moving her palms slowly up and down his skin and across his shoulders and arms, massaging the hard muscles underneath with her fingers. She heard him groan with pleasure.

With a little more soap she reached around to cleanse his chest, and then lower still to his abdomen, teasing down his thighs.

Returning to his back, she applied more suds to his backside, kneeling to get his long, muscular legs. It wasn't until she reached for his feet and began rubbing them that he jumped from her touch.

Annie quickly glanced up in time to catch the expression on his face as he watched her. She shrieked softly with delight and began to laugh.

"I found your tickle spot! I finally found it! Your feet are ticklish! I knew you had to have a tickle spot somewhere!"

"All you had to do was ask Vadon," her husband wryly commented. He lifted his giggling wife from where she knelt before him and kissed her soundly, pulling her under the waterfall with him.

To her surprise, he released her without any further love play, stepping out of the stream and leaving her to bathe herself. Slightly disappointed, she watched as he toweled himself dry and walked into the bedroom. She was shampooing her hair when he walked back into the bathroom and opened the shower door a crack.

"I will return as soon as I am able. Hopefully this should not take too long. I want you to rest until I get back," he told her.

"Where are you going?"

"I will explain later. May I have a kiss goodbye?" He smiled.

Annie gave him a quick kiss, noting that he was wearing his long, dark gold tunic with matching pants. Both the tunic and pants sported dark black-gray piping along the seams. He wore this particular outfit infrequently, for reasons she didn't understand, and she remembered the first time she'd seen it had been on the day he had been allowed to come home after his hospitalization. This time, however, there was an addition to his outfit. Something totally new. She pointed a wet finger at the pendant around his neck. "What's that?"

"Later," he called back to her, and left the bathroom. Curious, but knowing he would eventually reveal all, she shrugged and finished her shower.

Walking into the bedroom, she paused to stare at the enormous bed she and Rion had shared. It was no longer a bed they would continue to share, not since last night when she had found out who had also been sleeping in it. Now its overly large size made more sense to her—two angels would need something that big to accommodate their wings. Angrily Annie pulled off the patchwork spread she had made for it and carefully folded the quilt, laying it on a nearby chair. Rion had promised her a new bed today. Out with the old and in with the new, as her papa would have said.

New bed, new life.

She slipped into her favorite gown, one a deep blue color that reminded her of the wide Montana sky, before returning to the bathroom to hang up the damp towel she'd wrapped her hair in. From there she padded barefoot into the living room. She was in the middle of running a comb through her tangles when Michi wandered in from Kerr's bedroom. The young angel smiled as she rubbed the sleep from her eyes.

"Good morning, Michi. Thank you again for staying with Kerr last night," Annie told her. She was sitting in a wide ray of sunlight that was shining on the living room floor. It was warm, and it was helping to dry her hair quickly. The young angel nodded.

"When did you and Lord Rion get in? I must have fallen asleep. My apologies."

"Don't apologize, Michi. Rion and I got in quite late. We didn't want to wake you, so we let you sleep. Did you have any problems with Kerr? Is he up yet?"

"Not yet, my lady. He is starting to move around a bit. I did not have any problems, either. Well, except for the fact he would not eat some of his baby food."

"Bet it was the leelah, right?"

Michi smiled, nodding.

"Probably spit it out and left a nice little handful of it on the wall, too, I'm willing to bet," Annie added, smiling.

When the babysitter nodded again, Annie sighed, and then chuckled. "Rion insists he eats the stuff, even though I keep telling him it tastes like wallpaper paste to me. And since Kerr is half me, chances are he thinks it tastes that way, too!"

"I cleaned it up," the young angel told her.

Annie smiled again. "Thanks. We appreciate you being available."

"I love taking care of Kerr. Anytime, Lady Annie. I should be going now. Mother will be waiting for me."

Annie waved and watched the young woman launch herself out the front door. What she didn't expect was to see Chloe landing at almost the same time. As the woman greeted the departing babysitter, Annie noticed she was wearing her red tunic and pants, which meant she was on her way to work. But that couldn't be right. Annie's brows knitted in thought. Chloe had told her she had taken today off to rest after the Honorum. Curious, she got to her feet.

Chloe walked into the house, pausing just inside the front doors to stare at Annie. She glanced at the big sofa where discarded clothing lay in a heap across the pillows.

"I came to see how you were doing," she told her friend. She paused, collecting her thoughts, then said, "Vadon and I came by late to make sure you...that you and Rion..." Taking a deep breath, she gave up. "You were not here and we got worried. Then Rion came by the house this morning—"

"He what?" Annie interrupted her.

"He came by this morning and spoke to Vadon. I was still in the bedroom so I did not hear what they talked about, but it had to be something serious. Very serious."

"How could you tell?"

"Vadon put on his presentation uniform while Rion waited for him. They left soon after."

Annie shook her head. "I don't understand. What's a presentation uniform?"

"Did you see Rion this morning?"

"Yes. He took a shower and put on that dark gold outfit he doesn't wear very often. The one with the black piping down the sides."

Chloe nodded. "That is the presentation uniform."

Annie let out an exasperated breath and thought aloud. "Presentation. To present something. To present themselves?"

"To the council. They are probably in front of the council this very moment," Chloe told her. "What I cannot guess is why, although I have a good idea. So I came here to see if you might be back and if you might have some news about what is going on."

Annie threw a lock of hair over her shoulder and gathered the thick tresses with her hands at the back of her neck. Quickly she tied her hair with a white ribbon. "Rion and I didn't spend the night here." When Chloe's eyes widened, she shrugged. "We spent it...elsewhere. We just got back home not too long ago. Like I said, just as we got here Rion said there was something he had to do and he hoped it wouldn't take long. He took a shower, put on that presentation outfit and that black necklace I've never seen before—"

"The what?"

Annie paused. "A-a necklace. Kind of. A pendant? Some kind of symbol. Shiny black, with a little gold lightning bolt on it. It was on a short chain around his neck." Seeing her friend's face grow pale, Annie laid a hand on her arm. "What? What did I say? What's that necklace thingy? What does it mean?"

"Oh, sweetest heavens, Annie." Chloe shook her head, as if not believing what she was thinking.

"Did Vadon have one of those necklace things on, too?" Annie asked her.

"No, he does not have one. He is not the lord of the house. Only Rion would have one. It is the symbol of his title."

"Then why would Rion wear it and his presentation clothes, and take Vadon with him?" Annie wondered aloud. "And if it's such a big deal, why didn't he wear it last night at the Honorum?"

A sound caught her ear, a familiar noise coming from the second bedroom. Annie hurried in to find her son pulling himself up the side of the crib, chubby fists gripping the elaborately-carved railing. Seeing his mother approaching, the infant raised his arms, beseeching as only a baby can when he wants to be picked up.

Cradling him in her arms, she carried him over to the bassinet to change his diaper. Behind her Chloe had followed her into the room and now stood to one side to watch her. The woman angel observed how Annie cooed and tickled her son, smiling and laughing with him as she got him ready for his breakfast, finally settling in the rocker by the window to feed him.

Annie watched as Chloe moved over to where they could talk once again face to face. She motioned toward a low stool and the angel woman parked herself nearby.

"Talk to me, Chloe," Annie ordered gently. Kerr held one of her fingers in his grasp as he nursed, and she playfully shook it. The baby grinned and chortled. "What's the big deal with the necklace?"

Chloe rubbed her temple before answering. "The necklace is called a chaster. Rion's father gave it to him, just like Dramon's father had given it to him when it was his time to hand over the title of Lord of the House of Thunder. When Kerr is ready to assume the title, Rion will pass it on to him."

She reached out and ran her palm over Kerr's short, amber curls. A tender smile touched her lips. "It is so soft."

"Yeah." Annie chuckled softly. "Rion's hair curls just like that when it's cut real short." At Chloe's wide-eyed look, she said, "What? You didn't know I'd cut off all his hair when he was in Montana?"

“He let you cut it?” Chloe confirmed.

“He didn’t have a choice. It was full of twigs and pine needles from his fall. It would have taken me forever and a day to pick all that stuff out. Besides, he was completely out of it when I did it.” She paused in thought. “Now that I think back on it, he did seem a bit perturbed when he found out I’d hacked it off, but it quickly grew back.” Looking at Chloe, Annie asked, “You were going to tell me about the chaster?”

Chloe continued. “A lord does not wear his chaster except in serious matters that involve his title or his house. The Honorum was a presentation, a gift of acknowledgment to Rion. And to you. There was no need or reason for Rion to wear his chaster last night.”

Annie nodded. “So for Rion to be wearing it this morning, and he and Vadon appearing before the council this morning, that means something very serious is happening. Why wouldn’t Rion want me to be with him if it involves his house?”

Shaking her head, Chloe explained further. “All matters involving this house are directly tied to Rion and Vadon. You will be called in if the matter extends to you.”

She looked at Annie and Annie could see the worry she was trying to hide in her liquid brown eyes. There was more going on than she was being led to believe, and Annie grew determined to get to the bottom of it one way or another.

“Chloe, as my dearest friend, tell me if I have a reason to be worried. This bit with him wearing his chaster is a major deal, isn’t it?”

The angel woman slowly nodded.

“This could affect not just Rion and me, but Kerr as well?”

“It might. I do not know. But wearing the chaster is not something a lord does on a whim. It is a major move on Rion’s part. I just hope it does not entail a lot of trouble for him, or you. We were so afraid last night—” Chloe quickly bit her lip, suddenly

afraid she'd said too much. Annie reached out to take the woman's hand and squeezed it.

"If it makes you feel any better, so was I," she whispered. She waited until she'd caught the physician's eye once more before continuing. "Here I was, all wrapped up in my own history and what I'd been through that I was totally oblivious to the fact that Rion might also have a history. Of course, I had asked him about it before, back in Montana, but he had told me practically nothing. So what was I supposed to think when this totally stunning woman walks up to him and acts like she knows every square inch of him? Which I find out later she did. And then that Lord Byric tells me they'd been living together for over a year and a half, right up to the time Rion had crossed over on his sixth mission and found me. And that Rion was supposed to have exchanged vows with her."

Annie stopped. Unbidden thoughts began to crowd in her mind. "Chloe, what if Rion had said his vows with her, and *then* found me?" She shook her head. "What if he'd found out he didn't love her until *after* he and I had met? Do your people have divorce laws or something like that? Or would we have..." Her voice trailed away. The implication had suddenly become too great to even think about. Quickly Chloe grabbed her friend's arm and squeezed.

"Why torture yourself with something that never happened, or never will happen?"

"Sorry." Annie managed a shaky smile. She switched Kerr to her other breast, caressing the baby's face as he settled in, then resumed rocking.

"But, to answer your question, yes. We have laws governing the release of a man and a woman from their vows. They are strict, which is why the giving of vows is not something we do lightly."

Annie stared at her. "Do you think that maybe the reason why Rion had been hesitant to say them with Anitra is because he knew he really wasn't in love with her?"

Chloe smiled. "That is something you will have to ask Rion, but I think you already know the answer." Several moments of silence passed between them before she asked, "Will the two of you be all right now? I mean...Annie, I do not think I have ever felt so depressed than when I saw Rion fly off with you after you had turned him away."

"You saw us?"

"I was watching and listening from the doorway. Forgive me. I knew how deeply you had been hurt, but I also knew how terrified Rion was."

"You could tell Rion was terrified?"

Nodding, Chloe said, "Just because you are married and you have given Rion an heir, you are still an outworlder. Believe it or not, you are not fully bound by our laws. Rion knows that, and he knows that if you ever wish to be released from your vows, or decide to leave him, he would be powerless to stop you."

This bit of news stunned her. "Leave Rion? You mean...forever?" Annie glanced down at her son. "And if I decided to take Kerr with me, he still couldn't stop me?"

"No. Not as long as Kerr is dependent upon you for life, Rion could not stop you from walking away. Annie, if you took Kerr away, it would hurt him more gravely than you could ever know, but I know in my heart that if *you* left him, it would probably kill him. He loves you with every ounce of his being."

Sighing loudly, Annie closed her eyes and leaned her head back against the rocking chair. The room was quiet. Peaceful. She loved this time with her son as she nursed him, and the sunlight streaming through the window was like a warm blanket over them both. Even now she could hear his soft suckling sounds. The emotions she felt when he fed were like warm waves breaking over her, soothing and oddly erotic. But more than that, they made her feel whole and complete, affirming her womanhood as a part of life that had come full circle.

“Chloe?”

“Yes?”

Annie opened her eyes. “I thought you were taking today off? Why the uniform?”

“I must check on my patients who are still infirmed in the hospital. It should not take long. I promised Vadon I would return before midmeal.”

“Chloe, how soon can you tell if a woman is pregnant? I mean, how far along does she have to be before one of your kind can be sure?”

The angel woman smiled warmly. “If I am allowed to boast, I pride myself on that ability. I was first in my class and I can say I am able to ascertain within hours of conception. Why?” Her eyes widened. Annie saw the expression on her face and gave her a small smile in return.

“Last night. Or maybe early this morning. I’m not sure, but somehow I just *know*. I think Rion and I... He promised me we would begin a new life last night. I just didn’t think he’d be so literal about it.”

Chloe moved off the stool to rest on her knees in front of the rocking chair. She laid a palm over Annie’s abdomen and closed her eyes to concentrate. A minute had barely passed when she looked up at Annie. There were tears in her eyes as she nodded.

“Oh, God.” Annie closed her eyes. Suddenly it had become difficult to breathe. Overwhelmed, she leaned over and kissed the top of her son’s head. “Is it too soon to tell if it’s a boy or a girl?”

Chloe laughed tearfully and sniffed. “I may be good, but I am not *that* good. Perhaps in another week.”

“Thank you, thank you.” Annie leaned over and hugged the physician. “Please, never fear about me and Rion again. Our love has withstood so much. There isn’t anything that can tear us apart now.”

Hugging her in return, the woman angel got to her feet, wiping her eyes. "I must go or else I will not make it home in time." Leaning over, she planted a kiss on Annie's forehead. "I wish I could be here when you tell Rion."

Laughing, Annie promised to let her know. She got up from the rocking chair to walk the woman to the door then watched from the platform as she took off. Glancing down at her son who had finished suckling and was now intent on playing with the toes of one foot, Annie nuzzled him until he gurgled before placing him over her shoulder to burp him.

"You are going to have a brother or sister, Kerr. But I'm warning you now, little man, if he or she comes out looking like me, all wingless and unable to fly, you had better be the protective big brother. I don't care if you're going to be the next lord or not. You hear me?"

Kerr grinned toothlessly. Annie stroked his back and the small sprouting of wings just beginning to form. Like baby teeth which would later make way for adult teeth, Rion had assured her that all of his people began with the little feathery appendages, which would soon mature into fully developed wings as Kerr grew from childhood into an adult.

Giving him another tender kiss, she snuggled the baby under her chin and continued to rock him in her arms. Life had given her another reason to feel wonderfully blessed, and she was not about to question it again.

Chapter 9

The Symbol

Annie had just slipped the straps of her gown back onto her shoulders and covered her bosom when she saw an angel approaching the platform. Switching Kerr to her hip, she watched as the courier landed, bowed, and presented her with a note before taking off again. The handwriting on the outside of the folded-over piece of paper was Rion's. Inside were two brief lines.

I will be by momentarily to take you out to eat.

Bring a bag for Kerr. Rion.

She quickly went back inside the house to grab the diaper bag, double-checking to make sure it held all the necessary items she'd need. As a precaution she added a bundle of baby food, in case they were somewhere where she couldn't breastfeed their son. Too bad this world hadn't learned about baby bottles.

Walking into their bedroom, she sat her son on the floor next to her dressing table and began brushing her hair to braid it. Whenever they were to go flying, it was better if her hair wasn't loose where it would drift all over the place. Except for last night. Rion had taken extra care to hold down her fresh curls, preserving them and her appearance for the Honorum. She was nearly finished when Rion entered the bedroom, striding in purposefully as he headed for his bureau on the opposite side of the room. But first he walked over to her to lift her chin and give her a quick kiss.

"Did you get to rest any while I was gone?" he asked.

"No, but I did get Kerr fed. Where are we going?"

Annie watched as he unclasped the chaster from around his neck and placed it carefully in a top compartment she'd had no idea existed until then. For a brief second she saw other items in the compartment before he closed the top of the bureau. With that done, he pulled the tunic top over his head and doffed his pants, then reached inside his closet for a fresh change of clothes. Even after nearly a year of being together, the sight of his lean, muscular body still sent chills through her body. Annie felt a familiar tightening in her abdomen, her "lover's lust" as Rion sometimes called it, as she debated whether they had enough time for a quickie. But her husband's no-nonsense movements told her they may already be running late for whatever he had planned. She sighed regretfully.

"We are leaving Kerr with Joberiah so we can have the afternoon to ourselves," he told her with a grin.

"Joberiah?" She glanced down at where Kerr was lying on his back and playing with the hem of her gown.

"I trust Joberiah," Rion told her, referring to the old angel who was, in fact, his uncle. There were few family members left who were directly related to Rion and Vadon. Joberiah had been Rion's mother's eldest brother, and a Lord of the House of Trade. Annie vaguely remembered Rion telling her one evening about the old man who lived on the other side of the city with his housemaid of sixteen master cycles.

* * * *

"Her name is Minet. A very sweet woman. Has to be at least twenty festivals younger than him," Rion told her. They were lying in the pool of water at the bottom of the shower, resting after a bout of lovemaking that had turned the floor of their bathroom into a miniature lake, much to Annie's chagrin. Of course, Rion had laughed and told her Pella, the housemaid, would clean it up the next morning, and not to worry.

"Is Joberiah married to Minet?" Annie asked.

"No, I do not believe they have exchanged vows, although they might as well. They are so dedicated to each other."

"Joberiah was never married before? Never had any children? You know, like cousins?"

"No. And my mother was a late child," Rion confided to her as he swirled more warm water into the lowered water level. "My...grandparents?...married young and had Joberiah soon after. They had a second child twenty-four lunar cycles later, but he died of Perrin's disease before he was ten. Andara was not born until almost twenty master cycles later."

"Wow. She was a late baby. Was she planned? Or a delightful accident?" Annie wondered aloud. She was using her feet to playfully walk up her husband's abdomen from where he sat on the other side of the shower. He grabbed one slightly pruney foot and tilted his wing tip inward enough so he could tickle the sole with a feather. Annie squealed with laughter, jerking her foot away.

"The physicians had told my grandmother she was past bearing age, so my grandfather had ceased to take precautions. Before they knew it, there was Andara!"

Annie had stopped being playful to stare at Rion. "What is it?" he asked, unable to fathom the look on her face.

"Precautions?"

"What about them?"

"You have birth control?"

"In a sense," Rion admitted. "Why do you ask?"

"Have you used any of these 'precautions' with me?" She had to ask. In the back of her mind she racked her brain to try and remember if she had seen him do anything "different" prior to sex. Maybe it would explain her inability to get pregnant again. To her relief, her husband had shaken his head.

"Why would I, when we both want more children?" He tilted his head toward her. "I know we have not discussed this in detail, Annie, but if I was wrong to presume—"

"No, no, no!" she hastened to reassure him. Moving over to his side of the tub, she quickly kissed him before snuggling under his chin. "I do want more children. I want to bear you more sons, and maybe a daughter. I don't care, as long we can be together to love them and give them a happy life and home." Rearing up, she gave him a questioning stare. "Now let me see if I have this straight. There was just you and Vadon. And on your mother's side, her and Joberiah. What about Dramon? Did he have any brothers or sisters?"

Rion sighed. "No. He was an only child."

"What about his mother and father? Your grandparents on that side?"

"They died in a fire fifteen...no, wait, sixteen master cycles ago."

"Any other great-aunts or uncles? Is that the extent of your family?"

Rion caressed her cheek then pulled her face closer so he could kiss the tip of her nose. "That is all of us, such as we are."

"Boy, talk about a meager family reunion," Annie whispered, lying back against his chest. No wonder family and honor and lineage meant so much to them, when there were so few to share and carry on. And no wonder so many people had been terrified when Rion had gone on his suicidal rampage. "Rion?"

"Umm?" His eyes were closed, and he had tilted his head back so that it rested against one of the glass walls. His voice sounded sleepy. It was late, and for the past few days she knew he hadn't been getting enough rest. This time together in the bath had been their first truly intimate, if impromptu, lovemaking in four days. Although she would have given anything to go back into the bedroom and continue to share in each other's bodies, she realized he needed to get out of the shower before his wings got too waterlogged, and get some real sleep.

"I'll dry you off if you promise me one thing."

He kissed the top of her head where she'd pinned up her hair. "That sounds good. What must I promise?"

"Never ever use any of those precaution things without my knowing. Deal?"

Not only had he agreed, but the next day he had brought out some of the items to show her and explained what other methods could be used, so that she would know what they were if at any time they together chose to use any. At that point Annie had promptly bundled them all into a neat little package and dumped them into the incinerator in the kitchen, much to Rion's amusement.

* * * *

Once Rion made sure Kerr was safely strapped in the carrier and tucked against Annie's chest, he slung the bag over her shoulder and lifted her into his arms. It was still early enough in the morning for the thermals to pick them up, allowing Rion to glide over the city at a leisurely pace.

Along the way their son would reach up and try to touch his father's face, giggling whenever a lock of amber-colored hair swept over him and stayed just beyond his chubby reach. Annie buried her face against Rion's neck and breathed in the scent that was his, the scent that reminded her also of her old home on her world, the scent of snow and spring rain and earth-heated air. The occasional swoosh of his wings as he adjusted their course was soothing, and Annie was lulled into a light sleep before she knew it. It was Rion's lips on hers that awakened her.

"We are here, my Annie. Wake up."

They were approaching the far side of the city where the towers were shorter and more rounded. The buildings seemed to be made from an opaque, stoney material instead of the crystalline matter of their own home. Rion told her the milky-colored buildings were alabaster, whereas the towers that seemed to have irregular seams running through them were marble. The tower they were nearing had a slight rose tint. The platforms encircling it were more oval-shaped, to accommodate those who needed more space to land and take off.

"When you get old, will we need to move here?" Annie asked him.

"No, our home is ours for as long as we want," Rion told her with a gentle smile. "Joberia lives here because this is where he was raised."

The moment his feet touched down, the front door opened. Joberia and Minet were there to greet them. For only the second time Annie got to meet Rion's uncle, but his greeting was as warm as it had been the first time.

"Where is Kerr?" he demanded good-naturedly. "Why must you make us wait so long to see the cherub?" The robust angel gave Annie a sound kiss on the mouth before reaching for his great-nephew and extracting him from the carrier pouch around her waist.

Annie marveled at the man's strength and mobility at his advanced age. More so she couldn't help but admire the old gold coloring still present in his whiter hair and wings. The first time she'd met him, she had asked her husband if Andara had also been blonde.

"Yes. My father had darker hair, but Vadon and I look more like her."

Minet walked over to give Annie a hug. Rion lifted the slender woman in his arms and kissed her cheeks.

"We were surprised to get your note," she told them. "It was unexpected, but we are delighted you are letting us keep Kerr for a few cycles."

"I think I remembered to pack everything," Annie said, handing over the baby bag.

"Will you be all right?" the woman angel asked her.

Annie could see the motherly question in the woman's eyes, and nodded, smiling. "I don't think we'll be gone that long," she told her, "although I have no idea what Rion has planned. I just finished feeding Kerr, but I packed a few bags of baby food, just in case. Are you sure he's not going to be a bother?"

"Bother? Nonsense!" Joberiah boomed. He held Kerr aloft, tossing him lightly into the air in a way she had seen Rion do numerous times. Her son giggled with delight.

Rion turned to Minet. "Did a package arrive for me?"

"Oh, yes! Just a moment!" The woman angel hurried back inside the house, emerging almost immediately with a small bundle wrapped in a piece of brown material, which she handed to Rion. He opened it to extract a series of wide straps. The whole thing looked vaguely like a harness. Holding it up, he gestured to Annie.

"Stand here and do not move."

"What is that? Looks like you're hitching me up a wagon," she teased him as he turned her around to face away from him. After he removed the baby carrier and handed it to Minet, she watched the straps go around, behind his wings, to buckle at his chest and waist. The second layer of straps were more thickly padded. These went under her arms to cross at her chest above her breasts, around her waist, and about her hips. When he had finished tightening the harness, she was securely fastened against him, her back to his front.

"I had this specially made for you," Rion explained. "It was not quite finished when I went to pick it up this morning, so I had it delivered here." He stretched his wings far to the sides to check to see if the straps would chafe. From the corner of her eye she could see the massive appendages tower above her. Joberiah nodded.

"She may not have wings, but she will feel as if she does," the older man observed.

Rion nodded. "Precisely. Are you ready?" he asked his wife. "We should be back before too long," he told his uncle, who held out their son for them to kiss goodbye. Minet gave Annie an extra pat on the arm.

"We will take care of him as if he were our own," she promised.

Annie smiled, understanding. Either they had never been able to have children of their own or they had chosen not to. No matter. Kerr was as precious to them as he was to her and Rion.

Placing an arm around her waist, Rion lifted her off her feet. Then, without warning, he launched them off the platform backwards. Annie shrieked softly until she felt him flip them over, righting them. He then pulled his arm away, and Annie found herself suspended above the city with virtually nothing to keep her from plummeting downward except for the harness. With her arms and legs free, she was at a loss as to what to do or what to hold on to until Rion came to her assistance, taking her hands in his and extending her arms outward as he normally would do when in flight.

“Straighten your legs. Like that. Yes. Now, pretend my wings are yours. Can you see them above and behind you?”

She nodded. He was bringing them down and around, taking her up and above the city with powerful strokes. Leaning her head back, she waited until he lowered his face, placing his ear next to her lips.

“Did you make this?”

He shook his head. “I had a Lord of Creation design and make it for me. Of course, I had to give him enough details so that it would fit properly.”

“Details? What kind of details?”

“Ohhh, like how tall you were. How your body was shaped.” His voice dropped. “The softness of your breasts. The firmness of your thighs. How round your hips were. The silkiness of your skin.”

“If you’re trying to embarrass me, you’re doing a great job of it,” she told him. Rion responded with a hearty laugh. Although she knew he had been teasing her, there had to be a grain of truth in his comment. Of course the person who had made the harness had to have certain measurements in order to make sure it fit correctly.

Rion banked, heading back toward the city and taking them lower. At some point he mentioned, "Pontier had told me there might be some abrading where our bodies made contact. I did not think it would matter at the time."

Annie glanced over her shoulder at him. She could feel where his chest and stomach moved against her back and buttocks. With a devilish grin, she knew exactly what he was talking about and wiggled her hips playfully. Immediately Rion clutched her thighs to stop her. Now that his hands were free, Annie realized there were a lot more things he—and she—would be capable of doing in the harness.

"Behave yourself, woman, or I will not share my surprises with you." When she looked back up at him, he winked at her but said no more.

He landed them on a street just inside an entrance to The Green. Three quick clasps released her from the harness and two more allowed him to slide it from around his wings. She waited until he quickly wound it around his hand into a tight bundle before tucking it into the small pouch he wore around his waist under his tunic. Taking her hand, they began walking further into the market area, past shops and stores, and into an area that was different from where she and Chloe often went. She gently tugged on his hand.

"Where are we going?"

"I promised to take you out to eat. There is an eatery here I like that I want to share with you."

They soon reached a long building with the sign of two bowls and a glass. Opening the door for her, Rion escorted her in.

Annie's breath caught in her throat. This place was grander than any of the places he had taken her before. The iridescent ceiling arching overhead glowed like a small sun, with light streaming from small windows set at intervals along the upper walls. A male angel greeted them with a smile and guided them to a table beneath a high canopy. Nearby a waterfall cascaded down a wall of rocks,

separating them from the eyes of some of the other patrons, but not all. Annie became acutely aware of their not-so-subtle glances.

"I brought you here for several reasons," Rion told her as he helped her into the tall, padded chair. At that moment another angel came up to them and Rion gave him their order.

"What? No menu?" Annie asked, curious.

"They have menus. I wanted to order for the both of us. It is something you have not had before. I hope you like it. If not, let me know and we can get you something else."

He took his seat next to her, not across from her. Beneath the covered table their knees touched. Annie smiled at the contact.

"All right, give."

"Give?"

"Why are we here? You said you had several reasons?"

He waited until their drinks were placed before them. "Very well. Where to begin." He took a deep breath, letting it out between pursed lips. "Let us begin with last night."

Annie lifted an eyebrow. "What part of last night?" she asked cautiously.

"At the part where you turned me away," he bluntly reminded her. He stared at his hands, silently forming his words. Annie waited patiently, feeling a little worried. She started to open her mouth to say something when he placed a finger over her lips.

"No. Let me talk. You listen." His voice was hard, but not toward her.

"Does this have something to do with you wearing your chaster this morning?"

Chuckling, Rion shook his head. "You absolutely refuse to follow directions," he accused her with a smile.

"Hey, I learned from the best. Very well. I'll shut up and listen." To prove her point, Annie placed her elbows on the table and rested her cheeks in the palms of her hands.

Rion nodded slowly. "Last night, when you turned me away and accused me of lying to you, Anitra had hoped your refusal would be enough to tear us apart from each other. It was a well-thought-out plan she had concocted with Byric. She did not want me, but she did not want you to have me, either. You do understand that now, right?"

Annie nodded, keeping her promise to remain silent until he was finished.

"Who told you about the chaster? Chloe?" She nodded again. Rion smiled and took a sip of his drink. "I thought as much, since I went to get Vadon to accompany me." He looked at her with his Montana sky blue eyes. "We went before the council this morning and filed an Intent for Dissolution against Byric's house, and against Anitra and her house."

Annie waited. He would explain if she allowed him the time. Patience had never been her strong point, and it definitely was difficult for her to keep her mouth shut now as well.

Rion crossed his arms on the table and leaned closer, keeping their conversation to themselves—an easy thing to do, what with the distance between their table and the next one over, the canopy overhead, and the soft distraction coming from the waterfall behind them.

"What Vadon and I did this morning will have a major impact. You need to know that and be prepared in case someone approaches you about it. What Anitra and Byric attempted to do last night is unforgivable. What is more, they may try to retaliate."

Annie's first thought was for their son. However, Rion seemed to have expected her reaction. "Do not worry about Kerr. There is no way anyone can harm him, or attempt to harm him. No, Annie, I am fearful for your sake. You are the outworlder. You are my wife. You are the cause for this discontent, even though you personally cannot be held responsible for their actions."

She finally had to speak, still stunned by his admission. "What have I done to *them*?"

"Everything, my love. If I had succeeded in destroying myself, as I had been intent on doing before I met you, Byric and his house would now be the most powerful House of Thunder. But, because of you, and because you have given me a son, that will never happen...at least, not in Byric's lifetime."

"And Anitra?"

"Anitra cannot accept the fact that I now reject her or that I have given myself to you."

"An outworlder."

"Yes."

"She wanted to be the wife of a Lord of a House of Thunder. She wanted to bear you an heir."

Rion made a face and tilted his head. "That particular point is...debatable. Maybe she wanted ultimately to bear me a son, but look at what childbearing would do to her figure. How would her body have changed? And let us not even mention the fact that she would have had to use her perfect breasts to feed him."

Annie giggled. He had made his point quite clear. The woman was obsessed with herself, and to have to go through so many months bloated and unpretty would have distressed her without end. "Then why doesn't she marry Byric? He's also a Lord of Thunder."

"Yes," Rion agreed, "but he is not me. He is not of my house. He is not...he does not have my standing with the council."

"I am a very powerful man, Annie. That much I have kept from you, only because I have not wanted anything to change your view of me...or the way you feel about me."

Things were quickly becoming much clearer for her.

"Rion, how powerful are you?"

"Powerful enough to destroy the lives of others if I so wish. Powerful enough to never have to take orders or commands from

others. Not even from the council.” He gave her a hard stare. “Am I frightening you?”

“No man has the right to that much power,” she whispered.

“Agreed. This is why I am glad I have you to whack me across the face with a wet rag if I ever start to come across as arrogant and boastful.”

Their meal arrived, steaming beneath their warming lids. Annie took several bites and discovered something new she liked. They ate in relative silence, until she felt the need to tell him. “I didn’t marry you for your power or standing. I didn’t marry you because of your wealth.”

Rion smiled at her. “I know that.”

“I married you because I’d fallen in love with you. Because you treated me with kindness and gentleness, and because you made me feel as if I was the most important thing in the world to you.”

“I know that, too. And you have never ceased to be.”

“So why are you telling me all this? Are you thinking I can’t handle myself? I’m a big girl. I knew things would be different and strange and maybe even a bit scary being here with you. This place, this world, it’s all so alien to me. But I was willing to come here because it was *your* world. You could not live with me on mine, so I made the only decision my heart would let me make.”

To her surprise, he cupped her cheek and kissed her tenderly.

“And I know that as well,” he said softly, “but I had to tell you. You deserved to know.”

“Right. Well, that’s one down. Is there another reason why you brought me here?” she reminded him.

“Yes. To show you off.”

“I beg your pardon?”

Rion chuckled. “When I first brought you to my world, we both needed time to heal and recuperate from what we had been

through. I selfishly kept you isolated, to give you time to adjust, and time for me to adjust as well."

"*You* had to adjust? To what? Hey, this blue stuff is great. Think they'll let me have the recipe?"

"Other than from my wounds, I was no longer allowed to walk the mission paths. Getting a new job assignment was a pretty big change. Not to mention being a new husband, and soon thereafter a father." He took a sip of his drink. "Ask Chloe for the recipe. She might be familiar with oonas."

Annie grimaced. Of course he'd had to adjust to a lot. She just hadn't been aware of how major of a change it had been until recently. "I'm sorry," she whispered. "That was a thoughtless thing to say."

Rion reached over to take her hand and squeeze it. "I love you, Annie."

"And I you. So why are you showing me off again?"

"Oh, yes, I did get a bit off-track, did I not? As I said, I had kept you away from others so you could gradually feel more secure and at ease. Chloe helped by taking you to do things I thought you would be comfortable doing."

"Like taking me shopping and all?"

"Yes. My people are dying from curiosity to see what you look like, to know who you are, and why I chose you and risked everything to bring you back. Now, after last night, after my telling the council our story, word has gotten out. Once news is released regarding what Vadon and I have done this morning, the public will be insatiable. I realized they needed to see you. They need to see us. Together. They need to get to meet you and get to know you and talk to you. Are you up to it?"

"What do I have to do?"

"Nothing but be yourself. Let them find out on their own what makes you unique, other than your beauty."

Annie laughed. "One day you'll wake up and see I'm not as pretty as you keep insisting I am."

Rion nodded thoughtfully. "Perhaps I will. Then again, you have become even more beautiful in the days since your arrival. Bearing our son has changed you into an incredibly vibrant woman."

Annie opened her mouth to make an offhanded retort regarding how much she might change again, what with a new baby on the way, and then quickly closed her lips. Now was not the time to tell him. Not yet. It had to be a special moment when she finally revealed to him that their dearest wish for another child had come true.

"So you brought me here where others could see me."

"I have been here many times. Just not with you."

"Did you also bring Anitra here with you?" she asked. Immediately she wished she'd never asked him. Dropping her utensils, she covered her face in her hands. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry. Forgive me for asking. I..."

To her surprise, warm hands clasped hers and pulled her hands away. The look he gave her was loving.

"Hush. I should be the one apologizing. Yes, Annie, I have brought Anitra here, but it was a long, long time ago. There is hardly anywhere on my world she did not go with me. Will you ever be able to accept that?"

"I'll try." She bit her lips, knowing there was one last thing she had to mention. "Rion?"

"Ask me," he said. "I know something has been eating away at you ever since last night, but you have yet to mention it. What is it?"

"Anitra said she was the one who taught you everything about how to make love to a woman...and how to please her. Is that true?"

Rion rolled his eyes. "If I say no, you will know I lied. If I say yes, how much would it upset you?"

She was able to laugh shakily at his woebegone expression. "Papa used to say that even the worst relationship has to have at least one good thing come out of it, even if it was the parting of the ways. For me and Foster, it was the fact that he was the one who brought me to Montana so that I could be there when you fell. For you and Anitra, it was her teaching you how to be the most wonderful, the most patient and exciting lover I could ever want. You think maybe I should thank her some day?"

Rion gazed at her incredulously. He started to say something when they were interrupted by an angel requesting if they needed anything else. Dessert? Annie shook her head. When Rion also declined, he presented the familiar slate with a voucher that Rion quickly signed.

"You still haven't given me a clue," Annie told him as they walked out of the eatery. Now that she understood why people stared at them, it no longer bothered her. She wasn't so much an oddity as she was an example of someone living her life with the person she'd risked everything to love. A person who, before, was someone to fear. And perhaps envy. But definitely a person who had never before been able to find it within himself to love himself, much less anyone else.

She had changed all that. And that was why they had to find out all they could about her.

"A clue to what?" Rion glanced around before taking her hand and leading her down the avenue. He had someplace else he wanted to take her, she realized.

"Remember? You said *several* reasons? Common sense tells me it's got to be more than two."

"I am taking you to another one of those reasons now." He glanced down at her. "Do you remember when I first said my vows to you?"

"Yeah. We had just made love for the first time. I told you I wanted to be your wife. Rion, when you said them, I thought they were just real pretty words, but I didn't care. So I repeated the vows the preacher had me say when I married Foster." She gave a little snort. Strange, but it no longer hurt to speak of him. Maybe Chloe was right. Maybe her nightmares about her old life were over. "But when you said those exact same words again in front of the council, you surprised me."

"Why? How?"

"Because I knew then you'd actually said the real thing back at the cabin. That you actually *had* married me then."

"It took you a long while to learn to trust me."

"Yes, it did. I hope you know that when I doubt you, it's not personal. I'm trying, Rion. I really am."

"Back to my question. When we exchanged vows the first time, you mentioned a honeymoon. Remember that?"

"Yes."

"I also asked you what else people on your world did. Do you remember what else you mentioned?"

"Uh-huh. A ring." She stopped abruptly, eyes growing wider as she pulled on his hand. Rion stopped and turned back to her. "You said your people didn't exchange rings. That they didn't need...what did you call it? 'There is no need to parade anything about to remind others.' That's what you told me." She stood straighter. "Rion, are you buying me a ring?"

Laughing gently, he tugged on her hand, urging her to continue walking. The next street over a sign above a shop bore a picture of something that looked like a necklace. When they entered the sparsely furnished business, passing another couple on their way out, the angel at the far end glanced up from a large book he held in his hands. He quickly closed the book, set it on a nearby table, and hurried over to greet them.

"Lord Rion!"

"Lord Egan. May I introduce you to my Lady Annie."

The older man took her proffered hand and bowed over it. "An honor." To Rion he said, "If you will give me a moment," and disappeared behind an opaque panel.

Annie glanced around at the nearly empty shop. Other than a few tables and chairs, there was nothing to suggest the place sold jewelry of any kind. "Are you sure this place sells necklaces and such?" she asked her husband.

"It must look different from the ones on your world." Rion smiled.

"Oh, you can say that again. Where are the counters? What all can you get here?"

"Anything. Necklaces, hair clasps, wrist ornamentation...chasters."

Annie shot him a careful look as Egan emerged from the back room. He handed Rion a small red box. "I followed your specifications as closely as possible. If it is not to your liking, I will gladly try to redesign it."

"It is not my liking you should concern yourself about," Rion told the creator. Turning to face her, he held out the box. "My love..."

Annie glanced from her husband to Lord Egan, then back. Taking the box from his hand, she slowly opened it. Embedded in a swatch of black material lay a slender ring deep blue in color. Annie lifted it from its box, holding it as if it might break if she grasped it too tightly. "It's so beautiful," she breathed. The sunlight coming into the room made its multifaceted surface sparkle. "It's the same color as your eyes. And Kerr's eyes. Rion, I love it."

"It is made of daystrom," Lord Egan told her.

"Blue daystrom?"

"Daystrom only comes in blue," Rion told her, taking the ring from her. "Does it fit?"

Annie grinned at him. "Do you know which finger it belongs on?"

Giving her a lopsided smile, he slowly slipped it over the correct finger on her left hand. It was slightly overlarge, but that was all right. With the new baby coming, she knew her hands would swell.

She held out her hand to see how the blue color seemed to change, depending on how the light hit it—at times robin's egg blue, and at others almost as dark as midnight.

"What is it you say on your world when you give a ring?" Rion asked her softly.

"Mmm, with this ring, I thee wed. I think that's the phrase."

Taking her hand, he held it up for them both to see. "With this ring, I thee wed," he intoned, and kissed her finger. "One year ago today we met. I fell into your world thinking it would be to my death. Instead I fell into your heart, and I fell in love with you. This ring is for our year of life and love together, and I pray we may share a lifetime of those years."

Annie could feel her nose tickling with the first sign of tears.

"Lord Egan, you have done yourself proud," Rion congratulated the man. Egan bowed in appreciation.

"I am honored to have been of service. Lady Annie? If ever I can be of service to you again?"

"Thank you," she told the man. "You do excellent work."

Lord Egan bowed again. This time it was obvious he thought highly of her praise. Annie could swear his ears reddened.

Rion led her outside and removed the harness from the pouch. Annie watched how the ring seemed to catch the suns' light and change colors even more.

"Do you really like it?" he asked her again, drawing her back toward him to slip the straps around her.

"On my world, rings are made of gold because gold's the most precious metal there is, and highly prized by kings. Is daystrom precious on your world?"

"What makes you think it is not?" he murmured against her hair. His hands lingered as he tightened the buckles against her body. Powerful fingers curved around her waist with extreme gentleness. Unlike Foster, Rion never touched her in anger.

Annie stopped to think. Would Rion ever get her anything that wasn't of the finest quality? What had Chloe told her? That there wasn't anything he couldn't afford to get her?

"Now you have me worried," she told him.

"Worried? How?"

"What if someone sees this and wants it? Would people be willing to cut off my hand to have a ring of daystrom?" To her surprise, his answer wasn't what she had expected.

"They might."

"Rion!"

He smiled and lifted off, taking them directly upward to avoid another angel passing nearby. "One more place, Annie, my love, and then we will need to call it an early day."

She nodded, agreeing. After the Honorum the night before, and their hours of lovemaking which had followed, they needed real sleep so Rion could be fresh for work tomorrow.

"What do you have up your sleeve now?" she asked him. He dipped his head to hear her better. He had taken her hands in his and held out her arms, helping to keep her body straight and parallel to his in the harness, thus making for better balance.

"What about my sleeve?"

"First, you took me to eat. Then you gave me a ring. What's next? A picture show?"

"A what?" he laughed.

She shook her head. "Never mind. Where are we going?"

"Wait and see."

She made a little sound of exasperation. That was quickly replaced by a gasp of awe as the city opened up below them in a vista of glistening colors. Flying this way with Rion was quickly becoming more exhilarating and exciting than when he held her in his arms. And although she knew she would miss watching his shoulders and the strong beating of his wings, the sensation that she was actually flying would more than compensate. She glanced at him to say something, and he bent to hear her. "This is wonderful! I feel like I have wings!" she giggled.

"I had hoped you would like it."

"There's just one thing I miss."

"What is that?"

"I miss being in your arms," she admitted.

"Not a problem," he said, releasing her hands to pull her closer to him. Annie immediately realized he had full control of their situation, and was able to touch every intimate part of her. Adding to that bit of knowledge, she felt his lips placing soft kisses along her neck and shoulder.

"Keep your eyes on the road, big boy," she warned him softly.

"Perhaps we should go directly home."

"That might not be such a bad idea. I'm going to need to nurse Kerr soon. Even if I packed his baby food, my body still has a schedule." At the mention of their son's name, she had felt her breasts beginning to harden as they filled with milk. Surprisingly, Rion banked suddenly and headed in another direction.

"My last surprise can wait until later," he told her enigmatically.

They returned to Joberiah's house to pick up their son, keeping their stay brief, but still long enough for the old man to relate an embarrassing story from Rion's childhood. As her husband finished strapping her into the new harness, Annie chose to turn Kerr's pouch around so that their fussy son could nurse on their way home. Soon after taking off, she reached inside the pouch to

lower her gown, guiding the baby to her nipple. Above her, Rion could easily look down to watch their son busy at her breast.

"How long will he be able to do that?" he wondered aloud.

"To do what? Nurse?"

"Yes. How long is a mother able to nurse her child?"

"You haven't been around many nursing mothers, have you?" she asked teasingly.

"You are my first."

"Ah." She watched as their son settled against her, content and warm and lulled to peacefulness with her milk and the rocking sensation of flight. "Rion?"

"Hmm?"

"In most cases a mother can nurse a child for as many as two or three years. I once knew a woman who nursed her daughter up until the girl was nearly four."

"How long do you plan on feeding Kerr?"

She shrugged. "I don't know, but it can't be too long." She smiled. At her husband's questioning glance, she told him, "At the most, he'll have nine more months. Then he'll have to relinquish his rights to the new baby."

Rion's surprise was so drastic, he lost several feet of altitude before he could get his wing beats back into a regular rhythm. Cupping her face in one hand, he turned her head slightly so he could reach her lips. "Annie? This is true?"

"Yes."

"But...how? When?"

She laughed. "I need to tell you *how?*" she teased.

"When did you learn?"

"This morning, when Chloe came over."

"This morning?"

She nodded. "Remember? Last night? You promised we would begin a new life. You haven't lied to me yet."

"Last *night?*"

“Shhh! You’ll wake Kerr.”

They continued the rest of the way in silence. Annie knew a hundred things were going through her husband’s mind at that moment. She wouldn’t be surprised if he wanted to get away once they had arrived home, if only for a short while. He often went on random flights while he got his thoughts in order.

The instant their feet touched down on their platform, Rion hurried her inside, releasing the clips along the way. As the front doors slid shut, he turned her toward him, taking her face in his hands, and kissed her until she felt as if her whole body would melt. She was literally breathless when he pulled back. “A baby? Are you sure?” he asked her again, glancing down at her flat abdomen.

She swallowed hard. “Chloe said it was too soon to tell if it was a boy or a girl, but she said my intuition was correct. I finally got pregnant again. I’m going to have another baby, Rion.”

This time when he kissed her, she had to clutch his tunic to keep herself from falling.

Releasing her, Rion led her over to the sofa and extracted Kerr from the carrying pouch. Annie removed the rest of the gear and watched as he took their son into the nursery to lay him in his own bed. Moments later Rion walked back into the living room to take her hands.

“Come,” he whispered, pulling her to her feet.

Annie immediately balked. Into their bedroom? In there where the bed that—

“Annie, trust me.”

She stopped. At first she hadn’t wondered about her husband taking her out to eat, especially since they’d had such a long night and not enough rest. Then there was the ring and that other secret he had yet to reveal. He had been planning this for some time. And now he wanted her to trust him as he led her into their bedroom?

What was it he had promised her last night, just before they were consumed with each other on the velvet grass in the grotto?

Tonight is ours and ours alone. We have healed from the past, but I have yet to finish making up with you from tonight. And I am not going to spend it in a bed that is tainted. Tomorrow, I will have us a new bed delivered.

Letting go of his hands, Annie walked past him into their bedroom. Inside, the enormous bed that could hold two angels, the bed Anitra had slept in, was gone. In its place was a new bed. It was smaller than its predecessor, but this one had a padded, amber gold headboard. A new set of pure white sheets was already on it, as well as a new set of pillows.

Rion stood to one side, waiting to see her reaction to it. Annie looked over at him. "If it is not to your liking," he began, and then stopped.

Annie walked over to the chair where she'd laid the quilt she'd taken off the other bed that morning. Shaking it out, she carefully placed it on top of their new bed, tucking it in at the foot and corners.

"We made one baby in a cabin in Montana. We made this baby among the flowers in a grotto near The Green. I would like our third child to be conceived in this bed. Our bed. *Our* bed." She turned so he could see the tears in her eyes. "Love me?"

She was not asking for a declaration of his feelings for her. She wanted him to take her into their new bed where they could christen it.

He would never deny her anything.

Chapter 10

The Summons

She was first aware of lips tenderly kissing hers. Softly, gently, seeking the smallest response. When she lifted them, his mouth closed around hers, bringing her further out of the depths of sleep.

Hands at her back pressed her against his warmth, against muscles hardened by years of intensive training. Annie lifted her arms, and a hand guided one of hers down between the tumbled sheets to find his erection already stiff and pulsing. She stroked it, stopping to grasp and squeeze it long enough to make him groan. He trembled in her embrace. His mouth found the satiny skin of her neck and his tongue began to dance over what he knew was one of her more sensitive areas.

Annie opened her eyes slightly. It was still dark, meaning it was either the middle of the night or too early for first dawn. Rion was an invisible presence, unseen but undeniably real. Her body was already responding to his, answering his sexual call with her own.

He rolled her onto her back, following her, and not breaking their contact. Already she was guiding him into her as she continued to stroke him, pulling back only when he had sheathed himself completely, his heat within her greater heat. His body blanketed hers, but her hand remained tantalizingly trapped at their juncture.

As he began to move inside her, he got up on his knees and spread her legs further to cross them behind his buttocks. Bending over he lifted her hips. Now he could dive into her sweet moistness

without putting any extra strain on his arms or back. Annie arched herself and moaned as his thickness filled her.

He moved steadily in and out of her as their sensations gradually expanded. Annie kept her hand between them, touching him and teasing him as she felt him rocking back and forth, wet, hard, and incredibly hot. He groaned softly, and she could feel his fingertips pressing into her waist.

Rion increased his movements, pumping her with more ferocity, yet always aware of any sign or sound that would tell him he was becoming hurtful. When he heard Annie whisper one word, he finally dropped his hands to the bed and lowered his head as he aimed them both toward the edge of their fulfillment. He could feel her tightening around him, forcing him to push harder and deeper. Sight and sound disappeared, only to be replaced with the sensation of fire in their veins as it roared through them, totally engulfing every inch of skin, nerve, muscle, and bone.

Annie cried out as her nails clawed into his back, drawing blood. Her sweet torture slammed into her and capped his own release. Rion shuddered, moaning, to a sweaty halt. Bringing his knees under him, he fell over her, wrapping his arms around her panting body. For several long moments they both trembled in their aftermath, neither one moving, neither speaking, as their waves of passion receded from the shores of consciousness.

Lifting his wings, Rion eased himself onto his side, bringing Annie with him. Lying between the soft covering of his feathers, she nuzzled his sweaty neck, tasting his salt. "Yes. Oh, yes," she finally managed to say breathlessly. "I am definitely going to have to thank Anitra next time I see her."

Rion chuckled and hugged her tightly before settling her against his chest. As their bodies cooled, they fell back asleep, remaining enmeshed until first morning had completely risen.

* * * *

It was Annie who awakened first. It took a bit before the last foggy wisps of sleep fell away, and she became aware of what had drawn her out of her dreams.

There was a baby crying in the distance.

Kerr was crying. It was past time for his feeding.

She opened her eyes and found herself still in Rion's embrace. From the long rise and fall of his breathing she knew he still slept. Carefully she tried to remove herself until a deep voice, muffled in the pillows, mumbled, "I am awake."

"No, you're not," she said softly, smiling. "Go back to sleep."

"Bring him here," her husband said drowsily.

She padded into their son's room where Kerr was standing in the corner of his crib. Seeing her enter, he reached out toward his mother, silver tears covering his cheeks. His tiny wings fluttered as he anticipated being picked up. Speaking soothingly to her son, Annie quickly changed his diaper before carrying him back to the master bedroom. Laying him on the sheets next to Rion, she climbed in, then placed the child against her breast where he began to nurse. Rion reached out to encompass his family, drawing them against his body with the baby cradled between. Annie heard her husband's deep, contented sigh as he sank back to sleep.

It would have been so easy to go back to sleep as well, but she feared accidentally rolling over and smothering the child. Instead she dozed as Kerr gave up his fussiness and played with her hair as he suckled.

At some point Annie switched sides, snuggling backwards against her husband, and let their son have her other breast. This time the overwhelming lassitude that came over her was too much to fight, and she fell asleep as well, her arms firmly entangled in Kerr's tunic in case he tried to crawl out of reach.

There was no way of knowing what time it was when the banging on their front door woke them both. Rion sat up in bed, slightly disoriented.

"Who in the world could that be?" Annie managed to say as she watched him go over to his bureau for a pair of breeches to slide on before exiting the bedroom. To her surprise, moments later, she heard him call her name from the living room.

"Annie. Come here."

The inflection in his voice was one she had never heard before. Quickly she got up and pulled on one of his old, knee-length tunics she liked to wear just around the house. With Kerr still soundly asleep, she dragged a couple of pillows around him for safety and hurried into the living room. To her surprise, Councilman Dimarkus was standing there. Annie paused, immediately aware of how she looked. She couldn't help but notice how the councilman glanced over her.

"Lady Annie," he said, bowing.

"C-Councilman Dimarkus. This is a surprise." She flashed him a smile as she tried to tame her wild mane of hair. "I must look a mess," she apologized as an afterthought. *Not to mention smelling like a cow.*

"You look...endearing," he assured her. "If only my wife could look half as beautiful as you do when she first awakens." Looking back at Rion, the councilman told her, "I am afraid I have brought you both some unpleasant news today."

Annie glanced over at the chronometer on the wall. Seeing her difficulty in reading it, Rion interpreted for her. "It is fourteen and two past first midday."

"You're kidding, right?" Past first midday? They must have slept completely through the morning. It was then she noticed the number of sheets of paper Rion held in his hands. She walked over to peer at them, but they were written in their old language she could not yet read.

By the look on her husband's face, she could see that the councilman's comment was not far off the mark. "What's going on, Rion?" she asked softly. She glanced at the councilman. A small

shock went through her as she suddenly realized how grave the missive must be. Councilmen were not couriers. Nor did they go to peoples' houses for a casual visit wearing their deep blue and green robes of office.

"Yesterday I told you that Vadon and I filed an injunction against Lord Byric and Lordess Anitra for Intent of Dissolution," Rion reminded her.

Annie nodded. "They tried to break us apart and destroy our family and our home. What's happened? Have they counterfiled?"

It was Dimarkus who answered her. "They have filed a Dissolution of Marriage and a Negation of Heredity and Hierarchy against Kerr and all future-born children you and Rion may have."

"*What?*" She stared slack-jawed at him. She didn't understand fully what he was telling her, but she grasped enough to know how serious it was.

"Lady Annie, is it true your first husband is still alive? The one you purportedly left on your world?"

She glanced at Rion, then back at the councilman. Mutely, she nodded. Rion sighed loudly and rammed a fist against the crystal-line wall. The action and sound made her jump. "What? *What?*" she begged.

Dimarkus' face grew grim. "That is the basis of their suit against you. Annie, our laws forbid the taking of another wife or husband if the previous spouse is still alive."

"But what about divorce?" she quickly asked.

"You did not divorce Foster," Rion reminded her. "I took you away from him before that could be done."

"But he tried to *kill* me!" Annie exclaimed. "He tried to kill *you!*" Turning back to the councilman, she reached for his arm and clasped it. "Tell me. What does all this *mean?*"

"It means you and Rion will have to appear at the Court of the Council tomorrow to answer to these charges."

"Why? Because the man who nearly killed me and Rion is still alive? He's in jail back on my world. He's been found guilty by my world's court system of murdering me!"

"Which he did not do," Dimarkus reminded her gently. "If the court finds you and Rion guilty, the council will have no choice but to permanently dissolve your marriage."

"No!" Annie shook her head, aware of the tears burning her eyes. "They can't do that, can they?" She looked at her husband to see the pain on his face.

"What the court decides I cannot alter, change, or argue," Rion told her, his voice breaking. "The laws are final. Even I cannot fight them."

"But...but what about your house? What about Kerr? What did you say they had filed against our son?"

"A Negation of Heredity and Hierarchy," Dimarkus said.

Annie took two strong but shaky breaths. "In short, they're declaring Kerr a bastard, and Rion will have no heirs."

"Not from *your* union, no." The councilman shook his head.

"But, if Rion and I are declared unmarried, then he is free to choose a new wife, one who is not already married, and if *she* gives him a son, then *that* firstborn son will be the next lord? Have I got this figured out correctly?" Annie demanded.

This time the councilman nodded. "You are correct."

She looked to her husband. "Rion?"

"They will not get away with this." He crushed the notice in his hand as the veins in his neck pulsed with anger. "We will fight them," he swore softly.

"Anitra is determined to have you one way or another," Annie told him.

"No," her husband said. "She has chosen Byric. He is the one who wants my station. He wants my house. And he wants my family to suffer."

Turning to the councilman, Annie softly asked, "What can we do?"

Dimarkus clasped his hands before him. "I brought this to you today even though it is not protocol. Lady Annie, you must stay away from Lordess Anitra and Lord Byric. Do not give them any further reason for provocation."

"Do we...do we need to get a lawyer or something?" she asked.

"You mean an intermediary? We do not have those here. You will appear before the court and truthfully answer all questions asked of you." The councilman held up a finger for emphasis. "*Truthfully*, for it is within our abilities to tell if you are lying or hiding something."

Like the physicians on this world who can heal with their hands, those of the House of Law can tell if I'm lying or just telling a fib. She sighed loudly. "And then what happens after everyone has had their say?"

"Then the court dismisses to make a decision. We will be called back to hear their final decision," Rion said.

"And that's *it*? What they say goes? You don't get to appeal or something like that?"

The silence from her husband and the councilman was her answer. Collapsing on the sofa, Annie ran her fingers through her hair, subconsciously gathering it behind her neck and holding it there. Rion walked over to sit beside her, drawing an arm around her waist.

"Rion, they want to dissolve our marriage," she told him weakly.

"I know."

"But what will happen if they do? What will *you* do? What will happen to Kerr?" She lifted a face reflecting her growing fear. "What happens to our other baby?"

Dimarkus' brows came together. "*Other* baby? Lady Annie, are you with child?"

"We only found out yesterday," Rion told the man.

Dimarkus rubbed his chin. "This could prove to be a nice wrinkle."

"Oh? How?" Annie asked, adding a small, humorless laugh. "How could things be any more complicated than they already are?"

Rion kissed her temple. "A marriage cannot be permanently dissolved while a child is in utero."

"Is in what?"

"Yet to be born," Dimarkus clarified. "All children have the right to be born and be given their namesake testimony. You are positive you carry another child in your womb?"

Annie nodded. "Chloe confirmed it yesterday."

The councilman thought for a moment. "Then let me suggest you keep this bit of information to yourselves for the time being. It might become helpful later on."

Annie sniffed, wiping away her tears with the back of her hand. "Councilman, you don't serve on this court?"

"No." He shook his head. "That is not my area of expertise. I serve on the dais for warriors and messengers of the Houses of Thunder."

"Oh, so you've had to deal with Rion's nasty temper in the past," she quipped, totally unprepared for the smile the older man gave her.

"I have been summoned by the court as a witness."

When the couple looked up at him in surprise, Dimarkus shrugged his shoulders. "These charges on your house and Byric's house are serious and far-reaching. Already news of Byric's Intent is spreading throughout the city. I was surprised to find you not at work this morning, Rion."

"I took today off. Apparently that will not be a problem for the next few days," Rion wryly commented, glancing at the papers he still clutched in his fist.

Annie glanced at him, curious. "Why not?"

"Once Byric filed his suit, I was temporarily suspended from my work until the court reaches a decision."

"Can you be fired from your job?" she asked him. To her relief, he told her no.

"However I must be available at any time to answer their summons," he added. "If there is small consolation in any of this, it is the fact that Byric is not seeking dissolution of my house, just of my marriage to you. I do not know if it was an oversight, but I will still be the Lord of my House of Thunder, and my house will continue, even after the court has made its decision."

"What if he realizes his mistake and tries to go back to change it?"

"He cannot," Dimarkus answered. "Once an Intent is filed, it cannot be changed. And our laws prohibit the refiling of an identical or similar Intent after a decision has been reached."

Annie stood and walked over to where the councilman was preparing to leave. "Dimarkus, may I call you by your name?"

"It is only fair, since you granted me the same privilege."

"A few lunar cycles ago you had to test me to see if I was worthy of staying here. Remember that?" At his nod, she continued. "You said that Rion had been wrong, and that I *could* be returned to my world. Was that the truth? Or was it something you guys made up as part of the test?"

Dimarkus' eyes darted from her face to Rion's. Quietly Rion came up behind her and grasped her shoulders. "It used to be where the reverse was impossible, but that was many, many, *many* master cycles ago," Rion told her softly. "Things have changed, and we now believe it is possible. Dangerous, but possible, even though such a thing has never been attempted. So, to answer your question, yes. Yes, it is possible you could be returned to your world."

Annie glanced over to see his hand trembling on her shoulder. She reached over and placed her own over his. Looking back at

Dimarkus, she asked, "Could the court order my return? Or would I have the right to make that decision for myself?"

"It could be either way," he said. "We shall have to wait and see."

Annie gave her husband's hand a squeeze. If she were to return to Montana, she knew there was no possible way he could go with her. The damage to his back and wings was too severe for him to survive taking another passageway through the gap during the storms.

"Rion? If I was ordered back to Montana, what would you do? What about Kerr? What would happen to him?"

"Please, Annie, do not speak of such things."

"But we have to. We have to be prepared for whatever happens. We have to prepare ourselves for the worst."

Dimarkus stepped back. "I will leave you to discuss this further. In the meantime I need to go home and prepare for tomorrow." He motioned toward the papers that now lay spread out on the table by the door. "I will see you at the cathedral at ten and two past the fifth cycle tomorrow. Until then..." He paused then impulsively leaned over to place a fatherly kiss on Annie's cheek. Without another word, he turned and walked out of the doors to launch himself into the sky.

For many long moments they stood in the living room, still stunned by all they had heard.

"Do you think they also served Vadon and Chloe?" Annie whispered. She felt Rion kiss the top of her head.

"I have no doubt, Annie." He turned her around and tightened his arms around her. "I am sorry I have brought this upon you."

"No. *No*." She looked up at him, shaking her head vehemently. "Don't *ever* apologize for bringing me here! Don't you *dare* apologize for falling in love with me, or for sharing your world and your life with me! Don't you *dare* apologize, you understand me?"

"I will fight this with everything in my power. I promise you."

"I know you will, but what if it's not enough? What if..." The intent was too horrible, too certain to even talk about. Annie began to cry silent tears as she buried her face against her husband's chest.

Rion also strengthened his embrace and wept, pressing his cheek to her forehead.

They stood that way until they heard Kerr's soft cries coming from the bedroom. Wiping her face and nose on her tunic, Annie rushed into the bedroom and clutched her son to her. "I won't let them take my baby away from me," she told Rion fiercely as he entered the room behind her. "They can't do that, can they?"

"If they order the guards to intercede, I cannot stop them." He shook his head, still unable to believe what had just happened. "What Byric is doing is unfathomable. He wants a chance at becoming the Grand Lord. By eliminating our marriage, he eliminates Kerr from obtaining the chaster. He knows I will never take another woman, which will leave me without a legitimate heir. And by my house not having an heir, he will finally be given the opening he has been seeking to step into my place."

"Why? What is a Grand Lord? Why would someone be so cruel as to try and destroy a baby's future?"

Rion gazed at her, his Montana sky blue eyes filled with love and worry. "I told you I was a very powerful man. Annie, when a warrior becomes injured to the point of being unable to walk the pathways in the storms, do you know what happens to that warrior?"

"I just figured...I guess...I don't know. What happens to him?" She tried to remember what Chloe had told her, but at the moment she was too upset to think straight.

"His title is automatically given to his first son, who takes over for his father."

Annie blinked. "But what if the son is too young to walk the pathways? Or there is no son?"

"Either way, the house is put in stasis until the child is old enough, or a son is born who can be titled."

That's what Chloe said. Still, something wasn't right. "But wait a minute. *You* became incapacitated. You can't walk the pathways any longer, but they didn't take your title away. Kerr hasn't been made the new lord, and they didn't put our house in stasis. Or did they? They just gave you a different job, didn't they? Rather than make Kerr the new lord?"

"Because I am the Grand Lord. My house rules all the other Houses of Thunder. Thus I was put in charge of overseeing every warrior and messenger, assigning them their pathways, and designating a number to each storm as it forms."

Annie bounced Kerr on her knees to keep their son from fidgeting. He needed his diaper changed as well.

"Was Dramon the Grand Lord before he died?"

"Yes, but he died before he took over the position I currently fill."

"Then who was in charge of all the houses before you took it over?" she asked him.

"That position was in stasis, and therefore under the control of the council until I took it over. Had I died before producing an heir, my House of Thunder would have been dissolved, and the job and title of Grand Lord would then have passed to the next successive lord."

Annie bit her lower lip. "Byric?"

Rion nodded. "Byric."

"Damn." She picked up Kerr and headed for the second bedroom. Rion followed her, watching from the doorway as she changed the baby's diaper.

"We have a slim chance all of this will not go as far as we believe it will," he told her gently.

"Oh, really?" she replied sarcastically. "How do you figure? Point, Foster is still alive. Point, I never divorced him. And point,

we both acknowledged the fact that we exchanged vows *knowing* points one and two existed.”

“What Foster did to you and me was unforgivable. We have laws against such acts of aggression. The courts may not condone our marriage, but neither can they condone what was done to us, either.”

“And you think that’ll sway them enough to dismiss the case?”

“No, Annie.” He paused to gather his strength for what he had to say next. “Annie, we have to face the truth as it is at this moment. Our marriage, the fact that we exchanged vows even though we knew Foster still lived, our marriage is no longer valid on my world.”

“Nooo.”

“It is a fact that will not change, and it is going to be the first thing declared when we walk into the cathedral tomorrow.”

“No!”

“You must be prepared to hear it,” he told her, walking over to put his arms around her.

“*No!*” She turned toward him, looking up at him with panic-filled eyes. “And then what will happen? What happens when they say it aloud?”

Rion kissed her forehead. “I cannot come back here. I will stay with Vadon and Chloe until the court has made its final decision.”

“*No!* No, no, Rion! You can’t!”

“I must, my Annie. The court will see to it we obey their directives. You will be allowed to stay here, but I will be ordered to find another place to live.”

“Then if they dissolve our marriage, can we ever live together? Can we ever be together again? Like Joberiah and Minet? Without the benefit of vows?”

“It is not...” He sighed loudly. “I cannot say. We will have to wait and see.”

Another pounding on the front door interrupted them, but this time it was Vadon and Chloe who had come to see what they could do to help. Annie took the opportunity to change into a gown and try to make herself more presentable.

With the four of them together, Annie felt more in control and confident that something positive might come out of all this. Byric couldn't win his challenge. No more than Foster could ultimately become the victor from his cell on her world.

"What if..." she interrupted as a thought came to her. "What if you just *gave* Byric the Grand Lord title?" She watched as her husband played with Kerr, who lay on his back on his father's lap. It wasn't long before the infant had fallen asleep, still grasping one of Rion's stray feathers.

Vadon snorted. "Rion could no more than do that than to tell the council he did not want to be a warrior of the House of Thunder, even though he was firstborn. It simply is not done."

"You know the first thing the court will do is order our marriage to be dissolved," Rion brought up.

Chloe nodded. "Vadon explained that part to me. You are welcome to stay with us."

"Councilman Dimarkus did say we had a possible ace in the hole," Annie commented. "But we need to keep it just amongst ourselves unless circumstances change."

"What is that?" Vadon asked.

Rion smiled at his brother. "Annie is pregnant with our second child." He looked to Chloe for confirmation. She nodded.

Vadon stared in surprise at Rion. "And when were you going to tell *me*?" He leaned over to give Annie a hug and a kiss. "My congratulations, despite these troubled times."

Annie gave him a warm smile. Turning to her husband, she asked, "What will we do with Kerr while we're at the cathedral? I seriously doubt the court will stop their proceedings while I take

the time to feed him. And we don't want to do anything to irritate them or sway them away from favoring us."

"I will contact Joberiah and see if he and Minet can take him. Unless, of course, they also received a summons," Rion said.

"I doubt it," said Vadon. "They are innocent of any wrongdoing. I would hazard a guess and say the court is calling us four, the physicians who worked on you and Annie at the beginning, and many of the people who attended the Honorum who heard your oratory about how you and she became husband and wife."

Rion nodded, agreeing.

"Look. I just want to know if there's any way on this God's green earth—" Annie stopped. They *weren't* on God's green earth any longer, a fact she'd painfully overlooked. "Is there any way this whole mess can somehow be resolved to the point where Rion and I can still have a life together?" She glanced at the three of them for some sign of cautious optimism. When she didn't see any, Annie bowed her head and buried her hands in her hair. She had yet to braid it or pull it back, so it hung like a thick black cloud over her shoulders and arms, and down her back. Rion reached over and tucked a strand behind her ear.

"We will get through this, my Annie. Trust me. Somehow, someday, we will be together."

It was Chloe who stood up and placed her hands on her hips. "Look, it is almost twenty-seven and six before first sunset. I am starving and I doubt either of you have had much to eat today. Annie, what do you have in the kitchen we can whip up to eat?"

Annie blinked at her. With all the attention they had been giving their problem, she had forgotten the fact that she and Rion had still been in bed when Councilman Dimarkus had come by to give them the bad news. Now, here it was getting close to first sunset and neither she nor Rion had had anything to eat all day.

Once inside the kitchen, Chloe reached out and laid her palm over Annie's lower abdomen. She took a deep breath then gave

Annie a smile. "I just had to make sure. With all this going on, I was beginning to doubt myself." She dove into the cold box and began to pull out various foodstuffs. Annie watched her, still slightly dazed from the events of the past few cycles. Chloe noticed her disconnected expression, and went over to give her a hug.

"No matter what the outcome is, you do know you will always have Vadon's and my love, right?"

"Don't try and tell me everything's going to be just peachy keen."

"No. I will not try and soften the blow you know is coming. But we are here and we will always be here for you."

"What if they decide to send me back to my world? What then, Chloe? What happens to Rion? What happens to Kerr? What happens to our new baby? And what if he or she looks like me? Without wings? Will they say he is an outworlder, too, and order him sent back as well?" The tears that had come before now began anew. Annie gratefully accepted Chloe's embrace and the blanket of healing the physician sent through her to calm her frayed nerves. "I never expected a perfect life," she whispered against the woman angel's ear. "But I always felt I was being allowed to borrow one, if only for a short time."

"Hush!" Chloe ordered her. "You cannot give up, especially now, not when things have not even begun! Just wait, and listen. And watch. And be very, very observant. You have a sharp eye and a sharper ear, and I am willing to bet you will see or hear something that may be just the thing you will need to sway the court in your favor. Now, hand me that bowl over there. I am going to show you how to make oonas."

"You mean the blue stuff?"

Chloe smiled at her. "You had some?"

"Yeah. When Rion took me out to eat yesterday. The same day he also got me this ring." Annie showed her the cut blue stone she wore on her left hand. Chloe's eyes widened.

"Is that...daystrom?"

"Rion got it for me for our first anniversary. Is daystrom a good thing?"

The physician nodded her head slowly. "Oh, most definitely. A very good, very *expensive* good thing."

Annie sighed. "I figured. And then, when we got home, I found out he'd had our old bed removed and a new one moved in its place."

This time Chloe's smile broadened. "That does not surprise me in the least. I knew that might happen sooner than later. Do you have any uncas? Sprinkle a little of that over the oonas and then pop it over a flame. Once you see the sides begin to wilt a bit, it will be ready to eat."

"Chloe?"

"Hmm?"

"Thank you."

"No, Annie, thank *you*."

Annie looked up from the pan she held over the kitchen flame. "Why me?"

"Because of you, Vadon and I have found a way around our problems and discovered a love that was only possible because of what you and Rion showed us."

"We did?"

"Yes. Now, how many terrin seeds do you have? My mother used to make a terrin seed casserole that would make you curl your toes."

Although Annie knew the woman's mood was buoyant specifically for her benefit, she couldn't help but smile. The next few days were going to be sheer hell, but Vadon and Chloe would always be there for her. Just like Rion, they would never abandon her, no matter what the court ordered. Never. She knew it deep in her heart and her heart had never wronged her before.

Chapter 11

The Proceedings

They made love throughout the night, as if it would be the last time they would ever feel their arms around each other. Just before first dawn a female courier named Ballara appeared at their door to take Kerr and deliver him to Joberiah. With Rion's arms holding her tightly, Annie watched her still-sleeping son being flown away as sobs hitched in her chest. She had to make it through these next few days with as brave a face as she could possibly muster. Her future, her husband's future, and the future of their children depended on it.

But it was going to be so damn hard.

Barely sixteen minutes after first dawn a guardsman came to their door to escort them to the Council Cathedral. He was a man somewhat older than Rion, wearing dark green robes and carrying a sword at his hip. Instead of using the new harness he had had made for her, Rion carried her in his arms. On their trip to the cathedral, Annie kept her arms tightly wound around his neck, her face pressed next to his.

As they approached the immense jade tower, Annie could see a multitude of people already gathered outside the building. She looked at her husband in confusion.

"They are here to observe the proceedings," he told her softly.

"Will they also be inside?"

"Those given special clearance, yes."

Once they landed, Rion gave her a last, tender kiss and told her he loved her before another guard took Annie by the arm to

lead her into the building. Angrily she shook off his hand. Lifting her chin, she walked unassisted through the arched doorway and into the judicial portion of the cathedral.

A high dais lined one obsidian wall. Four of the nine chairs were already occupied with the councilmembers who would determine her and Rion's fate. On the floor below and before them sat several chairs scattered throughout the otherwise empty room. Annie stared at the haphazard-looking setting of chairs, each of which sat on a short pedestal within a small, gated enclosure. The guard led her to one of the chairs, helped her up the single step then closed the gate behind her. Annie sat down to find the railing of the fence came up to her chest; when she stood, it would be waist high.

There were sounds of other people filling the room, sounds which came from overhead. Annie could see that there was a balcony level of sorts which went all around the chamber, overlooking the central floor. Already the spectators were talking and pointing downward at her and everyone else below. Those given special clearance. She lowered her head and shivered.

She counted slowly to ten then looked up to see that three more chairs had been filled on the dais. That left just the two in the center. Annie glanced around and spotted Rion about fifty feet away, slightly behind and to her left. The guard assigned to him was talking to him, probably giving him some instructions, as Rion would occasionally nod. His eyes caught hers, and he acknowledged her by placing two fingers to his lips. She answered with a kiss to the ring on her hand. He was resplendent in his black uniform and black-gray official tunic. The chaster around his neck seemed to glow in the sunlight streaming through the domed glass ceiling.

To her far right she saw Anitra being seated. The woman angel wore her official blue and yellow robes of her office. She looked

even more beautiful than she had the night of the Honorum. She also looked more dangerous.

A few feet away, and a little behind Anitra, Lord Byric, wearing his official uniform and chaster, took his assigned chair. He shot Annie a dark glance, but she was too far away from him to tell what it meant.

A small swelling of sound reverberated through the hall. The guard standing just behind and to the side touched her carefully on the shoulder. "Stand," he ordered in a low voice.

Annie quickly got to her feet and watched as the last two councilmen entered the dais and took their seats. The one directly in the middle carried a staff, which he beat on the floor for attention.

"The parties involved remain standing. All others may be seated," he intoned, giving the upper balcony a moment to obey. Once things had settled, he began to read from a sheet of paper.

"Here it be known, on this eighty-first day of the master cycle two zero two four nine nine five, as noted by our historians, the Court of the Council was called into session. Historians, please note the names of those involved in this dispute, and the names of our venerable panel of judges.

"Of the parties involved, Grand Lord Rion, Lady Annie, and Under Lord Vadon of the House of Thunder. Lordess Anitra, of the House of Law. Lord Byric, of the House of Thunder. All others who will be called upon to testify will be named as they are summoned.

"However, before we begin, this panel would like to remind everyone of a few general rules of conduct in the court. Any undue noise or disturbance by the assembly above will not be tolerated. Defendants, you will rise when you are addressed. Otherwise you will remain seated. You may not address this court or the panel unless we address you first. A guard has been assigned to each of you to ensure that all abide by the rules."

He set the paper aside. Claspings his hands on the table before him, he looked out over the room.

"Our first order of the day..." He stopped to check another paper beside him. "We have a protest filed by Grand Lord Rion and Under Lord Vadon against Lordess Anitra and Lord Byric, on the grounds of Intent for Dissolution of a House of Thunder. Lordess Anitra, how do you plead?"

"Undeserving, your Lordships," she called out in a clear voice.

"Lord Byric, how do you plead?"

"Undeserving, your Lordships," he replied as well.

"Historians, please account for their responses. We will now address the protest filed by Lordess Anitra and Lord Byric against Grand Lord Rion, Lady Annie, and Under Lord Vadon. Count one. To wit, a Dissolution of Marriage between Grand Lord Rion and Lady Annie on the grounds that Lady Annie's first legal marriage is still valid, that the first husband still lives, and that the marriage itself was never declared void. Count two. To wit, a Negation of Heredity and Hierarchy against the child known as Kerr because of the circumstances of the first Intent. Grand Lord Rion, how do you plead?"

"Deserving, your Lordships," Rion responded.

Above them the balcony and rotunda became abuzz, but the noise quickly died.

Turning to Annie, the councilman in charge asked her, "Lady Annie, how do you plead? And please remember, we will know if you speak the truth or not. If you do not, we will be forced to increase the penalties if you are found deserving."

She cleared her throat. "Deserving, your Lordships."

The councilman looked to the side of the dais where Annie noticed for the first time a man standing nearby. He wore official robes of black and green. At their signal, he nodded toward the panel. It was then Annie realized that black and green men were

scattered around the room, strategically near each of the occupied chairs.

Overhead the balcony erupted into heated whisperings. However, a sharp look from the guards brought it instantly under control.

The panel of councilmen moved away from the table for a short discussion. Annie took the moment to glance back at Rion, but the expression on his face was unreadable. His body posture, however, was as rigid as stone.

The panel moved back into position. "Lady Annie, please state for the court your full and legal name."

"Annabel Lee Prichard...Mayall. Mrs. Foster Mayall. Lady Annie."

Another brief discussion ensued then the head Lordship rapped his staff on the floor. "It has been determined by the court that, upon the accused's admission, the marriage between Grand Lord Rion and Lady Annie is hereby declared invalid. Both parties will be separated until the court has made its final decision."

Annie's hand flew to cover her mouth, and she had to bite down on her lips to keep from crying out. Rion had warned her this would happen, but she still hadn't been prepared for the knife that sliced into her heart when it was announced.

"Until these proceedings are concluded," the head Lordship continued, "the woman formerly known as Lady Annie will be referred to only as 'Annie'. In addition, the child of Annie and Grand Lord Rion is now considered unrecognized by the Houses of Thunder. We so decree. Historians, make note." He banged the staff twice more, causing the balcony to erupt into a low hum of activity.

Through her tears Annie glanced back at the man who had been her husband, but Rion had lowered his head. Behind him she could see Vadon staring off to one side. She followed his gaze until

she spotted Chloe seated near the back of the hall. Even this far away she could see the tears on the physician's face.

The rapping staff brought quiet to the room. "The accused may be seated."

Annie felt her knees give way and grasped the railing for support. Its smooth, glassy surface was cold to the touch, but it was solid. She felt disoriented and dizzy, which forced her to strain to hear what the court had to say next.

"The court will proceed in the following manner. Lordess Anitra and Lord Byric, as the initial accused, you will be allowed to defend yourselves first. After their testimony, Grand Lord Rion, Under Lord Vadon, and Annie, you will be given an equal chance to testify. Lordess Anitra, please rise."

The woman angel got to her feet and faced the panel.

"Lordess, two evenings ago you attended an Honorum for Grand Lord Rion, is that correct?"

She nodded. "That is correct."

"And at that time there was an instance where you claim Annie threatened you with bodily harm?"

"Yes, your Lordships."

"Will you please tell the court exactly what she said that made you believe your life may be in danger?"

"I was in the women's facilities holding a conversation with friends when she walked up to us and told me that...that she would make a deal with me."

"A deal?" The question came from the Lordship next to the one with the staff. Anitra looked at him and nodded.

"She said that if I left her alone, she would not beat the living crap out of me."

"The what?"

The woman angel swallowed hard. "The living crap, your Lordships."

The balcony was overcome with the sound of titters and muffled laughter. It took the rapping of the staff to return to order.

Picking up a sheet of paper, the other Lordship read from it. "Why do you think Annie made such a threat to you?"

"Because, your Lordships, she found out that I had cohabitated with the man she called her husband."

"That man being Grand Lord Rion?"

She nodded. "Yes, your Lordships. She found out he had asked me to exchange vows with him before he had done the same with her."

"And what do you think prompted her to make such a threat if you no longer cohabitated with Grand Lord Rion?"

"I feel she may have been jealous, your Lordship, especially over the fact that during our cohabitation I became pregnant."

Annie felt the blood draining from her body as the panel urged her to continue. A baby? Anitra had been carrying his child?

"When Grand Lord Rion discovered my condition, he urged me to exchange vows with him," Anitra told them.

A quick glance over to what Annie now thought of as Truth Knowers told the panel she was still saying the truth. "Go on," they told her.

"However, I put him off because I was not convinced of Grand Lord Rion's sincerity. Or his love."

"You mean you did not accept his offer to exchange vows because you felt he did not love you?" the first Lordship reiterated.

"Correct. In fact, it was after I lost the baby that Grand Lord Rion and I separated. I believe she found this out, and that is what prompted her to target me with her hatred."

A motion from the corner of her eye drew Annie's attention to Rion seated behind her. The guard had lifted his sword parallel to the floor. It must have been a signal of some sort, because the panel paused.

“Grand Lord Rion is invoking his right of clarification,” the guard told them.

The panel nodded. “It is his right if he feels that not all of the truth has been given. What is it you wish to know, Grand Lord?”

“I wish for the Lordess Anitra to be examined and determined that she had indeed been with child.”

“Why? Is there some reason why you believe she may not have been?” The Master Lord spoke to the man on his left, and then turned back to Rion. “So far her testimony has been truthful.”

“I was never given confirmation by a physician on her condition,” Rion explained. “From the time I was given the news, to the time she miscarried, I had only her word. Your Lordships, I believe Lordess Anitra truly believed she had been carrying a child, which is why she would register with the Truth Seekers as positive. However, I never had any proof to back her claim.”

Truth Knowers, Truth Seekers. Annie clasped her hands in her lap to keep them from shaking. Rion had not told her about Anitra carrying his child, but it would explain why the woman was jealous of Annie giving birth to his heir. Maybe it would also explain—

A Lordship leaned over to give the Master Lord some information. Rapping his staff, the head councilman said, “I am told there is a physician in the court who can come forward and clear up this testimony. Physician, make yourself known.”

It was Chloe who stood, wearing the red robes of her house. She quickly walked over to where Anitra stood, avoiding eye contact with either Rion or Annie. Placing a hand over the woman’s abdomen, she closed her eyes and concentrated. The room grew as silent as a tomb.

Taking a deep breath, Chloe opened her eyes and faced the panel. “There is scar tissue, your Lordships. She bears the marks of a miscarried pregnancy.”

The panel thanked her before dismissing her back to her seat. Annie glanced over at Rion, who remained expressionless. To her

consternation, he also would not make eye contact with her. She glanced back at Anitra, who took the moment to look back at her. A smug smile of self-satisfaction came over the woman's face, and Annie had to turn her face away.

The panel continued to interrogate Anitra, but Annie no longer heard them. Rion and Anitra. When she had first discovered the truth about them at the Honorum, she had been crushed. Not because of her husband's dalliance with the woman prior to his marriage to her, but because Rion had not told her the whole truth about his past.

The whole truth.

Annie's head flew upward.

Whole truth!

Turning to the guard behind her, Annie urgently whispered, "Am I also allowed the right of clarification?"

The guard stared at her for a split-second before nodding. Immediately he unsheathed his sword and held it aloft, parallel to the ground. The panel, once again in brief consultation, paused. Annie couldn't help but notice the astonished looks on several of their faces.

"La— Annie is invoking her right of clarification," the guard told them.

The Master Lord cleared his throat. "What is it you wish clarified?" he asked her.

Annie rose unsteadily to her feet. From the corner of her eye she could swear Anitra's posture changed. "Your Lordships, if I may. Where I come from, when a woman learns she is with child, she refers to the child as *his* child, referring to the father by name. Which means she would have said *Rion's* child. She would have said 'I became pregnant with *his* child', not just 'I became pregnant'. She would have said 'I lost *his* baby', or '*our* baby', not 'I lost *the* baby'. Your Lordships, please ask Lordess Anitra if the child she carried was Rion's."

“And what makes you believe it was not?”

“Because if she had said it was Rion’s, I think your Truth Seekers would have caught her in the lie. But by excluding Rion’s name, she would be admitting to just enough truth to throw them off the scent, so to speak.”

The Master Lord grimaced. It was clear the man didn’t quite understand what Annie was trying to prove, but she was well within her rights to ask. “Very well. Lordess Anitra, was the child you conceived fathered by Grand Lord Rion?”

Annie watched closely as the woman bit her lips. She looked over at Lord Byric, who remained expressionless. She then glanced at the Truth Seeker staring back at her. Turning back to the panel, she finally took a deep breath.

“No, your Lordships,” she murmured, almost too softly to hear.

“Pardon us, but would you repeat that louder?” the panel asked.

“No, your Lordships,” Anitra repeated. “The child was not fathered by Grand Lord Rion.”

Annie could feel her heart resume beating when the Truth Seeker near her nodded his head to the panel.

“Then who was the father?” another councilman asked.

“Lord Byric,” she told them.

The balcony exploded with sound. The Master Lord pounded his staff on the floor and called for silence.

“Lordess Anitra, do you realize that by your confession, all of your previous statements must be removed from your testimony?”

Anitra opened her mouth but nothing came out. She had gambled. She had taken the chance that the room would not question her because of her prestige and position in the House of Law, nor would they think beyond her initial statements, especially when a physician had just verified the fact that she had actually been preg-

nant but lost the child, and the Truth Seekers had not found her statements to be false.

“Lordess Anitra,” the panel continued, “by excluding crucial testimony, you colored the truth to make it appear as one thing, when in fact it was completely the opposite. Guard, please escort Lordess Anitra from these chambers. Her suit against the accused is summarily dropped, and she will be called upon at a later date to face charges brought about by this council because of her duplicity. Court is recessed for one cycle.”

Abruptly the entire panel rose to its feet and filed off the dais behind a panel in the wall behind them. Annie sat down and covered her face with her hands. She didn’t feel cold, but her body suddenly wouldn’t stop shivering. Earlier she had felt her breasts grow hard and hurting as they filled with milk. Her body was ready to nurse only there was no baby to release the pressure.

Annie gasped. She tried to clear her mind, concentrating instead on the small sense of satisfaction she felt for seeing through Anitra’s deceit. When the hand came down on her shoulder, she jumped. Looking up, she was surprised to see Chloe’s smile hovering above the railing.

“What is wrong? I requested the court to let me check to see if you are feeling well.”

“Chloe?” She was afraid to reach out; afraid her friend was a figment of her imagination. That all of this was one horrible nightmare.

Chloe leaned over the railing and laid a hand on Annie’s arm. “I do not know how you figured out Anitra was hiding the truth, but we are astounded.”

“We?” The shivering wouldn’t stop. For some unexplainable reason the room was becoming unbearably cold. Annie clutched her upper arms and pressed them hard against her chest. Unconsciously she began rocking back and forth with increased agitation.

"Me. Vadon. Rion." Chloe grew concerned. "Annie, what is wrong? Why are you shivering like this?"

Somehow Annie managed a weak smile. "I-I don't know. Y-you're the phy-sician. You t-tell me." Closing her eyes, she drew herself into a little ball and hoped Chloe would do something, and quickly. Somewhere in the distance she heard the gate to the little cage where she sat slam against the railing. A pair of warm hands touched her face then grabbed her arms, and finally Annie was aware of those same hands touching her breasts through the thin material of her gown.

"Annie, you have milk fever. Guard! I need to have her removed to a private room *now!*"

Distantly Annie could feel herself being carried some distance to a place that was quieter than the hall where she had been sitting. Something soft cushioned her, and immediately the top of her gown was pulled down and firm hands began to gently knead her breasts. She groaned from the pressure and dull pain.

"Chloe."

She was turned on her side, then those same hands began to press against her breast—first one, then the other. It was several moments before Annie began to understand what was going on.

"Chloe, what are you doing?"

"You were forced to stop nursing without taking any precautions," she heard the physician whisper against her ear. "But your body is still producing milk. That milk backed up, with nowhere to go. Yet your body continued to produce more milk because that is what it must do when you give birth and breastfeed your child."

The pressure was slowly easing, yet the cold persisted.

"Chloe?" Annie murmured, still groggy from the physician's healing power.

"Hush, Annie. I am expressing the milk from your breasts, hoping it will bring down your fever"

"But I'm so c-cold."

"That is your body trying to cope with the excess and pressure."

"K-Kerr. I need to feed Kerr."

"I will speak to the court," Chloe promised her. "It may not do any good, but I can only hope. How are you feeling now?"

Cautiously, Annie opened her eyes to see the physician sitting back on her heels. She seemed to be lying on a low divan. A bowl of thin, whitish fluid sat on the floor between them.

"B-better. But you can't continue to do this. In a few cycles I'll be right back to where I was." Annie managed to sit up with her help. She gave the woman a sad smile as she lifted the straps of her gown back over her shoulders.

"There is some medication I can give you to help with the pain. If we bind your breasts tightly, it will help with your production. Not all of it, but maybe enough to avoid any more problems." Leaning over, she placed a hand on Annie's forehead. "I do not know what to do, Annie. This worries me. I could stop your production completely by giving you a powder to dry you up, but what if they return Kerr to you? Yet, if I try to limit you, you could be suffering for a long period of time. What shall I do, Annie? The choice is ultimately yours."

"Do you think there's any chance at all that they would give my son back to me? He's not even a year old. What if I'm not allowed to continue to feed him?"

"There are some babies who cannot take breast milk. There is a substitute product they are fed instead. Kerr is able to take a little baby food, which is good. If the court removes you completely from him, he will not suffer. Instead of your milk, the substitute will be provided until he is ready to be completely weaned."

Annie grasped her hands as a small wave of dizziness came over her. Instantly she felt Chloe's warmth evaporate it. "If I am banished back to my world, Kerr will have to stay here, won't he?" she asked her.

The physician nodded her head. "He is of our kind."

"You mean, with wings."

"Yes. He would not be able to survive on your world. There is too much of Rion in him. Even if, somehow, you were able to disguise or mask his wings, his body, his physique, his *blood* would still be different. He would be prone to diseases and all sorts of ailments that to you might be harmless, but to him could be fatal. Would you want that for your son?"

Annie shook her head as a single tear escaped from beneath her closed lashes. "And this child I carry now? Can you tell me if he, or she, is of your kind as well?"

Chloe took a deep breath and held it for a moment before expelling it quickly. She placed her palm over Annie's abdomen then concentrated. After a brief pause, she shrugged. "It is still too soon."

A knock on the door interrupted them. Chloe got to her feet and walked over to open the portal. The guard which had been assigned to Annie looked in. "The court is ready to convene. Is she ready to resume her seat?"

Annie managed to stand without help. "Yes, I can take my seat. Will you give me a hand?" she asked the guard.

Surprised by her request, the guard offered her his arm. Annie looked back at her friend.

"I will be out presently after I take care of this," Chloe told her, motioning toward the bowl.

"Thank you," Annie said.

"If you start to feel the same way again, notify your guard," the woman angel told her.

Annie nodded, and the angel led her back to the hall for the second round of questioning.

Chapter 12

The Oath

Rion remained in his seat, gripping his hands, as the hall echoed with voices from overhead. His mind was still reeling from the pronouncement the court had given to Anitra after Annie had seen through the one crack in her otherwise polished veneer and forced the woman to reveal the whole truth.

He had not been the father of the child she had claimed to carry. Her pregnancy had been real, but it had been Byric's seed. Not his. And to think that Anitra had made him shoulder the burden of guilt and the stigma for her loss for all these lunar cycles.

His pride had not suffered from the fact that Anitra had been making love to Byric behind his back, but he cursed himself for being so blind that he had not seen the signs. No. He had seen the signs; the fact was that he had been too self-obsessed to recognize them for what they were.

The court would come down heavily on Anitra for her duplicity. Without a doubt she would lose her title. And her house—as Councilman Dimarkus had predicted earlier—would be placed in stasis until another more worthy successor could be named.

But there was still the matter of Byric's accusations. Rion glanced over to where the warrior sat in his chair. The man was nervous, Rion could tell. Yet there was indisputable proof of what he had threatened to do to Byric at the Honorum.

Most damning of all was the fact that Annie was still married to her first husband. Above and beyond all else, that fact alone had ultimately doomed their marriage, disgraced his house, and would

prevent Kerr from assuming the title. Unless he married again—an act Rion knew he was now free to do since the courts had nullified his vows to Annie—and had another son, his house had no heir.

And he had no one to blame but himself. Annie had tried to stop him that night from telling all, but he had not listened. All he could think about was protecting her from the viciousness and rumors he had been shielding her from ever since he had first brought her back. And the only way he knew to completely dispel the hate-mongering was to tell the truth.

For now, however, he had another worry eating away at him. Annie had not looked well. When she had finally heard from Anitra what he had been keeping from her all this time, she had gone whiter than snow. It was a moot point now. The child Anitra had carried and lost, all within three short lunar cycles, had never been his. But up until that moment when Annie had made the woman admit to her falsehood, he had believed it was. Had been made to believe it was. *Damn the woman.*

It wasn't until the court had dismissed for a brief recess that his fears had escalated. There was no way he could go to her when she had doubled over in her seat. He could only breathe prayers of thanks that Chloe was there to see to her and to call for assistance when Annie needed to be carried out.

Rion closed his eyes. He could not lose Annie. Despite the court's dissolution of their marriage, he was still tied to her, heart to heart, soul to soul. There was no way a love as deep as theirs could be wiped away because of a simple edict. If she was willing to live with him and bear his children, despite the fact that they would be labeled as illegitimate—if it meant his house would be placed in stasis until an acceptable heir could be titled—so be it. They could live a comfortable life on the monies he had accumulated upon his father's death and his subsequent missions. Even if he lost his job and his title, there would be enough as long as they were careful not to be extravagant.

The door at the far end of the hall opened. Moments before, the guard assigned to Annie had gone to check on her condition. Now he was returning...with Annie on his arm.

Rion jumped to his feet, searching her face, hoping she would look at him and give him some clue, some explanation as to why Chloe had whisked her away. Was it their unborn child which had caused the problem? Was it the stress and worry of the trial that had made her ill? *What?*

He knew his guard was carefully watching him to make sure he did not leave the cubicle where he had been placed. Rion remained where he was as he watched her being led back to her seat. When she never made eye contact with him, Rion searched for Chloe, knowing she would also have to return to her seat in the hall. Presently, the physician emerged from the back room and quickly hurried back to her seat without looking at him.

The councilmen were returning to the dais.

Glancing over his shoulder, he saw Vadon nodding slowly. *Patience, dear brother, patience. You will find out eventually.*

The Master Lord rapped his staff as the panel resumed their seats. "Guards, are all parties still involved able to resume?"

One by one each guard gave a simple "Yes, your Lordships." Annie glanced up at hers as he spoke and flashed him a grateful smile. To Rion's surprise, the corner of the man's mouth twitched before he returned to his normally stoic countenance.

"Lord Byric, please stand. The court has decided it must warn you now that because of Lordess Anitra's past statements, your responses will be closely scrutinized and suspect to further questioning. Do you understand the gravity of this requirement?"

Byric nodded, his face pale. "Yes, your Lordships." With Anitra dismissed for hiding the full truth, everything he said now would be watched and examined with extra care.

As the panel continued to caution Byric, Annie slowly looked over her shoulder to find Rion staring intently at her. Seeing her

looking back at him, he lifted his head slightly, his brows knitted with concern. She gave him a quick smile to reassure him, and placed two fingers shaped in a V to her lips. It was their private signal, one that Rion had first taught her back when they had been in Montana. He called it “a kiss with wings”.

The worry instantly disappeared from his face. He gave her a winged kiss in reply. Annie turned back around to listen.

“—this panel’s expectations. Are you in agreement with this, Lord Byric?”

“Yes, your Lordships.”

“Very well.” The Master Lord held out his hand for a document that was quickly handed over. Turning back a page, he began to recite.

“Count one. Dissolution of the marriage between Grand Lord Rion and Lady Annie. This count is summarily dismissed. The dissolution has already been enacted. Count two. Negation of the Heredity and Hierarchy for all offspring of the above mentioned in count one. This count is also dismissed as count one automatically assured count two.” Closing the document, the Master Lord looked to Lord Byric. “Is there anything you wish to say at this time before we begin the next portion of these proceedings?”

“Yes, your Lordships. If I may address Grand Lord Rion, I would like to invoke my right to open and weaponless discussion.”

“So granted, but keep it brief.”

* * * *

Annie jumped when the guards standing beside Byric and her husband suddenly unsheathed their swords and jabbed them point-down into the floor. The clash of metal on crystal reverberated through the room. Byric waited until the sound had faded away before speaking.

“Rion! I wanted to bring this forth in front of witnesses so that there can be no question as to what I ask. I also want it to be noted by the historians, and therefore be made absolute.”

"What is it you want, Byric?" Rion's voice was low, cold, controlled. Annie knew without having to look back at him that he would be balling his fists in anger.

"I want your word as a Lord and a warrior that you will in no way retaliate toward Lordess Anitra for what she has done, or for what she has said against you or Annie," Byric stated.

Annie heard her guard's quick intake of breath and she looked up at him to see the disbelieving expression on his face. Quickly she turned to see Vadon's face bearing a similar look.

"I will not in any way retaliate toward Anitra because of anything she has done or said toward me or Annie," Rion agreed.

Byric nodded, satisfied. "One last thing. I want your word as a Lord and a warrior that *you* will in no way retaliate toward *me* for what I have done or said or will say against you or Annie."

Annie saw Vadon leap to his feet, only to be warned to sit back down by his guard. Rion's guard was also keeping a close eye on his charge. Even though Rion was bigger and more muscular than the man, Annie knew Rion would not do anything to upset or anger the panel. Not when their future still hung in the balance.

"I will not in any way retaliate toward you because of anything you have said or done or will say or do toward me or Annie," Rion recited as the muscles in his jaw clenched and unclenched.

Byric took a noticeable breath. "So be it written!" he exclaimed loudly.

"By this same right, Byric! Swear the same! For me and Annie," Rion demanded. "*Say it!*"

Byric looked up at the panel, fully expecting them to grant him amnesty. But when none came, he grudgingly gave Rion his solemn oath to do no harm. "I will not in any way retaliate toward you or Annie because of anything you have said or done or will say or do toward me." Bowing toward the panel, Byric resumed his seat and his guard sheathed his sword. Behind her, Annie watched Rion retake his seat as well, and his guard sheathed his sword. An

unspoken message passed between Vadon and Chloe, leaving Annie to wonder the significance of Byric's actions.

"Annie, please stand."

Taken by surprise at their request, Annie stood.

"This court has already taken action with regards to the two sets of Intents filed by both parties. The Dissolution of Marriage and the Negation of Heredity brought by Lordess Anitra and Lord Byric have been made absolute. The original Intent by Grand Lord Rion and Under Lord Vadon has been dismissed as no longer relevant, and is no longer a valid issue because of the dissolution. Do you understand so far, Annie?"

"I...I think so, your Lordships."

"Good. Because of the dissolution, we are now forced to take into account the fact that you are an otherworlder—"

A sudden sound behind her made her turn around in time to see Rion slap away his guard's restraining hand on his shoulder as he remained on his feet. Wide-eyed, she turned back to face the panel. He knew something was about to happen. Something was about to be said, and he had gotten to his feet against protocol to protest. Annie could feel small tendrils of fear start to curl inside her stomach.

"Sit down, Grand Lord Rion," the Master Lord said quietly.

"Permission sought—" Rion began.

"*Sit down*, Grand Lord Rion," the Master Lord repeated, this time with less patience.

"Please, your Lordships—"

"Lord Teth!"

Without warning, the tip of her guard's sword was suddenly aimed at the hollow of her throat. Annie clutched the railing in fear as the metal point remained unwavering less than an inch from the pulse beating beneath her skin.

Slowly she lifted her eyes to see sadness in her guard's eyes. He had no choice but to obey and now he was silently asking for

her forgiveness as his hand never moved away from the front of her face.

There was a faint sound behind her. Immediately thereafter, the Master Lord nodded, and the guard sheathed his sword. Annie shuddered from what had just happened and resisted the urge to glance back once more.

"We were speaking of you being an otherworlder. To resume...because you are no longer the wife of one of us, we must deal with the fact that there is no reason why you should or must remain any longer on our world.

"We have taken into consideration your son, Kerr. Being as he is of our blood, he may remain with us. Also, because of his age, we have consulted a physician who has assured us that he is no longer dependent upon you for his well-being."

At the mentioning of a physician, Annie turned to find Chloe's eyes. The woman angel shook her head to let her know it had not been her they had consulted.

"Therefore, this panel is closing this Intent for the evening and will resume deliberations again on the morrow at twenty and five before the third cycle of the first morning. At which time, we will hear further testimony as to whether or not you will be allowed to remain on this world, or be returned to your world. Guards, see to your charges."

The huge ornate staff lifted and fell twice. The panel rose as one and filed out of the hall.

Annie slowly fell back into her chair. She felt numb all over, detached from all that had happened.

They had wiped out her marriage to Rion as if it had never happened. Kerr had been declared a bastard and no longer Rion's heir. Worse, they would determine tomorrow if she would be allowed to remain on this world or be returned to hers.

Unable to think about it any further, Annie squeezed her eyes shut and clutched a handful of her guard's robes. Unexpectedly, a

warm, strong hand took hers. She glanced up to see her guard staring down at her. Concern was written across his face.

"I must take you home now," he told her.

Annie nodded and got shakily to her feet. She wanted to watch Rion leave, but she was afraid it would be too difficult. It was nearly impossible to keep her composure as it was.

"Would you like for me to call you a trip?" the guard inquired, helping her out of her cubicle.

"Could you...I mean, would it be possible for you to fly me there instead? I'm sorry, but I really, really don't want to be alone right now."

The guard paused to mull over her request. Annie didn't know if what she'd asked of him was protocol or not, and right now she really didn't give a damn. She needed a hug. She needed someone's arms around her to make her feel protected, if not worthy of a meager amount of affection.

He led her out of the hall and over near the edge of the platform outside of the cathedral. Automatically Annie backed away from the lip. The guard understood and swung an arm under her knees, lifting her easily. He leaped from the platform without any difficulty.

"Do you know where you're taking me?" she asked him. She had wrapped her arms around his neck the same way she did whenever Rion and Vadon carried her. The guard nodded.

"The silver towers. Everyone knows where you and Lord Rion live—lived," he hastily corrected himself.

Annie pressed her forehead to his temple and closed her eyes. The sense of flight was soothing, comforting, and for a brief time she could pretend she was back in Rion's arms. It was the wind blowing over them that let her know that tears were cooling on her face.

Before long the guard landed them at her platform and released her near the door. As Annie turned around to thank him, she saw him take a ceremonial stance near the edge.

"You have to stay with me, don't you?" she asked him softly.

"Yes, my la— Yes."

"What is your name again? Teth?"

"Lord Teth...Annie."

"Are you here to protect me, or what?"

He gave her a cautious glance. "I have orders to keep you and Lord Rion separated, as issued by the court."

"Why?"

"Pardon?"

"Why do you have to keep us separated? Do they think we'll run off together or something?"

"They have ordered that you do not have any physical contact until the court decides what to do with you," he told her.

"But what would it matter if we saw each other before then?" Annie inquired.

Without warning, the reason flashed before her, blinding her like a hundred watt bulb meeting a naked light socket. Her face glowed bright red as she quickly ducked into the front door. Exhausted, Annie fell onto the large round sofa and curled her knees up under her chin. Her papa always told her she had the smarts of a chicken. The words of Councilman Dimarkus came back to her.

This could prove to be a nice wrinkle.

She smiled to herself. The court was expecting to prevent something that was already out of their control. Even if they decided to remove her from this world, another child was growing in her womb. She had another nine months to be with Rion. Another nine months where she could live with him before they took her away to have this baby.

A marriage cannot be permanently dissolved while a child is in utero.

All children have the right to be born and be given their namesake testimony.

She had another nine months to hold Kerr and love him.

Getting to her feet, Annie walked back outside, stopping just beyond the doorway. "Lord Teth, when will you be spelled?"

"Not for another four cycles," he told her.

She could tell he was curious and more than a bit cautious. "I was going to fix myself something to eat. It won't be fancy. Just a stew. Would you like some? I mean, would you be allowed to eat it if I offered you a bowl?"

"That...that would be nice. Thank you," he relented.

Nodding, Annie went back inside to begin preparations. She had expected her heart to be heavy at this point, but knowing that the secret growing inside her might be an unexpected reprieve somehow lifted her spirits.

Her hand automatically clasped a breast. She was beginning to feel the telltale signs of her milk coming in again. Hopefully Chloe would arrive with her medicines before the pain got too bad.

The court could keep Rion away, but they couldn't keep her physician away. And when Chloe showed up, she would be able to give her news of Rion and how he was doing. And take news of her back to him. There was still the possibility of communication.

Annie took a deep breath as she continued to cut up vegetables for the stew. The familiar work calmed her. She wondered how Kerr had made it through the day. He had never been away from her for more than a few short cycles.

They would get through this. They'd been through worse times, terrible times, but they had survived, and their love had grown stronger.

They would get through this.

Somehow.

Please, God.

Chapter 13

The Irony

“Where is Rion?”

Chloe looked up from the quick dinner she had been preparing and nodded toward the front doors. Vadon bowed his head and walked out onto the platform where his brother stood to one side facing out over the city. Facing in the direction of their home, where Annie would be at this moment. On the other side of the platform the guards assigned to both Vadon and Rion stood at close attention.

Coming up behind him, Vadon laid a comforting hand on Rion’s shoulder.

“She would be nursing Kerr by now,” Rion mentioned in a soft, low voice. “We always had a late meal because she always made sure our son was taken care of first. Sometimes I would rock him to sleep while she was in the kitchen.”

“Rion, it will not help to remember these things,” Vadon told him.

“My memories are all I have right now,” Rion said. “What else would you suggest I do?”

“How is Kerr?”

Rion sighed heavily. After the court had dismissed them for the day, he had hurried over to his uncle’s home to let Joberiah know what had happened. More than that, he needed to hold his son, which he did for nearly an hour, playing and talking to the infant although he knew the baby had no idea what he said. But there were times Rion could swear the child appeared to be waiting for

his mother to come and take him and cuddle him lovingly. At the thought, a memory surfaced, bringing a warm wetness into his eyes.

* * * *

"You want to name him what?"

Annie was sitting up in bed, having just fed their son. Rion had the infant on his shoulder, and was learning how to burp him with his wife's guidance.

"Kerr," he replied just as a tiny belch issued from the baby's mouth, which was soon followed by a bubble of milk. Rion stared at it in fascination. "Is this normal?"

Laughing, Annie held up her arms and took their son back. "Perfectly normal. Okay, give. Why Kerr? Is it a family name?"

"Family name?"

"You know. A name that used to belong to someone in the family. Someone who lived a long time ago, like a dead uncle or grandfather."

Rion shook his head. "We do not duplicate names on my world. Everyone is considered to be unique, and therefore everyone is given their own unique name. No. It is a name that came to me once in a dream. I liked the way it sounded. It was strong and solid. So I checked with the historians to make sure it had not already been taken. They found no record of a person named Kerr in our past. Ever since that day I have held onto the hope that if and when I finally had a son, I would name him Kerr." He gave Annie a worried look. "Unless there is a name you think is more fitting."

"No, no," she hurried to assure him, and noticed how the tension seemed to flow out of him. "He has wings, so it's only right he has a name like your kind. Kerr." She tested the sound and feel of it, and a smile brightened her face. "You're right, my love. It is a strong and solid name. I like it. What do you think, Kerr? Do you like it as well?"

The tiny baby stared up at her in silence. Annie leaned over to nuzzle his little round belly. "One thing's for certain. There's no way you can deny he's yours, Rion. In fact, I'm wondering if there's anything of me in him."

"There has to be," her husband replied, although he had to admit their son had inherited none of his mother's outward coloring.

"Well, we'll see," Annie replied. "Time will tell."

* * * *

"Time will tell," Rion echoed softly as the first sun disappeared behind the distant towers.

"What?" Vadon asked.

"Nothing. He is doing well. He is too young to understand what is happening."

Chloe joined them on the platform as she tucked the small package inside her wide sash. She had thrown her red cloak over her shoulders so that anyone challenging her would see she was on official business. "I need to take these medicinals over to her before it gets much later. She may already be in pain," she told them.

Walking over to the lip to take off, one of the guards made a move as if to stop her. She glared at him. "Your orders extend only to Grand Lord Rion and Under Lord Vadon, not to me. But if you insist on making my comings and goings an issue, I will take it up with Lord Duvatt. The court has assigned me as resident physician during this trial and your interference will not be taken lightly."

"We only need to know where you are going, Physician," one of the guards told her, albeit with a bit less conviction.

"I am going over to the home of Grand Lord Rion to check on Annie. The court insists on her being in the best of health for the hearing tomorrow, especially after her illness today. Now, are you going to challenge me any further? Or am I allowed to leave?" She gave him her best I-know-what-is-best-for-my-patients stare. The guard stepped back and gestured for her to continue on.

She went over to give Vadon a quick goodbye kiss. "Watch the dish in the baker. I should be back before it is done." Giving Rion's arm a squeeze, she took off and headed for his home on the other side of the city.

It took her little time to get there. There were few flying around this time of the day. Second sundown was not far away, but already it felt as if the day had dragged on too long.

The guard standing outside on the platform never moved from his position, although he did give her a sweeping glance. "Good evening, Physician," he said.

Chloe paused for a brief second. A guard with a heart? "Good evening. I hope this will not take long."

He gave her a curt nod as she hurried past him through the obsidian doors.

The first thing she was aware of was the smell of something cooking in the kitchen. Surprised, Chloe dropped her cloak on the table inside the doorway and walked in to find Annie washing dishes at the sink. Annie looked up upon hearing her enter but continued with what she was doing. Chloe walked over to the flames to see what she had in the pot, stirring the contents automatically.

"You know," Annie said in a low voice, "the first time Rion left me, back when we were on my world, a very good friend told me I had to eat. I was...falling apart...but she was right. I had to live because there was this small piece of Rion growing inside me. I had to eat to keep myself alive so that he could live. I really, truly believed that our child was the only thing I would ever have left to remind me that Rion ever existed." She snorted softly. Suds slowly slid down her arm as she raised her soapy hands and examined them. "And now Rion is gone again. And once again there is this tiny bit of him growing inside me. And I have to eat because I have to live so that our child can live. Now, how ironic is that? Huh? Tell me. Just tell me...how...God...damned...ironic...is that? Same circumstances. Just different worlds."

She angrily threw handfuls of suds against the wall and watched as they left a wet swatch on their slide down to the floor.

Chloe reached for her as Annie choked on her tears, and drew her into her embrace as the woman's legs gave way. Together they

sank to the floor as Annie sobbed, beating weakly with her hands against the physician's shoulders and back.

The woman angel had no idea how long they knelt there. At times she infused Annie with her healing powers, but mostly she let the woman cry until she could find no more tears and leaned heavily against her.

Moving slowly, Annie got to her feet and checked on the stew to make sure it wouldn't burn, then went over to the fountain to wash her face. Chloe took the moment to pull the letter from her sash and hold it out to her.

Annie turned around. Her eyes widened at seeing the handwriting on the front of the envelope, and took the letter in her trembling hand. She looked up at Chloe, who gave her a warm smile.

"You will get through this. I promise."

"Please, Chloe." Annie shook her head. "Don't make promises you know you can't keep."

Almost as an afterthought, the physician tugged the small bag from her sash. "These are your medicinals. Take the powder and then follow with water. Do not mix it. It will start to dry up your milk production. You should notice a difference by morning. I wish I could stay longer, but I do not want to risk angering the court. If you need me for anything, tell your guard and he will come get me immediately."

Annie nodded.

"Is there anything else I can do for you before I go? Anything you might want...delivered?"

Annie saw the suggestion in her friend's eyes and she hesitated. "Yes. Wait." She hurried from the kitchen and returned a moment later with a book in her hand. Opening the thin volume, she flipped a few pages until she found the one she wanted, and took a writing instrument from the basket on the counter. She

made a few strokes on the page, then closed the book and handed it to the woman angel. "Rion will know," Annie told her.

Chloe tucked the book inside her sash before giving her another hug. Walking back into the living room, she put on her cloak, turning around to face Annie as she fastened it around her throat. "We *are* going to get through this. I just have this—"

"Feeling?" Annie smiled humorlessly then gave a weak wave of her hand as if dismissing something unimportant. "All I wanted was to be happy. What did I ever do but fall in love with a man who loves me back?"

"You first married a man who did not," Chloe whispered, "and then you spoke the truth."

"Yeah, and it's not fair. For a society that values the truth, I've been condemned for admitting it. Chloe?"

"Yes, Annie?"

"When you go home, will you tell Rion something for me?"

"Anything. What is it?"

"Tell him there will never be another. If I am sent back to my world, never to see him or Kerr again, tell him there will never be another person in my life I will be able to love. Can you tell him that for me? Please?"

* * * *

Through her own tears, Chloe nodded her head, not trusting her voice. Quickly she turned and left the house, running to the lip of the platform before falling over the edge. She wiped her eyes to be able to see where she was going, but it didn't help as more tears took their place.

Vadon was waiting for her when she returned. Gratefully she fell from the sky into his arms, pressing herself against his strong body as she allowed herself to weep without restraint. Neither did she care if the guards were watching, although they kept their eyes averted. Vadon held her tightly, alternating between murmuring loving words in her ear to simply stroking her and letting her vent.

When he felt she was finally able to calm down, he lifted her chin and kissed her. "How is she?" he whispered.

"Not good, but trying to cope. Where is he?"

Vadon motioned with his head. "I finally convinced him to take a shower. His back was starting to spasm on him."

She nodded. "I will see if he will let me help him. Have you eaten yet?" She broke from his embrace and walked into the house. Vadon followed her.

"No. We waited for you. Or rather, *I* waited. Rion is not eating."

"Let me talk to him."

Dropping her cloak on the sofa, Chloe strode into the second bedroom to find Rion standing by the window looking out. He was shirtless, wearing just a pair of lounging breeches. From where she stood she could see the angry pink scar on his back where the bullet had done its damage. The bullet he'd taken saving the woman he loved.

When he heard her enter, he turned around and gave her an expectant look. "How is she?" he asked.

"She is trying to cope. She asked me to give you this." Taking the book from her sash, she handed it to him. To her surprise, he knew exactly where to open it to find the brief note Annie had added. A wistful smile came over him, and he handed her back the book to see for herself.

It was a poem. Chloe had never seen the book before; neither did she know the author, Edgar Allan Poe. The title of the poem, however, surprised her. "'Annabel Lee'." She glanced up at him. "She was named for this?"

"Yes. It is my favorite piece. Read aloud the stanza she marked," he asked her.

"But our love it was stronger by far than the love/Of those who were older than we—/Of many far wiser than we—/And neither the angels in

heaven above,/Nor the demons down under the sea,/Can ever dissever my soul from the soul/Of the beautiful Annabel Lee.”

Next to the stanza were just two words.

Eternally, Annie

The page blurred before her, and Chloe hastily handed back the book. “Will you be all right tonight?”

Rion gave her a patient look. She knew that if she looked deeper, if she tried to touch him to offer healing and comfort, she would feel his pain and anguish like a massive thunderstorm rolling through him. And right now she didn’t know if she could take any more sadness. Not this evening. Not tonight.

Tonight she wanted to curl up in her lover’s arms and take her own comfort in his body. Tomorrow she could resume her duties as the person who always healed others, with no thought to her own well-being. But right now—

“Go to Vadon,” Rion whispered gently.

Chloe’s head snapped up, surprise on her face. Was her own unhappiness so evident?

“Go. I will manage through tonight. You need him more.”

“Rion.” She walked into his embrace and hugged him tightly. He kissed her cheek before letting her go.

Chloe walked out of the room to find Vadon waiting for her.

Chapter 14

The Hope

Annie stared at the envelope still sitting on the counter where she'd left it. After Chloe had left she had taken a bowl of stew outside to Lord Teth, who thanked her.

She liked him. He was young but very capable. Strong and trustworthy. He would have made an excellent warrior if circumstances had been different upon his birth.

Coming back into the house, she had eaten a small amount herself while standing in the kitchen and staring out the window at the gathering twilight. Her belly was still so flat, it was hard to believe a barely week-old fetus was growing inside her.

Once she finished, she washed the bowl and spoon, then went into the bathroom and took a long shower. She put on one of Rion's tunics, then went back into the kitchen for a glass of water to take with her medicine.

Picking up the envelope, she stared at the handwriting on the front.

For My Annie

She carried it into the bedroom, crawled up over the covers, and lit a second candle before opening the envelope and pulling out several sheets of paper. It was hard to read with her hands shaking as they were.

I am writing this to you when I cannot tell you to your beautiful face. A thousand thoughts are going through my mind at this moment, and I am having a hard time trying to make some sense of my words before I put them to paper.

First, I must beg for your forgiveness. If I had listened to you at the Honorum, if I had kept our secrets strictly between us, none of this would have come about. Byric would have filed against us, in counter to what Vadon and I did to him and Anitra, but there would have been no evidence for him to seek a dissolution of our marriage. All the blame is mine, and I beg your love and forgiveness for betraying you.

I have tried to think of what my life would be like without you, but I cannot get past the blackness or misery, which is all I see. I had no life before I met you. I will have no life if I lose you. This is why I can see only two possible futures for us.

If by some miracle the court allows you to stay on my world, I am renouncing my title and placing my House of Thunder in permanent stasis. I have spoken to Vadon about this, and although he is saddened by my decision, he understands.

If you can stay, and if you are willing, I am offering you a simple life with me. However, we would be pariahs, living against our laws, unable to call ourselves married. Kerr and all children you bear would have to be reassigned their life's work, with the stigmata of being illegitimate for all their lives. It would be a hard life, but it would be the only one I could offer you, if you are willing to share it with me.

Unfortunately, there is the greater chance you will be sent back to your world, and I know how much this future terrifies you. Know that I grow cold thinking about it as well. Which is why I have spoken at length with Lord Duvatt. He is the councilman in charge of the Court of the Council, and the man who is the head of today's proceedings. He knew my father, and I have known him all my life. He had spoken to me prior to today, and he has mentioned more than once how radically you have changed me. He is not a hard or hateful man, Annie. He is doing what he must, but please know that he will use every available means he has at his disposal to find a just solution for

the court, as well as for us. Trust him, my Annie. He is on our side.

But if he is unable to sway the panel, and the verdict is to return you to your world, I have made arrangements to begin a series of treatments to strengthen my wings. Yes, it will be very painful, but if they accomplish what Chloe thinks they can, I might be able to take one final pathway through the storms, and follow you to your world. I know my being on your world is dangerous. I understand all that it would entail, but I cannot stay here without you. I can survive day after day if you are only a few feet, a few hundred yards, or a city away. But if you are removed to where I can never see you or never hear your voice again, it would only be a brief matter of time before I am completely lost.

I must close so Chloe can get this to you. You are my heart, and you have my love forever. I will dream of you tonight, and in my dreams I will make love to you.

Take care of yourself. I will see you tomorrow.

Always your husband in body and soul.

Rion

Hope. He was giving her hope. Meager hope, but it was better than the dead emptiness she saw before them.

Kissing the sheets of paper, Annie carefully folded up the letter and stuffed it back into its envelope. She placed it under her pillow, then blew out the candles and curled herself around the bedclothes that still smelled like him.

By some miracle, she managed to sleep through the night.

Chapter 15

The Guilt

The sound of someone pounding on the front door woke her the next morning. Despite sleeping heavily throughout the night, Annie still felt exhausted, not to mention emotionally drained. Padding into the living room, she opened the doors to see Lord Teth standing on the other side. “It will be time to leave soon,” he told her, taking in her sleep-rumpled appearance. Unaware of the look that passed over his face, Annie nodded as she rubbed her eyes.

“Give me ten minutes.”

True to her word, she was ready in the time she’d allotted herself, although she had to forego braiding her hair. Instead she had to make do with gathering it behind the nape of her neck and tying it with a ribbon.

As he had done the day before, the guard lifted her in his arms and took off to return them to the cathedral. Annie watched her home recede from view behind them, unable to stop herself from wondering what this day would bring. If the court declared she be sent back to her world, would she be able to come home tonight? Or was there a holding cell or something like it where they put people they no longer wanted around?

When would be a good time to mention she was already with child? Would she have to bring it up, or would Rion? Or Chloe?

Annie pressed her forehead against the collar of the guard’s robes. At the thought of her husband—ex-husband, now—she realized why she felt incomplete. Like a lost lamb, defenseless against

this world, and left to wander aimlessly. She needed him. She needed his gentle words, his loving hands, and his soft kisses. She was a parched desert and he was rain. She was suffocating and he was the air she had to have to breathe.

For some reason, though, she was almost afraid to see him. Afraid that this morning she would see her own ache reflected in his Montana sky blue eyes. If she did, how would she be able to react? How would he, knowing that they couldn't kiss hello? Couldn't embrace? Couldn't tell each other how they felt?

How had he spent the night? A sense of guilt passed through her, knowing she had been able to sleep the sleep of the dead. If she had dreamed at all last night, she had no memory of it.

Annie took a deep breath. She had to be strong, she knew. For Rion's sake, she had to show the kind of courage the wife of a warrior was expected to have. She had to make him proud and show others she would always be worthy, despite whatever the court's final decision would be today.

Rubbing her temple where a small headache was beginning to make itself known, Annie looked up at the angel carrying her through the warm morning air. "I thought you said you were being spelled last night?" she asked him.

"I was. Lord Amarath guarded you until first morning. I had just come back on duty when I awoke you." He glanced down at her in his arms. "You understand this is the last day I will be assigned to you," he told her.

"No. Why?"

"The court will make its final decision sometime today. When they do, you will be reassigned, depending on their verdict."

"Reassigned? What's that supposed to mean?"

"If they allow you to stay, you will be released from custody, to go where you wish. Or, if they say you are to be returned, another contingency of guards will escort you to a waiting room where you will have to spend your last hours."

"My last hours?" Annie blinked in surprise. "There may not be another storm for *days!*"

Lord Teth nodded.

"Will I get to see Rion?"

The guard chose his answer carefully. "You will be allowed to see him and talk to him, but any private or physical contact will be closely monitored and strictly forbidden."

"Oh. I get it. They won't want to risk me getting pregnant, is that it?"

Annie got an indecipherable look in response. She shivered slightly and the guard automatically held her closer.

"Are you chilled?"

"More like really feeling down in the dumps," she grouched softly, trying not to cry. "But thanks for asking."

They flew the rest of the way in silence. When they reached the platform leading into the judicial chambers, Lord Teth released her to give her a moment to ready herself. Her thick black hair had not fared well on the flight over, the wind having thrown tendrils about her face and over her shoulders. Annie fussed with retying it, oblivious to the appreciative stares of others and her guard. Unaware of the effect she was having on them, Annie squared her shoulders and walked through the archway. Lord Teth, however, knew well of her nervousness.

The panel had not yet begun to fill their seats. Annie saw that Byric was already in his cubicle and she resisted the urge to walk over and say something nasty. She wanted to vent at the man. She wanted to show him the extent of her frustration and heartache. She wanted to hurt him as equally as she was hurting.

As if he could read her mind, the guard touched her shoulder and gestured for her to keep walking. Clenching her fists, Annie lowered her eyes and continued onward.

In the rotunda above, the crowd was already filling the chamber to capacity. Strangely, though, neither Rion nor Vadon were

seated yet. A further sense of loss welled up inside her and Annie took her seat feeling the sting of unshed tears rising in her eyes. She was beginning to understand Rion's comments he'd written to her in his note she'd gotten from Chloe last night.

I can survive day after day if you are only a few feet, a few hundred yards, or a city away. But if you are removed to where I can never see you or never hear your voice again, it would only be a brief matter of time before I am completely lost.

As the gate was closed beside her, the court of the council began to file in. Last to mount the dais was the councilman Annie now knew to be Lord Duvatt, the man with the staff. She tugged on Lord Teth's robes. He leaned down to give her his ear. "What is the councilman's name who sits next to Lord Duvatt?"

"Do you mean Under Lord Colyer?"

"The one who is like second-in-command," Annie clarified. "He comes in with Lord Duvatt when everyone else is seated."

"That is Under Lord Colyer. His position is the most important one on the panel." At Annie's questioning look, the guard nodded. "If any decision is split equally, he is the one to cast the final decision."

"I thought Lord Duvatt was in charge of the court."

"His position is to make sure all charges have been raised, questioned, and answered, yes. But, overall, Under Lord Colyer's final word has been the deciding factor in many cases brought before the panel."

Annie stared at the older man now talking to Lord Duvatt. "How does he feel about otherworlders?" she whispered with a quiver in her voice.

"I would not know," Lord Teth told her, then added a shushing sound before resuming his stance beside her chair.

"Guards, are all parties present and able to resume today's proceedings?"

“Not yet, your Lordships,” a guard called out from the back of the hall. “Grand Lord Rion and Under Lord Vadon have not landed.”

Annie felt fear close her throat. Why hadn't they gotten there yet? It wasn't like Rion not to be punctual. Not unless something had happened.

“Why are they delaying the court?” another councilman asked, clearly peeved over their tardiness.

Before the question was out of his mouth, Rion and Vadon and another man burst into the room. With cold fingers Annie clutched the skirt of her gown in relief. Nothing had happened to them. He was all right.

Another second passed before she recognized the third man who had entered the room with them. Tugging on Lord Teth's robes, she whispered, “Why is Councilman Dimarkus here?”

“I do not know, but I suspect we shall find out soon.”

Annie's eyes widened as Dimarkus approached the panel without first requesting permission. Even knowing as little as she did about the intricacies regarding their rules of etiquette and law, Annie recognized a major discrepancy when she saw one. More troubling was the fact the man had no guard to escort him.

Lord Duvatt glanced calmly down at the councilman. “Lord Dimarkus.”

“Lord Duvatt, Under Lord Colyer. Esteemed members of the court. Permission requested for a few moments of your time. Behind closed doors.”

“For what purpose?” Under Lord Colyer questioned in a casual but definitely curious tone.

“Please, Lord Duvatt. You have known me these past twenty-six master cycles. I have never interrupted nor dared to disrupt any court's proceedings for any Intent. However, I have come upon some information I feel is critical to the outcome of these discussions. With your permission, we will need a Truth Seeker as well.”

The panel pulled back for a quick vote then Lord Duvatt nodded. "Very well. Court is in stasis until it is ready to resume."

As quickly as they had filed in, Annie watched them disappear behind the obsidian wall behind the dais before whirling around to look at her husband, but Rion was in deep conversation with Vadon. Annie could feel her face redden with impatience. Looking up at her guard, she noticed his attention was directed toward Lord Byric. She leaned over to peer around Lord Teth, trying to get a better look, when the wall behind the dais slid open and one of the lesser councilmen stepped out.

"Guard, escort Lord Byric to the antechamber," he ordered before disappearing back behind the wall.

Annie stared as the warrior was led into the back room behind the dais. Something had happened. Something was very wrong, and there was no way she could find out what it was. But Rion knew. And Vadon knew. Without a doubt she also knew it had something to do with her and Rion.

She glanced back to see Rion staring intently at her. To her surprise, he placed his two fingers not over his lips but over his heart, directly above the lightning emblem emblazoned on his official uniform. *A heart with wings? What does that mean?*

A quick look at Vadon yielded no answers as well. He was talking to his guard. Searching the small group seated behind him, Annie was unable to spot Chloe. She let out a frustrated sigh. She started to ask Lord Teth if he had any idea what was happening when the wall opened once again. This time the panel reentered the hall, mounting the dais. Lord Byric was led back to his cubicle. His face was pasty and Annie would swear he was sweating profusely.

Councilman Dimarkus was among the last to leave the antechamber. As he stepped onto the main floor, a guard detached himself from among those at ready who stood near the panel. Annie

watched as the older angel casually stepped into a cubicle a few feet away from Rion and the new guard took his place beside him.

It wasn't until everyone had taken their seats that she noticed the still-empty chair beside Lord Duvatt. Under Lord Colyer hadn't returned.

"All parties will rise." Duvatt leaned back for another consultation with one of the other councilmen then resumed what he was going to say. "It has come to the court's attention there are two items of importance with regards to the Intent brought forth by Lord Byric and Lordess Anitra." His voice was emotionless. Controlled. Yet, there was no way anyone could not hear the slow burn eating away at the man.

Annie tried to glance at the warrior from the corner of her eye but Lord Teth blocked her view.

"Lord Byric, the extent of the duplicity you and Lordess Anitra have attempted to present to this court is not only reprehensible, but it is unforgivable. Councilman Dimarkus has issued an Intent against you, to wit, to sway the judgment of one of our own for the benefit of yourself and Lordess Anitra. What say you?"

Lord Byric remained silent as he gripped the railing of his cubicle. Two pink spots of color on his cheeks were the only signs showing what he was feeling at that moment. Otherwise he had gone completely white.

Annie stepped back with the realization. He had tried to bribe a judge! He and Anitra had tried to get one of the councilmen on the panel to vote against her and Rion and their scheme had been found out! But how? Who? Her eyes raked the room then returned to those seated upon the dais. One chair remained glaringly vacant.

Under Lord Colyer. *His position is the most important one on the panel. If any decision is split equally, he is the one to cast the final decision.*

"Lord Byric, you will answer the court or be placed in contempt and removed from this hall immediately!"

Too clearly, Duvatt was at the end of his rope. The court had been placed in jeopardy because of Byric's actions and the councilman was determined to remove any taint from the proceedings as quickly as possible.

"D-deserving, your Lordships."

Annie bit her lower lip. *What had happened?*

Getting to his feet, Lord Duvatt pounded his staff of leadership on the floor three times. He glowered at the warrior with undisguised disgust.

"I personally am invoking the Right of Court Authority to throw your entire Intent and defense into the nearest incinerator. What is more, you are to appear before the Council of Warriors at first sunset today, to be judged and sentenced by the court of your peers."

"Grand Lord Rion is the master of that court!" Byric yelled, out of order. "I refuse to be judged by any court he heads."

"Grand Lord Rion has sworn no retaliation against you. And unlike you, his word as a warrior has never been refuted, has never been anything other than the oath of our ancients. You, on the other hand, have proven yourself time and again to be the antithesis of what a warrior is to our people. You cheated. You lied. You brought others into your circle of deceit and coerced them into doing your dirty work for you, all in the name of 'justice'!" Duvatt pounded his staff on the crystalline floor so hard the sound was like the pealing of an enormous bell.

What happened next took the entire court by surprise. Rather than going with his guard as expected, Byric leaped over the railing of his cubicle and began running for the nearest exit. His guard was immediately after him.

"Guards! Apprehend him at all cost!"

Lord Teth bolted toward the archway, as did another half-dozen of the armed angels.

Mesmerized by the turn of events, Annie opened her gate and stepped down out of her cubicle. If Lord Byric got away, what would happen next? What had he done specifically? Confused, she turned and tried to find Rion, but the ensuing melee was overwhelming. The balcony overhead was rife with yelling and catcalls.

“Annie! Watch out!”

She heard someone shouting her name just as she was suddenly knocked aside. The guard barely acknowledged accidentally sideswiping her as he joined the stampede to stop Byric from escaping.

Unable to stop herself from being thrown against the side of her cubicle, Annie threw up her hands to cushion the blow. Instead, she felt a sharp burst of pain as the side of her face met the stone railing. The impact knocked her woozy, and she buckled to the floor. Seconds later a pair of hands drew her into a warm embrace.

“Annie?”

Mutely she wrapped her arms around his neck. Her fingers clutched his shoulders. Dizzy, she laid her head against his tunic and allowed herself to be comforted. He felt so good. Solid, like a protective wall of love.

“Rion, she’s bleeding.”

“She has a bad gash above her eye, but she also hit her head. Can you take her to the hospital and have her checked out?”

“Are you going after Byric?”

“Yes.”

“Rion.” Annie could hear the warning in Vadon’s voice as she felt herself being handed over to him.

“This is all coming to a close right now,” Rion replied mysteriously. “Do not worry. *I* will abide by my oath.” He kissed the top of her head then he carefully tilted her chin to kiss her lips, his mouth lingering on hers for a moment longer. She could taste the salt from his tears. “I will return as soon as we have him in custody.”

But we cannot let him get away. If Byric has lied before, he will not hesitate to do so again, and that includes breaking his oaths as a warrior.”

She felt him leave, but there was a sense of relief in hearing him go. Byric hadn’t won, and from what she could tell, he never would. Even better, something inside her told her their future was no longer veiled in darkness.

Vadon carried her to the entrance where he lifted off gracefully. She snuggled closer and tried to ignore the increasing pounding in her skull.

“Annie, still with us?” he whispered in her ear.

“My head hurts,” she managed to answer. Blood was trickling down the side of her face. It ran warm and cool at the same time. She felt him chuckle.

“I do not doubt that, considering how hard you struck that banister. I will have you at the hospital shortly. A physician there will take care of you.”

“Vadon?”

“Yes?”

“What happened?”

The wind flowing over them was warm. It was difficult now to believe that only a few cycles ago circumstances had been so different and so agonizing.

“Councilman Dimarkus discovered Anitra and Colyer were lovers. Or rather, let us say Colyer had been lured by Anitra’s looks and promises. He was just another one of her many conquests, but one where she and Byric were certain the Under Lord would place his vote wherever she wanted him to.”

“If that’s true, he shouldn’t have been on the panel judging us.”

“Correct. But he was, and that makes everything up to now suspect. Even more so because it was Colyer who put himself on

the panel for this Intent. It was a deliberate move on his part, and all because Anitra and Byric had put him up to it."

"Vadon, Anitra never loved Rion, did she?"

She felt him shake his head. "I never believed it. But Rion... well, you know what he was going through at the time. He was fighting his own demons. I think Anitra saw his self-torment as a chance to better her social status."

"What do you mean?"

Again Vadon chuckled. "Dear, loving Annie. If I had not lost my heart to my Chloe, I could easily fall under your spell. Power, sweet Annie. By becoming the wife of one of the most powerful warriors. By assuming the title of Grand Lady of the House of Thunder. Anitra has spent her entire life trying to become one of the most enviable women in our houses. She thrives on flaunting her beauty and desirability in front of those of lesser status. When she was with Rion, there was nothing she could not attain. No door was ever closed to her."

"But what about Byric?"

"Ah. I think he is the only bruise she has ever borne. I think Anitra truly loves Byric, and he her. He is a warrior and lord, but his status is nowhere equal to Rion's. Byric was left with a very cruel dilemma. He was forced to watch the woman he loved in the arms of another man, even though he knew she would always return to his bed. It was only a matter of time before he found a way to win her permanently."

"When Rion went suicidal?"

"Exactly. If Rion died, he would have no heir. The house would die. Byric would become the Grand Lord and all that the titled entailed, and he would have Anitra. It was the perfect solution."

"Until I came along?" Annie whispered.

"Yes. Exactly. Until Rion found you and brought you back. To be honest, I worried about what kind of woman you were. And

then, when I saw you were with child, I could feel my heart sinking.”

“You thought I had duped Rion as well?”

“But only for a moment. Only until you began to beat up on me because I would not take you to be with him.”

She heard him smile.

“Before he went back to get you, Rion had told me things about you, things I had a hard time believing at first. Forgive me, Annie, but after Anitra...” He paused. “I love my brother very much. The life of a warrior is difficult, and Rion, before he met you, he had never really been a happy man. I was shocked by his change.”

To her surprise, she felt him kiss her hairline.

“We love you, Annie,” he told her. “There will never be any sacrifice too great that Rion will not attempt if it means keeping you with him. And when he does, he will always find me there beside him.”

“I know. I know.”

She started to ask him more, like how did Dimarkus find out about Anitra’s dalliances, when she felt Vadon begin to land them on the hospital platform, his wings beating furiously to slow their descent. She managed to open her eyes although blood was already congealing on the side of her face. He took her inside where a physician in a red tunic and pants immediately hurried over to check her out.

“She hit her head,” Vadon told the young man.

“I can see that. Can you put her on the table?”

Annie noticed the small nest of rooms along the wall, just inside the entry, each of which had a small padded table and a privacy curtain. The physician led them to the nearest empty room, and Vadon sat her up to be examined.

The angel healer peered inside her eyes, placing his fingertips against her skull as he moved her head carefully from side to side. "Does your head hurt?" he asked her quietly.

"Yes."

"How about here?" He pressed along the wound that had stopped bleeding.

"It stings a bit."

Nodding, the physician waved at someone standing behind Annie. A pair of hands began to clean the cut. As that was being performed, the healing angel briefly ran his hands over her arms and legs, pausing the briefest second over her heart and abdomen. When they were finished, the physician laid a palm over Annie's eyes. "Take a deep breath then exhale carefully," he instructed her.

She did, letting it out slowly. By the time she needed a second breath, the headache was gone. Smiling, she opened her eyes. A few feet behind Vadon, Chloe had joined them. She turned to Vadon.

"What happened?"

"Long story," Vadon smiled. "You will be sorry you missed all the excitement. Annie, do you want me to take you back home? Or would you rather stay here and wait for Rion to come for you?"

Annie gave him a disbelieving stare. "What about the guards? What about the court?"

"That is all over now," Vadon told her. "Once Byric's schemes were revealed, and he fled the cathedral, Duvatt dismissed the Intent. You heard him."

"You mean..."

Chloe held out her arms. "It means you can stay," she cried happily, giving Annie a warm hug.

"But...but what about our marriage? What about Kerr and our baby? Where do we stand now?"

Chloe gave the physician who had tended to Annie a questioning glance. "Did you check to make certain the child she carries is unharmed?"

"Yes," the male physician told her. "The fetus is doing well. There was some bruising on her arms that I took care of. Otherwise she is fit." He helped Annie down from the examining table, giving her a smile. "We are happy to hear you will be staying with us, Lady Annie."

Touched by his unexpected admission, Annie was blushed. "Thank you, but you don't need to call me that. I'm not a lady any longer. Not since the court dismissed my marriage."

A small disturbance out in the main room drew their attention. Presently they could see a man being directed toward their room. Vadon turned around to meet him. "Fallon?"

"Vadon! There you are. We have been searching for you and Lord Rion at the cathedral. You are needed back at the way station. Immediately!" The messenger's eyes darted to everyone in the room, his gaze lingering a moment longer on Annie.

"Rion?" Annie asked. "Why?"

"What is the emergency?" Vadon inquired. Looking back at Chloe, he said, "I will be back as soon as this is over."

"Not to worry. I will let Rion know Annie is still here. Go. Take care of your emergency."

"Peran just returned from his mission. We have come across some vital news. Do you know where Lord Rion is?"

"He has joined the hunt to bring Lord Byric to justice. Tell me what you have discovered and I will make certain he is informed."

Together both messengers hurried out of the room and exited through the double doors leading to the outside platform. Chloe grabbed Annie's hands and rubbed them. "Do not worry. It is probably some official business they need him for." She gave Annie a heartfelt smile then hugged her again.

"Where were you earlier? I looked in the crowd but I didn't see you," Annie asked.

"Forgive me. I had a patient who had developed complications, and I was needed here. I had planned to return as soon as I was finished." Glancing around, Chloe led her out of the examining room. "You look tired. Are you hungry? Would you like something to drink?"

Annie laughed shakily. "It *has* been a long morning, hasn't it? I could use something to drink."

"Come. I will show you the commissary."

As they strolled down the wide hallways, Annie remembered the last time she had been in the hospital. She fondly recalled Rion's proud face as he presented their son to the great hall before lifting them both into his arms to take his new family home. Chloe saw the soft smile on her face.

"I will send a courier to leave word at the main entrance where to find you. When Rion returns for you, he will check there first."

"Thank you. Do you think it will take them long to find Byric?"

Chloe shrugged. "I have no idea. If night falls first, though, they may give up the hunt until tomorrow morning."

"I can't believe you're not pumping me with questions about what happened," Annie admitted with a little laugh.

"Do not worry. I will harass Vadon tonight until he begs for mercy." The woman angel giggled.

Just then a slender young man rounded the corner of the hallway. Chloe snagged him by the sleeve. "Courier, can you take a new message?"

"Yes, Physician." He bobbed his head as he pulled out a tablet and pen from his shoulder bag.

“Inform the main entrance that Lord Rion will be asking for the whereabouts of his wife. Let him know we will be in the commissary until he arrives.”

“Yes, Physician. I will go there as soon as I deliver this message to Physician Tannor.” He dashed off, leaving Annie to watch in amazement.

“Where do they get their energy?” she asked aloud. Chloe burst out laughing. Annie stared at her. “What did I say that was so funny?”

“Nothing. Come.”

“Chloe!”

“You are going to spend the rest of your life surprising us with your naivety and honesty, do you realize that?”

“Hey, my papa always told me ignorance is no excuse. Besides, you don’t make fun of me when I ask dumb questions.”

“You do not ask dumb questions. You ask the questions of someone who wants to learn, which makes you all the more endearing. That is another reason why we love you. Oh, turn here. This is the commissary.”

Chapter 16

The Attack

Annie paused outside the doorway leading to the dining hall. Chloe waited silently, watching as she hesitated, thinking. Several angels passed by, entering and exiting the double glass doors, all of whom gave the wingless woman with the flowing black hair more than one glance.

“Annie?”

Annie gave her a small smile. “Remember that powder you gave me last night to help dry me up?”

“Did it work?”

“Yes, but...but I think I may need another dose of it.”

Chloe nodded, taking her arm. “Forgive me. It normally takes two to three doses before it is completely effective. The medicinal room for the warriors is just down this hall. We can get you another powder there and come back for some water for you to take it.”

Annie snorted softly. “Why would warriors need that powder?”

“That powder has several useful purposes. It can also dry up blisters. Warriors are constantly getting blisters from handling weapons, especially after swordplay.”

Chloe showed her into a room lined with cabinets and shelves. A few small examining rooms were behind a curtain to their left. A narrow, quick-exit/entrance platform was open before them.

“When a warrior gets injured, he is brought here for treatment,” the physician explained, going over to a nearby chest of drawers.

"You mean, like when they come back from a mission pathway?"

Chloe stared at her, smiling. "That is another reason why they would come here, yes."

"Sooo, Rion's been here to get checked out in the past?" Annie asked.

The woman angel sighed. "When he could be convinced into being examined, yes. He has been here more often, though, when he was in training. Like the other warriors, he must keep up his strength and his skills, even though he can no longer walk the pathways between worlds."

Annie remembered days when Rion would return home, sweaty and breathing heavily, his muscles glistening as he walked in bare-chested from another training session. She'd seen the telltale reddish marks on his skin—marks which told her he'd received some sort of injury, but had been healed before coming home.

Chloe closed the drawer and glanced around. "What is it?" Annie asked.

"The powder is not here. Hmm. Hello? Physician?" She looked to Annie. "I will check in the back. A physician is always supposed to be on duty here. Perhaps he will know where there is more stored."

She started to head toward the back examining rooms when a curtain slowly slid to one side. Chloe gasped, unable to move for a second. She then turned around, her eyes wide with terror.

"Annie! *Run!*"

Annie bolted for the door leading to the hallway but a huge, brown-black wing swept outward, blocking her way. She stood her ground and glared at the warrior emerging from behind the curtain. Chloe struggled in his grasp.

Byric gave Annie an appreciative smile. "Well, look who happened to show up. Here I am, being hunted like a common thief, and all I can think of is how my troubles all began because of you,

Annie otherworlder. And then, like a gift, you just walk back into my life."

Chloe shook herself, trying to free herself from the tight grip on her wrists. Byric looked down at her. Making a disgusted face, he pushed her away. The woman physician stumbled, rubbing away the reddish marks already darkening her skin. Annie steadied her with an arm around the woman's waist.

"What are you doing here, Warrior?" Chloe asked in her most authoritative voice.

Byric laughed softly. "What does it look like I am doing? I am hiding from those who want to strip me of my title."

"You have no one to blame but yourself," Annie told him. "You and Anitra caused your own troubles. No one forced you to lie. No one told you to bribe a judge."

Chloe's eyes widened and she glanced at Annie. "Who?"

"Under Lord Colyer," Annie replied.

"None of that would have been necessary if you had not shown up," Byric interrupted. "Look at you, with your hair like storm clouds and your eyes like perillion. The sum of all my problems is you. *You!* If you had not been there on your world, Rion would be dead now. There would be one less House of Thunder, and the Grand Lordship would have been handed over to my house. To *me!*"

He came away from where he had been hiding in the back rooms, advancing closer toward the two women. His face was apoplectic. His hands were squeezed into tight fists. The muscles beneath his tunic were bunched from the strain of his flight.

He stepped closer. "Because of you, I will never gain the title of Grand Lord. My house will never be anything now but a subsidiary. Anitra tried to bring Rion back to her bed but he refused because of you! You and that...that bastard child Rion so fondly adores."

"You leave Kerr out of this!" Annie yelled at him. "He's an innocent! He doesn't deserve your anger!"

Byric shrugged. "It no longer matters. At least I got to watch your marriage being nullified. That can never be taken away from me. At least I got that much satisfaction out of knowing Rion will never have a legitimate heir, not as long as he stays with you. And he will, you know. He will never leave you for another, even if it is to create a legitimate heir, which he has every legal right to do."

"Why not go ahead and leave?" Chloe asked in a low voice. "Leave now, before they find you here, although you know they will find you eventually."

"Not if I am swallowed up in the Far Lands," Byric told her. "I am only here long enough to gather what medicinals I will need before taking off." He patted the side pouch slung over his shoulder, bringing it to their attention for the first time. "But this," he held out his arms as if he was accepting accolades, "this has been an unexpected bonus. Not only do I get to leave my life and my future behind, I also get say goodbye to the one person who has made it all possible."

He took a menacing step toward Annie, but Chloe quickly placed herself between them.

"Go now, Byric."

"*Lord* Byric, physician."

To Annie's shock, Chloe spit at the warrior. "You no longer deserve the title, underling. Leave now before Lord Rion shows up."

Byric paused, his eyes sweeping from the physician to Annie and back. "You lie," he murmured threateningly.

"I sent a courier to leave word with Rion that we would be in the commissary."

At that bit of news, the warrior's face brightened. "Ah! The commissary? All the better. That platform is around the other side of the building. Excellent. Thank you, Physician, for diverting their

attention from me. However, you are right; I must hurry. But before I go, I believe I am allowed a small amount of compensation for all the troubles that have befallen me."

He took another step toward Annie. This time Chloe raised her hands and gave the warrior a hard shove against his chest. Byric stumbled slightly off-balance.

"Out of the way, Physician!" he ordered thickly. "You have been warned."

"By my rights as a physician, leave her alone!" Chloe snapped, her voice raised.

"You have no rights over a well woman!" Byric growled. "You can only maintain your rights over the sick or injured. I know the rules too well, physician!"

"Lady Annie is pregnant!" Chloe shouted. "My rights are justified!"

The color slowly drained from Byric's face. Then, unexpectedly, the warrior broke out into a humorless smile. "She is...with child? That is...that is quite ironic, is it not? That guards would be placed on her and Rion, and for what reason, when the damage was already done?" He laughed softly, shaking his head.

As suddenly as his demeanor changed from anger to amusement, it changed back. "It does not matter any longer," he said darkly. "The child she bears is a bastard. Any child she carries that comes from Rion's seed will be a bastard. That is my ultimate revenge."

Reaching out, Byric grabbed Chloe by the upper arm and effortlessly threw her aside, immediately dismissing her as she fell against a cabinet of medicinals. The translucent panels in the cabinet doors shattered upon impact. Annie cried out and tried to go to her, but Chloe managed to extricate herself. Again she placed herself between the warrior and Annie as blood flowed from her arms and shoulder where tiny crystal fragments remained embedded in her skin.

"Last warning, Warrior! Leave now or I will put an Intent on you that will bring the full force of all the Houses of Healing on your head!"

Byric glared at her. For a moment Annie believed the man might back down.

"It no longer matters, Physician," he calmly told her, and raised his arm. He swung his hand downward, putting the full force of his strength into the blow. Annie screamed Chloe's name as the warrior slammed the physician to the floor. He then stood quietly over the still body of the woman angel, looking down at her as if she was just another fallen enemy.

Annie remained frozen, unable to believe what had just happened, unable to believe her friend was lying unconscious a few feet away.

Byric lifted his head and gave her an empty stare. "I am deserving of some small recompense," he told her emotionlessly, and stepped over Chloe's body, toward her.

"I'm going to kill you, you bitch!"

Suddenly, it was Foster's voice grinding in her head. It was Foster advancing toward her, determined to kill her and her unborn son. It was no longer Chloe's body lying on the hospital floor; it was Horace Funderburke's, shot and bleeding as the storm grew in intensity around them.

"I'm going to kill you, you bitch!"

A jolt of pure terror ran through her, ungluing her feet and releasing her body from its paralysis. Annie saw the pole standing in the corner of the room. There were hooks on both ends of the obsidian rod, hooks to hold a warrior's wings aloft.

He is in suspension. It is painful, but it is how we learn how to fly.

She could feel her hands close around the thick glass shaft as Byric reached for her. Instinctively, Annie jabbed the pole upward, behind her, and she heard a grunt of pain. Glancing over her shoulder, she could see part of one end of the hook had caught in the

warrior's shoulder, curled through the tunic and into the flesh. She shoved on the pole, and Byric roared at her.

"I'm going to kill you, you bitch!"

For a second Annie thought she saw movement out of the corner of her eye. Movement coming from the open doorway leading outside to the tiny landing platform. It only lasted for a second. Her concentration immediately shifted back to the pole quivering in her hands as Byric wrestled for possession. It was a quick contest.

"You have drawn first blood!" he shouted at her, throwing the pole across the room. "You have broken your oath against retaliation! Now my hands are clean!"

Annie ran in the only direction open to her.

Outside.

She gasped as she rounded the doorway. Three angels were hovering near the entrance, confused looks on their faces. They had heard the disturbance inside and were checking it out. When Annie spilled from the room, expressions of surprise ran across their faces.

"Lady Annie?" one of them called out. "Is all well?"

"Get Rion!" she screamed as she gripped the side of the wall. The platform was smaller than most, as it was primarily used for quick landings and take-offs. At the most it could hold two, perhaps three people.

She glanced over her shoulder to see Byric casually advancing toward her. She had nowhere to go, and he knew it. She also had no other weapon to use against him, which he also knew. She held out her hand to the one angel still remaining a few feet beyond the platform.

"Help me! Take me down!" she begged.

Without question, the young man started for her when he spied Byric standing in the doorway. The warrior still wore his

official black uniform and black-gray tunic. The sunlight reflected like a beacon off the lightning insignia on his ebony chaster.

"L-Lord?" the angel stammered, stopping short of reaching Annie.

"*Go!*" Byric ordered the young man.

"*No!*" Annie cried out, but the young angel had been taught to respect the authority of the Lords of the Houses of Thunder, and he backed off as commanded.

She clutched the outside wall, when her hand encountered a small ring set into the stone. Frantically she grabbed the ring and jerked open the small door. Desperately she reached for the flare gun and one of the notification balls. Her fingers closed around a red one. Trying to keep her balance on the tiny platform, Annie shoved the ball into the gun's chamber, then whirled around and pointed the pistol at the warrior.

Byric froze in his tracks, his eyes on the gun in her trembling hands. A smile spread over his face. "Go ahead and call for help," he told her. "They will not get here in time."

"I'm not going to use this to call for help," Annie hissed through her teeth. "I'm going to use this *on you*. So, unless you want to end up fried to a crisp, you'd better start backing away from that door *right now!*"

"And if I don't?" Byric gave an overexaggerated look over the side of the platform. "Do you think you can hit me before you accidentally fall off?"

"I've hit rabbits a whole lot smaller and a whole lot further away," she told him. "Don't you *ever* underestimate me! Now, *move!*"

When Byric chose instead to take another half-step in her direction, Annie cocked the pistol and took deliberate aim, gazing down the length of her arm to where the barrel would fire directly into the center of his chest.

Byric paused again. She knew then that he had heard the rumors, had heard the stories of what the otherworlder could do, would do, and was very capable of doing. But if he was beginning to have doubts as to whether or not she would shoot, it no longer mattered.

"Go ahead. Fire it," he ordered hoarsely. "Fire it! If you hit me, it will not stop me because I will still be able to reach you, and then the both of us will go over the side!"

"You don't want to do this, Byric," Annie cried, keeping her aim true. "There's no reason to take this out on me. You can still redeem yourself. Just...back away!"

"Fire, woman! Fire it! Fire it!"

"Go away!" Come any closer, and I'll shoot this thing so far up your ass, we'll be able to see your black heart in color!" Annie screamed, feeling her bravado melting away as the realization that Byric would not step down overcame her. Neither one of them would win today. Neither of them would probably live, either. Yet there was no way she would not go down without a fight.

Byric saw the slight hesitation in her stance. He must have also seen the split-second of doubt that came over her face, and that's when he lunged at her.

Annie fired.

The ball of explosive light missed its mark, but it grazed the warrior's shoulder before it plowed into the man's upper wings, setting the feathers ablaze with a crimson light.

Shrieking in pain, Byric's fingers closed around the barrel of the gun and wrenched it from Annie's grasp, tossing it over the edge. Simultaneously, his other arm came around, and he back-handed Annie across the face as easily as brushing away a crumb on his uniform.

He was so intent on the excruciating flames enveloping his wings, he never heard the woman's scream, or the sound of her body as it struck the next platform thirty feet below.

Chapter 17

The Loss

The hunt for Byric had taken longer than Rion had hoped, but it didn't surprise him. Byric was a trained warrior, well-versed in the teachings drilled into him about survival, about hiding and keeping out of view while on his missions to the other world.

It was Lord Focolton who admitted aloud what they were all thinking. "He has escaped detection."

"But not for long," Rion swore. "He will eventually be found, and when he is, he must be made to stand in judgment for his crimes."

"We will find him," said Councilman Dimarkus, placing a hand on Rion's shoulder. "It may not be today. It may not be tomorrow. But eventually we will catch up to him. The law will not turn away or diminish its punishment with the passing of time. Have patience, Rion. Look. It is nearing first sunset. Did you say Vadon had taken Annie to the hospital?"

Rion nodded. Around them, the half-dozen or so guards stood around in the antechamber of the warrior's hall, waiting for the next set of orders. As time passed, more guards landed at the cathedral platform, unhappy to admit defeat, but still determined to find their prey.

"He may have already taken her home," Rion told the councilman.

"Or she may still be there, waiting for you." Dimarkus smiled. "Let us meet up again at five and twenty-five before dawn," he an-

nounced to everyone in the chamber. "Lord Preyad? You will need to inform Lord Duvatt of our progress so far."

"Lord Duvatt is already aware of your progress, or lack of it."

The head councilman walked into the room, having just arrived minutes before. The guards bowed their heads in deference to him as he passed by. Still dressed in his official robes, Duvatt stopped in front of Rion and stared at him for a long moment. "I am sorry, Rion, for having to annul your marriage to Annie. If there had been any other way, if she had not admitted to the truth..."

Rion gave the man who had been his father's closet friend a small smile. "You did your duty. You upheld the law. I can never find fault with you for doing so. However, you do understand that just because you have annulled our vows, Annie and I will always remain together?"

Duvatt nodded. "I suspected as much. Still, I question why you would risk losing your house by not having a true heir. You know you could find another you could lawfully marry and have her—"

"Do not ever mention that possibility to me again," Rion interrupted curtly but gently.

Duvatt sighed. "You indeed are a wholly changed man."

"More than you will ever know! Rion, how goes the hunt?" Vadon strode in, wearing a wide grin on his face. He was followed by a messenger angel and a third man. A warrior. Seeing the newcomer, Rion's face lit up and he held out an arm to clasp his old friend's hand.

"Peran! We have missed you. You were gone, what, nearly six lunar cycles!"

"It has been an experience," the warrior told them. "I will undergo a full debriefing at first dawn tomorrow, but I had to bring this back to you before then." He reached inside his tunic and pulled out a small bundle which he had tucked into the waistband

of his pants. He handed the bundle to Rion, who gave him a curious look.

"Read it, Rion," Vadon said, still smiling broadly.

Slowly, Rion unwrapped the package to find a newspaper brought from the other side. It was a copy of the *Seattle Times*. A quick glance over the front page yielded no clues. "What am I supposed to see?" he asked Peran.

Looking over his arm at the page, the warrior tapped a small article at the bottom right corner of the paper. "Read this. Aloud."

"Brazelton extradited. John Lee Brazelton was transferred today to Walla Walla maximum security prison in Spokane where he will begin serving out two consecutive life terms. Brazelton was found guilty last month in the beating death of his cellmate."

Rion looked up at his brother, still confused. Vadon continued to smile. "Go on."

"The victim, Foster Ray Mayall, had also been serving out a life sentence for the death of his wife, Annabel Lee Prichard Mayall—"

Rion's head jerked up, disbelief on his face. Vadon began to laugh as the realization began to sink in. He grabbed Rion's arms.

"She's *free*, finally, *free*! Her husband is dead. You and Annie are free to marry! You *will* marry her again, right, big brother?"

Speechless, Rion looked to Councilman Duvatt, who nodded his head as a smile creased his face. "You have the right to marry her again," the older man admitted with growing happiness. "In fact, you must if you want to reinstate your son as your legitimate heir. Not to mention, you will have to submit the proper paperwork to have his title returned to him. It will take some time, but if you are willing to go through the trouble—"

"*Lord Rion!*"

The room turned toward the shout to see two angels, one an apprentice and the other a courier, hurrying into the hall. It was obvious the two were on the brink of exhaustion.

“Lord Rion! The hospital! Lady Annie!” one of them gasped.

Without stopping to question them, Rion bolted from the cathedral as he raced toward the hospital. Several guards managed to stay even with him, with the others not far behind.

There were no words, no thoughts that went through his mind as his immense wings flayed the sky. There was only the small, crying boy nestled in his heart, promising to be good if he could only have his life’s wish granted.

His Annie.

She was free. Irrevocably free. She was no longer married to the man who had beaten her and abused her after leaving her defenseless and alone for so many bleak and empty years. That man was dead, and she was now free to love him without any restrictions, or without breaking any laws on his world. He could bring her home to love her. They would go get Kerr and be a family once again.

A family.

Rion stretched, pushing himself to the limit, ignoring the warning pain in his damaged wing and increasing his speed until the guards themselves were hard pressed to keep abreast.

As they neared the hospital, Rion noticed the flurry of activity on the side of the building facing him. At first it looked to be centered around the warriors’ entrance where they went to be healed after training, but that couldn’t be right. Rion shook his head. There had been no training sessions scheduled for today. There should not be any warriors seeking medical attention today, especially at this hour.

They drew nearer, and it soon became apparent there were red robes and uniforms clustered mainly around the visitor’s entrance below the warriors’ platform. As he and the others approached, two angels detached themselves from the crowd to meet them. Rion recognized one as Lord Vikker, the guard who had

been in charge of Lord Byric during the proceedings. As the man joined them, Rion drew up in alarm at the sadness on his face.

“Lord Rion?”

No. He did not want to hear anything from the guard. Anything that had to be said to him would have to come from someone of greater authority.

Beside him Vadon pulled even. Together they exchanged worried looks.

Rion dove downward, plummeting toward the platform where most of the physicians were hovering. He was a few hundred feet above them when his eyes spotted the splay of long black hair spread across the platform like a wide, dark ribbon.

No.

The physicians, there had to be at least a dozen or more, were bent over a still, very pale form. A form dressed in a dark blue gown.

Annie loved that dark blue gown. She said it reminded her of the color of the Montana skies.

No!

It was Physician Mannion who literally pulled him out of his descent and landed with him on an adjoining platform.

“Lord Rion—”

“What has happened? What has happened to Annie?”

“*Listen* to me, Lord Rion.” The older physician grabbed Rion’s arms and turned him around to face him. “This is what we understand so far. Lord Byric came back to the hospital to steal some medicinals. Chloe and Annie ran into him. He...he attacked Chloe. And then he attacked Annie.”

“*What?*” Rion was finding it hard to breathe. Byric attacked Chloe and Annie? “Wh-Why? What kind of fair fight is that? He is a trained warrior!”

He glanced over and down at the ring of physicians surrounding Annie’s body, their hands all placed in strategic locations to aid

in fighting for her life as she laid face-down, unconscious and unmoving. Shock ran through him when he saw Lord Moltan suddenly crawl to the middle of the ring and begin removing his tunic and pants as the others started to strip off the blue gown. He then laid himself prone, bared skin to bared skin, across her body. Moltan was possibly the best and most highly gifted physician among them. For him to have to submit to full body contact healing could only mean one thing.

Rion watched as coldness began to seep through his skin to his insides, beginning with his heart and his lungs. A wave of anger and denial swept over him when he saw the physician lift his head and shake it sadly.

“No!”

Rion jumped from the platform to land on the yard just below. He wanted to be with her, but there was no more room on the platform to hold him. Yet he knew if he moved aside one of the physicians intent on healing her, that one physician’s power could mean the difference in Annie’s life.

“Rion.”

He turned around, overcome by a feeling of helplessness until he saw Chloe standing before him, supported in Vadon’s protective arms. There were marks on her arms and neck that were still healing, but nothing could quickly erase the ugly black smear across her cheek and over her forehead, shadowing her swollen, bloodshot eye. The physician began to weep as Rion gathered her into his embrace.

“I tried to protect her,” Chloe sobbed. *“I tried, but Byric was determined to get even.”*

Rion frowned. *“He could not get even. He swore in court not to revenge himself on me or Annie.”*

They were interrupted by Councilman Dimarkus, who had walked over to join them. *“The guards are holding Lo— Byric nearby. I have ordered them to bring him here.”*

"Chloe claims Byric was intent on revenging himself," Rion informed the man.

Dimarkus nodded. "Let us see what Byric has to say in his defense."

"Forgive me," Chloe whispered as Rion gave her back to Vadon. Clutching her hands, Rion kissed them.

"There is nothing to forgive," he promised her gently.

Vadon spoke up. "Chloe wants to help with the healing, but with her also injured..."

The sound of the guards returning with their prisoner caught everyone's attention as the entourage landed a few feet away. Byric was in chains. It was also very apparent that the man was in intense pain. His upper shoulder and wings had been severely burned; even now blackened feathers barely hung from flesh that was scorched black, bloody and raw. So far a physician had not been assigned to heal him. They all had been ordered to care first for the woman on the platform. For some perverse reason, Rion felt justified.

Calmly, Councilman Dimarkus approached the rogue warrior just as Lord Duvatt touched down, along with a young, unknown male angel. The councilman waited until the court councilman joined him.

"You know, Byric," Duvatt commented, "I would ask you what happened, but I am afraid you would only twist your lies into another semblance of truth that our seekers could not detect. That is why I am grateful for Under Lord Castor, here."

Glancing over where Rion and Vadon stood, Duvatt explained. "You see, there was a witness to what happened, which may have Byric wishing he had not been so open with his retaliation."

"She drew first blood!" Byric roared. "She broke her oath!"

"Lady Annie never swore an oath of retaliation!" Duvatt roared back. "The historians will prove it to you! You made *Rion* swear against you and Lordess Anitra. Then you swore in response

not to oppose him and Lady Annie. *You* swore not to retaliate against Lady Annie!" Duvatt repeated. "*You are now bound by Blood Right!*"

Byric stared in trapped horror at the men surrounding him. Somewhere in the dim recesses of his mind they could tell he vaguely remembered, and knew that Duvatt spoke the truth. Annie had not been made to swear the oath. At the time he had never thought she would ever be a threat to him. And why would he? She was a weakling. An otherworlder. She didn't even have wings. When could she ever be a threat to him? Which was why he thought he had made the sound choice to have Rion take the oath. And if by some chance Vadon had decided to come after him...well, there would have been no contest anyway. Vadon would have been no match against his superior strength and training.

"Master Castor, will you please tell Lord Rion what you saw?"

The young angel swallowed hard, nodding. "We were coming to see a friend of mine at the hospital, when we heard this yelling from the platform above."

"From the warriors' entrance?" Duvatt clarified.

"Yes. So we, my friends and I, we went up to see what was going on. We were hoping to see one of the warriors. Maybe get him to say hello to us. That is when we saw Lord Byric hit the physician."

"Hit her how?"

"This way," Castor demonstrated, making a forward motion with his whole arm, his hand balled into a fist. "He hit her in the face."

Duvatt nodded. "Continue."

"Well, then he yelled at Lady Annie. She grabbed a suspension pole and jabbed him in the shoulder with it."

"Then what happened?"

“He pulled out the pole and started toward Lady Annie. That is when she ran out onto the platform and held onto the side of the building. She saw my friends and me, and told us to go get Lord Rion.”

“Two of your friends left, but you stayed. Am I correct?”

Castor nodded.

“Why did *you* stay?”

The young angel swallowed again. “Because...because something bad was going to happen. I just knew it. And I wanted to stay in case there was something I could do to help prevent it.”

Rion closed his eyes as the young man told his story. He could visualize what must have happened. The anger Byric had let loose as he went after the two women. The horror Annie must have faced, horror no woman should ever have to endure once, much less twice in a lifetime.

“She...she begged for me to help her,” Castor admitted as tears began to roll down his cheeks. “I wanted to. Oh, sweet...I wanted to, but Lord Byric was there, and he ordered me away. What was I supposed to do? You always obey the direct command of a Lord of the House of Thunder!”

“Continue,” Duvatt told him in a gentler tone of voice. The boy was obviously tormented by the turn of events, and blaming himself for not having helped when he had been asked. When she had begged for her life.

“I did not leave, so I saw. I saw Lady Annie open the emergency box and take out a flare gun. Sh-she pointed the gun at Lord Byric and told him she was going to sh-shoot it up his ass so far she would be able to see his black heart in color.”

Duvatt’s eyes widened. “She said that?”

“Yes,” Castor affirmed. “And Lord Byric, he kept telling her to fire it, *fire it!* And then he jumped at her, and she fired. The flare, it hit his shoulder and then his wings, until he was on fire. That is when Lord Byric went like this...” He motioned with his arm in a

wide back-swing. "He hit Lady Annie and knocked her off the platform, and she fell and landed right there."

The young man's shoulders hitched as he continued to weep. Burying his face in his hands, he confessed, "I could have grabbed her. I should have, but I was afraid of what Lord Byric might do!"

Giving the young man a pat on the shoulders, Duvatt dismissed him. "You are not guilty of anything, Under Lord Castor. You have been made a witness and an unwilling participant in a heinous crime. But be grateful for the fact that your testimony will bring about the dissolution of a House of Thunder that long ago ceased to function under the oath by which all warriors are made to uphold."

Turning to Byric, Duvatt gave the man a look of utter disgust. "If my wishes were commands, you have seen the last light of day."

"It no longer matters to me. My most desirous wishes have already been granted," Byric snapped back. "Rion's house will cease to exist as well."

"Far from!" Vadon spoke up. "Not one cycle ago Lord Peran returned from his mission, and he brought back proof that Lady Annie's first husband is now deceased. Which means she and Rion can remarry, and their child can be reestablished as the legitimate heir to his House of Thunder. His house will continue. And that means *you* lose."

Chloe turned in his arms to give him a disbelieving smile. "This is true? Her first husband is dead?" Vadon nodded and cradled her face against his shoulder.

"Rion? Would you like to say anything to Byric before I dismiss him?"

Rion nodded although his mind was a total blank. His body felt detached from himself, as if it was a shell totally emptied of emotion and feeling. He opened his mouth, wanting to rain his anger on the man, when a physician landed in the yard nearby. It was

Mannion. To everyone's horror, he approached them with bloodied hands.

"Lord Rion?" he began in a soft voice.

"No." Rion stepped back, shaking his head. He could not, he would not hear what the man would say next, although he knew exactly what was about to be spoken. "No!" he shouted again, holding up his hands toward the physician away.

"You now are given Blood Right."

"*Nooo!*"

Rion fell to his knees, his body bent over as indescribable pain lashed through him. He screamed in anguish as Mannion knelt down and smeared Annie's blood across the front of the warrior's black-gray tunic. Doubled over, he sobbed openly, unashamedly, calling out her name as his heart was ripped apart. He pounded the ground with his fists, venting his initial agony toward the earth. His whole body shook, until the hot tears of grief suddenly cooled into cold resolve.

Rising to his feet, Rion turned to Byric as his entire demeanor became as stone. Eyes narrowed, his face reflected the torment he could no longer bear.

A sword was handed to him, hilt-first. Rion looked up to see Lord Teth, the guard who had been assigned to Annie, handing over his weapon. The man also had tears streaming down his face. Rion accepted the sword as the other guards unchained Byric to face Rion alone. Another sword appeared from nowhere, thrown at Byric's feet. The warrior picked up his weapon and cautiously began to size up his enemy.

"You know you will die today," Rion told him in a deadly whisper as they began to circle one another. "You have lost everything, including your right to live."

Surprisingly, Byric smiled. "So have you," he said.

Rion swung outward as Byric countered. Rare metal met rare metal, and the air shimmered from the impact. It was immediately

clear that although Byric was wounded, he was fighting for his life, and that knowledge allowed him to tap his last reserves of strength. The only way he could defeat Rion was to kill him, as he had every right to do now in self-defense.

Rion, on the other hand, knew he had nothing else to live for.

For a while it looked as if the two warriors were evenly matched, but slowly the advantage began to tilt in Rion's favor as sword beat sword, thrust met thrust, and blood was drawn on both sides. Byric led with every trick he'd learned, every ruse he could remember. It simply would not be enough.

Where Byric fought for his life, Rion fought for one end only. Death.

He wanted to die, and it no longer mattered when, so long as Byric went first. So long as his Annie was avenged.

* * * *

Vadon pressed his face into Chloe's unblemished cheek and began to weep. He knew the look haunting Rion's eyes. He knew the passion and the heat in his brother's blood. He knew the suicidal side of Rion was back. The loving man who had finally been full of joy and a future was now gone forever at the moment of Annie's passing. Byric had finally told the truth. Rion had lost everything. If there was any glimmer of hope left in this whole horrific turn of events, it was the knowledge that Rion would be able to reinstate his son's legitimacy before bowing eternally to his grief.

Byric fainted, sidestepping before Rion countered. He lunged, pressing the tip of his sword into Rion's side. To everyone's shock, Rion remained standing, unaffected by the piercing. As Byric remained crouching, his mouth opened in disbelief, Rion shoved him onto his back with his foot, and brought the blade of his weapon down next to the warrior's head.

"Once more my Annie has proven herself greater than you will ever be," Rion hissed, reaching beneath his tunic to extract the small volume he had pocketed there. He held it where Byric's eyes

could read the faded gold lettering—*The Works of Edgar Allan Poe*. A neat slit had been cut into the cover, into the pages, but not so deep as to wound him.

Tossing the book at Byric, Rion lifted his sword and held it to the warrior's throat, right where the vein could be seen pounding beneath the skin. Both men were panting heavily.

"Last words, Byric, and I am warning you. If they are coarse or inflamed, I will not let you die easily," Rion warned him as they both breathed heavily.

"You...lose." Byric smiled one last time.

His shrieks of agony filled the early evening air as Rion slowly pressed the entire length of his sword with both hands through the man's chest, splitting the heart before sinking the blade into the ground beneath and pinning the warrior's body to the earth. Without looking back, Rion walked away from Byric's still twitching corpse.

He continued to walk toward the hospital as the others followed behind him, amazed to see the physicians still hovering around the platform above. As he stared, Mannion detached himself from the group once more and landed next to them.

"What is going on?" Rion asked. "Why are you still gathered?"

"We are still fighting for Annie's life," Mannion answered.

Rion went white. "*What?*"

"But...but you gave him Blood Right," Vadon argued, unable to believe himself what he had just heard.

The physician nodded. "The child she carried has been lost, and we are about to lose her as well. The damage is too great for us to heal. It is all we can do to sustain her for a short while longer."

"Is there something else you can do?" Vadon asked. "Anything? More physicians?"

Mannion sadly shook his head. "She is an outworlder. If she were one of us, we could bleed into her—"

"Wait!" Chloe spoke up. "You can!"

"How?" Mannion asked.

And then Vadon remembered. Turning to Rion, he grabbed the warrior's arms. "You had me mark her when she first arrived. Then it is true you bled into her?"

"Yes. Back in Montana. When she had cut her leg with an ax and was bleeding to death. It was the only thing I could think of to save her," Rion explained.

"She *is* greatly blessed. You took an enormous risk," Mannion told him. "Our blood usually poisons, not heals otherworlders."

"I know," Rion nodded. "But at the time I felt I had no other choice. I could not lose her. She already had my heart."

Mannion raced off to inform the others. Within moments the team had begun to cut small slits into Annie's back, buttocks, and thighs. As her blood poured out, they sliced open their own hands and wrists, and pressed them against the openings. Placing one cut to one slit, until over a dozen physicians were knelt over the still, pale form.

Chloe pulled away from Vadon's grasp, determined to join them. Vadon protested, pointing out her own injuries that hadn't yet healed. She turned to him, pleading. "I must. It is what I do, and she is as dear to me as the sister I never had. What if she dies because she needed one more lifeline?"

Knowing she was right, Vadon nodded and watched as she lifted off to join them. Room was made for her on the outer edge, where she cut a small slit on one shoulder before laying her own pierced hand over the open wound.

Beside him Vadon heard Rion fall to his knees, his head in his hands. Duvatt knelt beside the warrior. Behind them, unnoticed, the guards carried away Byric's body.

A cycle passed. First sundown came and went. Just before second sundown, Vadon saw a movement among the group of physicians. He pushed Rion's shoulder to get his brother's attention. Rion was instantly on his feet.

Someone had called for a carrier, which was now being brought out. Slowly, carefully, and with great tenderness, Annie was rolled onto her back and draped with her torn gown. Lifting the carrier, six physicians escorted her inside as the rest of the healers followed behind. All except for one. Chloe detached herself to fly back down to where everyone was waiting below, including the guards who had returned after disposing of Byric's remains.

At first Vadon was struck by the seriousness of his lover's injuries. While she had helped Annie to heal, she had not used any of her abilities to help herself, nor accepted any healing from any of the other physicians, for fear of diverting a critical ounce of power from Annie. Instead, everyone had concentrated solely on the dying outworlder.

"Well?" Duvatt asked softly.

"We think...we think there is a chance," she admitted reluctantly. "She may still be lost to us. We are taking shifts to make sure one of us will be with her at all times until we know for certain, one way or another."

"Take turns?" Vadon asked.

Chloe nodded wearily. "Bleeding for her. Mannion is calling in all physicians who had today off so they can take over and give the rest of us a chance to recharge ourselves."

"I must be with her," Rion said. His eyes remained staring at the wide smear of blood remaining on the platform. Annie's blood.

"We...we want you there," Chloe told him. "We will need your blood as well. Since you have already marked her, her body will respond to yours. They have taken her to a room. You may join them now."

Rion leaned over to kiss her then kissed her hand where she had given her blood. As he flew off, Chloe turned to Vadon.

"I need to rest. Please take me home?" she begged.

Vadon nodded, lifting her into his arms. "Lord Duvatt?" he said to the councilman before flying away.

“Go. Our work here is done. This Intent is closed. Permanently. Let us hope the new dawn brings us better news.”

Nodding, Vadon lifted off, leaving Duvatt to watch them vanish into the distance as the last rays of sunlight disappeared from the skies.

Chapter 18

The Memory

Something cold and hard pelted him in the back, right at the neckline, leaving him to feel a chilling wetness beginning to seep through his clothing. Rion turned around, astonished to see how far away Annie had been when she'd aimed the snowball.

"Ha-ha!" she crowed. "Bull's-eye!"

"What are you doing?"

"Snowball fight!" She laughed. Already her hands were shaping another round missile to heave at him.

The morning had dawned crisp and sparkling, turning the nearly waist-high drifts of snow that had fallen the night before into a blinding wonderland of white. It had taken Annie quite a bit of begging to coax the reluctant angel man out into the front yard. But once she had, she had immediately taken the advantage by attacking his flank.

"You are not fighting fairly," he admonished her with a smile.

"Yeah, well, what are you going to do about it?"

Raising an eyebrow in her direction, Rion picked up a double handful of snow and began to shape it with slow, deliberate movements. Stepping back, he spread his wings and began fanning them downward until he could lift himself upward. Annie laughed throatily.

"Oh-ho-ho! I know what you're going to do, and that's not fair! I don't have wings!"

"Yeah, well, what are you going to do about it?" he echoed her before tossing the snowball directly at her from twenty feet above the ground.

Unfortunately Rion was not familiar with the science of compacted ice and frozen crystals. From his height, and with his strength, the sphere he

launched at her struck her with the force of a large rock. At the last second Annie turned to run. The snowball exploded against her left hip and thigh. She grunted at the impact and fell back into the drift, to lie motionless.

Alarmed, Rion dropped to the ground and plowed through the snow in his need to get to her.

"Annie!"

She was coming around as he reached her. Her cheeks were bright red, as was her nose, but her lips had a slightly bluish tinge. He rolled her over onto her back and into his embrace as she groaned. "Oh, God, that hurt!"

"I hurt you?" he asked.

"Yes, sweetie. Those snowballs aren't made of cotton candy, you know."

He shook his head. "No, I did not know, whatever cotton candy is. The one you threw at me did not hurt, although I am chilled now."

She looked at his face hovering over hers then began to giggle. "I have no one to blame but myself," she admitted ruefully. "If I put you in the middle of a field of dynamite in the middle of nowhere, you'd probably find some way to blow up all of Montana." Reaching up, her fingers touched the buttons of his shirt. "Peace?"

Rion smiled, laughing gently. "Peace."

His face was inches away from hers as he half-sat, half-leaned over where she lay across the low drift. Glancing down at her fingers playing with the front of his shirt, he bent down to kiss her. She sighed at the warmth of his mouth. "Nice." She smiled.

He bent down again to taste her lips. Wiping the cold and wet from one hand, he found the neckline of her flannel shirt and reached inside to cup her soft breast. Annie gasped and shrank from his touch. Surprised, Rion jerked back. "What is it? Was my hand not warm enough?"

She was holding her arms protectively against her chest, as if to prevent him from doing the same thing again. Shaking her head, she diverted her gaze away from his and rolled over into a sitting position on the snow-bank.

They had been lovers for less than a week. And although during those nights they had been insatiable in their lovemaking, Rion found she still had doubts about her body and her body's reaction to his. He knew she had been a virgin when she had gotten married, but the few times her husband had culminated the act had been nothing short of automatic. There had been no tenderness involved. No actual foreplay. No allowing for Annie to find her own orgasmic peak. She had been as ignorant and as inexperienced about the depths of her passions as she had been when she was still untouched. Until he had shown her differently.

In the daylight, especially, he found her cautious and shy, but curious. Whenever he tried a little impromptu foreplay, her reaction was like a frightened child, unsure as to whether such feelings were allowed in the daytime. Unsure as to whether she was allowed to physically celebrate their union when the sun was still shining, whether they were out in the open, or inside the cabin.

Seeing her now, prepared to go back inside, Rion got to his feet and placed a hand on the back of her shoulder. They had not planned to stay outside long. The cold was beginning to permeate their clothing. It was best they got back in front of the fireplace as soon as possible.

Wordlessly, they trudged through the drifts and into the cabin where he shook out the accumulated snow from his wings. They remained damp from the melted ice particles, forcing him to spread them wide before the fire until they were dry.

Silently he watched her moving about. He had felt her react, had felt her body respond to him when he'd caressed her skin. She wanted to love him, and wanted to make love to him at this moment, but something from her past or her upbringing was keeping her away. A guilt, a lesson, or a memory. Whatever it was, he knew they had to deal with it. Now. While there was still that small hesitation coming from her. Hesitation, and want.

"Annie?" he said softly. "Are you all right?"

"Yes." She flashed him a bright smile, but he could see her shivering behind it. A shivering not brought on by the cold.

"What did I do?"

"Nothing." She shook her head slightly. "Nothing."

"I touched your breast."

She seemed to wince at the word.

"Does it bother you when I say I enjoy touching your breasts?"

In answer, she bent down over the hearth and began prodding the wood with the poker.

"Annie, there is nothing wrong with what I did. Or for what you felt."

"I know."

"Then why did you turn away from me?"

At first she shrugged. After another long minute, she sighed and paused in her ministrations. "I just... I guess I always thought stuff like that was only supposed to happen in the dark. You know. At night. With the lights out, so you can't see what's going on."

"Who told you that? You told you that loving someone should only be done in the dark?"

She made a useless little gesture with her head. "If you do it in the daylight, someone could see you."

"And that would be wrong, because..."

"I don't know, Rion," she moaned. "It just is."

"Just like the feelings I bring to you when I make love to you. Are you only allowed to be that happy and content just once a night?" He watched as she bit her lower lip instead of replying. The first time he had brought her to orgasm twice in the same night, she had been shocked by the incredible magic he had performed on her. "You are my wife," he began, and immediately knew it was the wrong thing to say.

"Yeah, you're right," she admitted in a flat, emotionless voice.

"That is not what I meant," he denied heatedly. He pulled her to her feet, turning her around so she would look at him. "I did not mean to imply that because you are my wife, you are to subject yourself to anything I wished, including sexual favors."

"Oh?" The look she gave him was pained, and Rion realized she was unavoidably comparing him to her first husband.

He shook his head. "No. What I meant to say is, when two people love each other, as we do, when two people deeply love each other, then there should never be a time or place when they are not allowed express that love." He gazed into the clear green glory of her eyes. "I want to touch you now. I want to watch you when I am inside of you, and I want to see myself reflected on your face when I make you fly. But if at any time I touch you, and that touch upsets or disturbs you, you will not hurt my feelings if you turn me away."

She stared back at him, wanting to believe him. He knew it would take a long time for her to learn to completely trust him, but he was willing to wait. For her, for his Annie, he would wait as long as it took for her to finally come to him without inhibitions or fears.

"You mean it?" she asked.

"Yes. Every word."

"I mean, if I just want to kiss and be held, I don't have to have sex with you?" she emphasized.

"Your body is yours. I have no rights to it except to show you what it is capable of feeling."

She bowed her head, biting her lower lip again in that way she had when she was pulling her thoughts together. "If I had let you keep touching my...breast...outside, what would you have done next?"

"I do not know. We never got that far," he admitted truthfully, adding a smile. "But I know what I wanted to do."

"You like touching me?" She glanced up at him through her thick lashes.

"I love touching you."

"Why?"

"Why?" he repeated. "Because I have nightmares about waking up on my world and finding you have been nothing more than a figment of my fevered imagination. Because, by touching you, and making love to you, I know that you are real. That you are not a dream. And that I have finally found the woman whom I have forever lost my heart to."

Annie smiled lovingly. "Where did you learn all those sweet words?" she teasingly asked him.

Rion slowly shook his head. "I am finding them as I go along. If I stumble and say the wrong thing, please forgive me, because I have never felt this depth of emotion with anyone. It frightens me, what I feel for you. I have never in my life felt as helpless and as weak and as powerless as you make me feel, all because of this emotion."

"Kiss me," she whispered, "but don't touch me."

Carefully, he caressed her lips, aware of her tongue as it parted his own lips. She tasted of honey from their breakfast. Her tentative probing sent tingles down to his feet, and he was forced to clench his fists to keep his promise.

She moved closer, clutching his sleeves, as she waited for his response. Rion took her mouth with a heat that weakened them both.

Annie stepped back slightly and pulled her face away. "Ohhh. Wow." She opened her eyes and looked up at him. Then, with a tiny smile creasing the corners of her mouth, she reached up to unbutton the top two buttons of her shirt, parting the neckline until he could see her soft swells. She lifted one of his hands by the wrist and slipped it inside to where his palm rested against one breast. Already he could feel the nipple growing taut.

She looked down at where his hand was touching her then stared up into his eyes. "Do you really want to see us in the daylight when we make love?" she asked softly. He could feel her growing excitement in the increasing rhythm of her heart.

"The night has its own rewards," he murmured. "But daytime is best for joyous sharing. Yes, I want to see me inside of you. I want to see how your whole body reaches for me when you climax. I want to see how your body fits against mine, as if we were two halves made whole. Yes, my Annie. My beautiful Annie."

He leaned down to kiss her again, and this time she didn't push his hands away.

And she never did again after that day.

** * * **

Rion stared at the still form lying on the bed. Only a barely perceptible rise and fall of the coverlet told him she was still alive. Still breathing. Still with him on his world.

Behind her a physician stood with her hands splayed across Annie's stomach and chest. Every cycle another physician would come in and replace the one already there, never breaking the chain of healing.

He had already given his blood to her twice, each time holding his wrist to a cut he himself had made directly over her heart.

On the table between them the candle burned low. It would be first dawn soon. Rion ran an exhausted hand over his face. His eyes were burning from lack of sleep. His mind felt fogged. His whole body ached.

He still wore his official uniform, the tunic caked and smeared with her dried blood. The blood from her womb, where their unborn child would forever remain unborn.

There were times he had drifted in and out of sleep, although he had fought to remain awake. He had to be there for her, he had to be with her in the event...

...in the event she finally succumbed.

Unavoidably his body had betrayed him, dragging him into unconsciousness where his memories resurfaced to wash over him. Memories of their months in Montana. Memories of their brief time together in his world. Memories of little discoveries and small misunderstandings, and the differences they had discovered between them that had become links in a chain of love so strong that nothing forged could break it.

Nothing except death.

Rion rubbed his face again. Vadon had been by not two cycles ago, in the wee hours of the morning. He had begged Rion to go home and rest while he spelled him, but Rion had refused and sent his brother back to Chloe and his own home. These next few hours

were the most crucial. If Annie could make it past tonight, past tomorrow, and past the day after that—

“Lord Rion.”

A gentle hand on his arm drew him out of his pensiveness. Rion swore at himself under his breath, his eyes immediately going to the bed. He finally allowed himself to breathe when he saw her also take a shallow breath. Glancing up, he saw Physician Deara standing over him. “What?” he whispered.

“I have been assigned to assist you,” the woman smiled.

“Assist me?”

She moved behind him, brushing aside his unbound hair, and placed her hands at his neck, above his collar. Rion grabbed one hand to stop her. “You should save this for Annie,” he told her.

Deara shook her head. “She is being taken care of by our finest and most skilled.”

Rion glanced over at the bed where he could see Allaré with her hands cupping Annie’s face. He must have been dozing when the changeover took place. “I take it then that you are not among the finest or most skilled, if you are to work on me and not my wife,” he baited her with a lopsided grin.

The physician playfully pinched his neck. “You are a cruel man,” she whispered before she let out a soft laugh.

“How is she?” he inquired of both physicians.

Allaré looked up. “She is stable. That is more than we could have hoped for.”

“But is she getting any better?” He needed to know. He could feel the healing threads of heat weaving through him, erasing the pain in his muscles from his fight with Byric and soothing the tightness in his chest.

“You must rest,” Deara told him none-too-gently. “If she ever does awaken, what good will you be to her?”

“I cannot rest,” Rion shook his head.

"You are afraid she will be lost to you while you sleep?" the physician asked. When Rion didn't reply, she sighed loudly. "What if we were to promise to awaken you the moment there is any change?"

"You can do that, after you have put me to sleep?"

To his surprise, both she and Allaré laughed softly. "How little you know of our ways," Deará chided him.

Rion had to admit he'd had little to do with physicians other than when he needed immediate help. Even though Chloe was nearly a member of the family, he knew nothing of the extent of her abilities. "Very well. I will let you, for Annie's sake. Promise me, though..." His voice faded away as the physician lowered him into the chair, then adjusted the seat so that it reclined. As he slept she lightly stroked the warrior's face until the lines of sadness were melted away. That done, she took his hands in hers and healed the cuts and bruises he had sustained in his fight. When she was completely finished, she took a coverlet from the bureau in the wall and spread it over him.

"We promise," Deará told him, brushing her hand over his forehead with a final dose of healing. She gave her sister physician a nod of acknowledgment, then left Allaré alone to continue with her work.

Chapter 19

The Risk

“Rion.”

He instantly came fully awake. Jerking into a sitting position, his eyes went immediately to the figure in the bed. Another physician was with her now, a man he recognized but didn't know by name.

“Rion.” It was Vadon standing next to the reclined chair. “I never knew that part of my duty as your younger brother was to also be a surrogate mother. Here. I brought you a change of clothes from the house. Go take a quick shower. Mannion and Moltan want to speak with you and they will be here momentarily.” He set a tunic and pair of pants in Rion's lap. His voice brooked no argument.

Rion got to his feet, never taking his eyes off Annie. Was it his hopeful imagination, or was there some color back in her face?

“Who are you?” he gruffly asked the physician.

“Basil.”

“Mannion's son?”

“Yes, your lordship.”

Vadon gave his brother's shoulder a push. “Go. Shower. Now. I will take your uniform back to the house and see if Pella can clean it, although it would be better off burned. I doubt with all the rips and cuts in it that it can be salvaged.”

Rion looked around to shoot his brother an annoyed but grateful look. Quickly he unclasped the chaster he still wore around his neck and placed it in Vadon's outstretched hand. Unbuckling the

tunic, he folded it and also handed it over. That done, he strode into the bathroom before shedding the rest of his uniform.

"When was the last time you ate?" Vadon inquired over the sound of running water as he stood in the doorway.

"I do not remember."

"That is what I thought."

"How is Chloe?"

"Healed, finally. It was a long night for us. Who was it who managed to put you under? Dear?"

"How did you know?"

Vadon smiled to himself. "Moltan knew that if anyone could get close enough to you to knock you out, she could."

"Thank you for that warning. Next time she comes into the room—"

"Rion, quit thinking you do not need help. If Annie pulls out of this, how will you be able to take care of her if you yourself are not well?"

The water shut off and Rion emerged from the shower to stand under the hot air dryer. As reluctant as he was to admit it, the healing sleep and subsequent bath had invigorated him. As did the clean clothes against his skin. "If I ever wear that uniform again, it will be too soon," he grumbled.

Vadon smiled. A sullen Rion was much easier to deal with than a depressed one. He stepped back from the doorway when the door to the room slid open. Mannion and Moltan walked in with Chloe right behind them. They waited inside the room for Rion.

"We needed to meet with you to discuss Annie's possible future," Mannion began. There was only the one chair, but everyone opted to stand.

Rion took a deep breath. The physician took it as a signal to continue.

"Let us dispense with formality. Rion, the fact that Annie is still alive is nothing short of a miracle. The only thing that saved

her is the fact that you bled for her over on her world. And that was possible only because you had taken the risk first. If you had not, I do not think I would have asked my physicians to do it.”

“I knew the risks then, but I felt I had no other choice.”

Mannion slowly nodded. “I understand. Now comes the difficult part. She is not one of us. Therefore her outcome, how she will be in a cycle, or a lunar month from now, cannot be predicted.” He gave the warrior a solemn look. “You need to know all the options, and be prepared for whatever happens.”

“I am listening,” Rion said.

“I will not hedge my doubts, Rion. Annie may never wake up. If she does, she may not be the Annie you know. She may not know you, or us. She may not even be cognizant. In short, she may be just an empty shell. We can heal her body, but we cannot heal her mind.”

“Is there a way we can determine whether her mind is still whole?”

“There is,” Moltan told him. “A dreamer could tell us if there has been any damage to her brain, and, if so, to what parts, and to what extent.”

“Then I want a dreamer brought in,” Rion said flatly.

“It is not that easy. Besides, a dreamer is expensive,” Moltan said.

“Find one. Bring him here, if that is what it takes to find out.”

Mannion nodded. “Very well. I will send out a request. It may take some days.”

“That is not a problem. Until then, I am remaining here with her,” Rion answered in the same emotionless tone of voice.

The physicians excused themselves and left. Chloe remained behind.

“Rion, if Annie’s future is to permanently be in this state, if the dreamer determines her mind is gone, what will you do then?” she asked once the men were gone. Other than a few faint reddish

marks around her eye, there were no other outward signs of the abuse she had suffered from Byric's attack.

Shaking his head, Rion walked over to where Annie lay and took one of her hands in his. It was cool to the touch. He enclosed it between his palms to warm it.

"Let me think on that when the problem presents itself," he answered. "For now, allow me a bit of hope." He glanced back at her over his shoulder. "I am happy to see you well again."

"She was given a few days off to recuperate further," Vadon said, taking her by the arm. "Therefore, as your husband-to-be, I am asserting my right to have a completely healed wife-to-be." He paused at the door on their way out. "I will be back later," he promised.

Rion watched him go and then turned back to Annie. Basil, who had been quiet all this time, glanced up from where he had been concentrating on her right shoulder. She had sustained multiple fractures to that part of her body when she had landed almost head first on the platform.

"They are right, you know," he pointed out carefully. "We cannot repair the mind. Not even a dreamer has that power. If Annie's has too much damage done to it, what will you do?"

"What can I do? I will see to it she is comfortable until her final day."

"And what about love?" Basil asked. "Could you... would you be able to love again? With her gone?"

The young but gifted physician was not prepared for the hardness he saw come over the warrior. "What makes you think I would have a life after hers is gone?" Rion whispered ominously.

Basil shuddered slightly and bent back to his task. To his relief, Rion returned to his chair to sit and silently observe, and to think.

Chapter 20

The Dreamer

Vadon hit the platform running. The obsidian doors barely had time to open before he hurried into the house, searching for Rion. He found him in the bedroom changing clothes and cleaning up after his return from his last mission.

"Rion! They just notified me of your return. The entire council is in an uproar. Is it true what they are saying? Tell me what is going on!"

"It is true I am back and it is probably true what they are saying," the warrior replied indifferently. He pulled off the strange white shirt he'd worn through the gap, and Vadon gasped.

"You were injured!"

Rion glanced down at the large, round, puckered scar in his right side, just above his hip. "Do not worry. It has healed."

"Has a physician checked you over? Of course not," Vadon quickly corrected himself. "That is another reason Dimarkus is fuming." He took a step closer. "They are saying you went straight from the opening to the cathedral."

"True." Naked, Rion sauntered into the bathroom and got into the shower. Vadon followed.

"They say you approached the council without permission."

"True."

"They say..." Vadon stopped to swallow. "They say you demanded to walk the next pathway in that region."

"True again." Rion's voice almost sounded unconcerned.

"You demanded? What would make you do such a thing? You do not demand anything from the council."

This time Rion's answer was edged in stone. "I have, and I will get my demands met. The council has no choice in this matter."

Vadon could feel an insane laugh welling inside him. "Have you gone mad? What is so important that you have finally thrown all caution, all wisdom, all sanity aside?" He gasped and dragged a hand through his hair. A weak grin creased his face. "Please, please, please tell me it is not true."

To his utter shock, Rion turned off the shower and slowly opened the chamber door to peek out at him. "All you have heard is true, Vadon," he said calmly before stepping out to dry off.

"Oh, dearest, sweet... a woman? A wife?"

"Her name is Annie."

"An outworlder? Why, Rion why?"

Rion stared at him. "Do you think I went over there to find a wife?"

"You have not gotten over Anitra," Vadon reminded him.

"I was never in love with Anitra," Rion flatly stated, walking back into the bedroom.

"And this otherworlder, this Annie, do you honestly love her?"

Rion pulled on his pants. "With a passion I could never begin to explain, little brother."

Vadon's eyes widened. "Have you... oh, please tell me you have not taken her to your bed, Rion."

"More than that, I have exchanged vows with her, and we plan to have a family," Rion said, then pulled a clean tunic over his head.

"Then it is all true? Rion! What has happened to you?" Vadon demanded loudly. To his utter astonishment, his older brother burst out laughing and grabbed him by the shoulders.

"I have found a love that consumes me like a disease. It eats away all my inhibitions and unfocuses my eyes until there is nothing left for me to gaze upon but the sight of her beautiful face. Vadon, Vadon, wait until you meet her. Talk to her. Get to know her!"

Vadon stumbled backward as Rion released him to go into the kitchen. He tagged along, his mind whirling. "Get to meet her? Is that why you are

going back? To bring her back here? Is that it? Is that why you have to walk the next pathway?"

"I must, Vadon. The world she lives in will kill her if I do not. And I cannot...I cannot survive without her." Rion poured himself a glass of water, drinking deeply. Setting the glass down on the counter, he turned to face his brother's worried stare. "Please. Rejoice with me, Vadon. Because of her, I want my House of Thunder to live. I want...I want her in my arms, and in my bed, and in my heart every day for the rest of my life."

Shaking his head, Vadon managed to smile. "I can hardly believe it. You have finally learned to love. Then I guess miracles do happen."

"No," Rion corrected him. "Annie happened."

* * * *

"Rion. They have found a dreamer." This time it was Chloe's voice that broke through his reverie. She had hurried on ahead to warn him before they arrived at the room.

He quickly got to his feet as the door slid open, and Mannion and Moltan once again entered the room. Behind them was a slight figure dressed in gray robes and a hood. Rion stared at the dreamer with a combination of fascination and fear.

Although Mannion had thought finding one of the few, rare physicians would take several days, they had been lucky to discover one living on the outskirts of the city. Dreamers were not sociable creatures, keeping to themselves and their kind almost like a secret sect.

They dealt with the inner workings of the mind. The secrets, the knowledge, the memories, the very essence of what made a person who they were—that was what they came to know of every person they came in contact with. They did not have the power to heal or restore anything that was lost, but they could reveal depths of thought and memories believed forever forgotten. They could find that small bit of lost soul and draw it back to the surface.

In Annie's case, the dreamer would be able to tell them if the fall had erased the spirit of Annie from her mind. He would be able

to tell them if the body lying on the bed was nothing more than an empty husk. Or if, by some miracle, she was simply lying just beneath the surface, and they would need to give her more time before she could reemerge.

The dreamer paused inside the doorway. Reaching up with two gnarled hands, the physician flipped back the gray cowl. He was an old man. A very old man. Yet his eyes sparkled with the energy of a man at least fifty festivals younger.

He walked over to the bed, throwing back the coverlet to run a hand along the length of Annie's body, beginning at the foot and trailing it up her leg, over her thigh and hip, around one full breast, and over her face before actually dipping his fingers into her long black hair that flowed over the end of the bed like a thick, smoky veil.

"So this is the outworlder we have heard about," he commented. Whirling around, he eyed Rion from head to toe, smiling. Without warning, the dreamer shot out a hand and cupped Rion's chin, holding it firmly for a long moment before withdrawing it. He nodded when the man refused to flinch. "For a warrior who is trained not to show any sign of weakness, you have been swept away in your own storm," he told him. "Are you prepared for the truth?"

Rion steeled himself. "I have no choice," he replied.

Surprisingly, the dreamer grinned. "You understand I cannot heal her."

Rion nodded.

"If she is in there, I can try to draw her out, but if she is not ready, not willing, or unable, I cannot change that. Is that also acceptable?"

"It is."

"The least I can do is tell you if she still exists. Are you willing to pay the consequence?"

"Yes."

“Good. Let me begin. Please do not interrupt me, or I may lose whatever connection I might gain. Remember she is an out-worlder, so even I cannot begin to guess what to expect. If you hear me talking, listen carefully. It may be me, or it may be her. If it is her, I will have no memory of what I may say. That will be your responsibility. Lord Mannion, I am here solely as an observer. When you are ready you may connect with me at any time to determine her mental health, if need be.”

“I am ready,” the master physician answered.

“Then let me begin.”

The physician whose turn it was to watch over her stepped to one side as the dreamer positioned himself at the head of the bed. Slowly he ran his fingers through Annie’s ebony tresses, almost as if he were combing them. His eyes were closed, his breathing slowing as his hands sank deeper to seal around the curves of her skull. The room grew unnaturally quiet.

Rion felt a hand sneak into his and a tiny tendril of warmth curled its way up his arm. Chloe gave him a hopeful smile from where she stood beside him.

Time passed. No one moved. No one dared to break whatever fragile connection the dreamer might find. Taking a deep, shuddering breath, Rion felt himself almost on the verge of wanting to call the whole thing off when the dreamer lifted his face. Although his eyes remained shut it was as if the shadow of something, or someone, took his place.

His mouth opened, and the words that came out shook Rion to his core.

* * * *

She heard the log shifting in the grate. Annie slowly opened her eyes. Something had awakened her, but it hadn’t been the dying fire.

She carefully raised her head and looked over at Rion still sleeping less than a hand’s length away. The last of the glowing embers highlighted his

face with a soft blush, and Annie took the moment to study his features, now relaxed and innocent.

In the distance a low rumble of thunder rolled across the mountains. Annie quickly glanced up at the window, but from where she lay she was unable to see the storm as it approached from the northwest.

He had to go home at the next storm. He had to leave. He would be leaving her. When they had talked about it, even when bits and pieces of her were being crushed by the realization and understanding there was no other choice, she had accepted the fact numbly. Now the storm was approaching. His time to go was now.

Something inside her froze. She had lifted a hand to shake his shoulder, to awaken him, but she couldn't. Her hand would not obey her. Breathing heavily, Annie listened as the thunder gathered strength as it approached the valley and the little cabin where they were sleeping.

He was supposed to go. He was supposed to return to his world. But some force more powerful kept her from completing the act, kept her from shaking him awake so he could get ready to fly away.

Fly away.

Tears burned in her eyes. She had to let him go. She knew it beyond all doubt, beyond anything she had ever been forced to endure before in her life. Yet, she couldn't. Call her ungrateful, call her selfish. She didn't care. She just couldn't do it.

Squeezing her eyes tightly shut, Annie leaned over and enveloped him in her embrace. She gently covered his ears as the swift storm passed overhead, and guilt showered over her.

How long she lay there, protecting her heart against him hearing the sound, she couldn't tell. When the storm had finally spent itself over the next ridge, Annie removed her hands and kissed the top of Rion's head. She would bear the burden of knowing she had prevented him from returning when everything inside her cried out her betrayal. She couldn't let him go now. Not now. Not after they had been through so much together and there was still a lifetime of learning, of experiencing, of loving still left for them to do.

Later. Let it storm again later. Let him go back later. This was her moment to have him. This was their moment to share and make the memories she would have to make last for the rest of her life when he never returned to her world.

She would let him go back to his world and his life in the sky at the next storm. Tonight, though, was hers. That was all she wanted, and all she would ever ask for.

Kissing his hair again, Annie snuggled against Rion's chest, within the incredible softness of his wings which were curved beneath and around them, and allowed herself to drift back to sleep.

* * * *

The dreamer stopped. Lowering his head until his lips were nearly touching her forehead, he remained that way for several long minutes.

"A secret," he whispered so softly it almost wasn't audible. "She has kept it secret from you all this time. A memory... of guilt. She has been... she is reliving the past." He trembled as he pressed his lips to her cool skin. "Annie, can you see me?"

The ensuing silence was deafening as everyone waited for her answer.

"Annie, look up. Yes, I am here."

Rion bit his lip. He was unable to stop the tears that were burning in his throat.

"Annie, no! No. There is nothing to fear. There is nothing left to be afraid of. All of that is gone. He will never harm you again. Listen to me, Annie. Reach up. Can you reach up, Annie?"

Rion heard Chloe gasp and saw her clutch her chest, her breath hitching in her throat as they watched one frail hand move slightly against the coverlet. Shaking his head, unable to believe it himself, Rion focused on the dreamer's mouth where it caressed her forehead as he spoke.

"Yes, he is here, Annie. He is waiting for you," the dreamer said softly, slowly. "He cannot come to you, but you can go to him. Yes, you *are* strong enough. Yes, you can."

Unaware of what he was doing, Rion knelt forward until his face was even with the upper edge of the bed, his mouth parallel to her ear.

"Foster is dead, my Annie. Byric is gone. I need you here with me. Please, come back to me. Renew your vows with me. I am waiting for you," he whispered so only she could hear. "Come back to me, my beloved."

"Come back to us, Annie," the dreamer murmured. "Come. Reach up. You can do it. Yes, you can. Reach up, Annie. Yes, I know it is hard, but that is all you have to do. I cannot help you. I cannot do it for you. You must do it on your own. Come. Reach up. One...last...step...Annie...yes."

Rion rose to his feet, ignoring the sound of soft weeping and gasps coming from behind him as he held out his arms toward her.

Annie was lifting her arms, her breathing visibly increasing as the dreamer continued to hold her head in his hands. Rion felt his own tears falling as her lips parted and she uttered a sound for the first time in days.

"—ion."

He leaned over to slowly pull her into his embrace, although he could not keep his arms from shaking. His body alternated between cold and hot. Taking a ragged breath, he prayed he didn't lose his grip and drop her. The dreamer kept his hands around her face as she was lifted from the bed, her eyes still closed, her face relaxed and serene.

"Annie?" Rion murmured thickly.

"One last step, Annie," the dreamer whispered. "He is here. Come. Let him take you. He will protect you. Reach out. His arms are waiting. Let him... let him...yes. Feel him holding you. Hear him calling you. Come, Annie. Yes! You are there! You are..."

Open your eyes, Annie. Open your eyes and see he is waiting for you. Welcome home, oh beautiful wingless one."

Rion stared in mute shock, unable to move as Annie opened her eyes. She gazed at him, her deep green eyes glassy and uncomprehending. Her face was less than a foot away from his. Her arms rested on top of his as he held her securely.

Gently the dreamer pulled his hands away and stepped back, carefully breaking his connection with her. Lifting his face, he looked at Rion. "Talk to her."

Rion forced himself to breathe. "Annie? Annie. My beloved, come back to me."

She blinked. She was trying to focus, focus on the sight of his face and the sound of his voice.

"My beautiful Annie. My beloved. I love you. I, Rion, Lord of the House of Thunder, take you, Annie, as my equal. My other soul. My wife. For untold days, despite all transgressions, without reservation, forever and ever."

Miraculously, a little smile touched the corners of her mouth. Annie blinked again. And then, in a dry, raspy whisper came the hesitating words, "Take...me...home?"

Rion began to cry through his laughter, and he pressed her carefully against him. Her arms found his neck and her fingers entangled themselves in his hair. He rocked her in his lap, swearing never again to let her go.

Quietly and unseen, the dreamer slipped out of the room before anyone could notice the wetness on the little man's face.

Chapter 21

The Festival

“Annie! Hurry up or we will be late!”

“Hold your horses! Don’t rush me or I might forget to pack something!”

Annie half-ran out of Kerr’s bedroom as she tied up the bag of items she thought they would need while they were away. Rion stood in the doorway, holding the doors open until she could join him. Smiling, she tossed him the bag, and he deftly threaded its long handles over his head and shoulder. From him she accepted their son, already bundled in his carrier. The infant smiled as she strapped him against her chest.

She was wearing one of her new knee-length tunics and long pants in a mint green color. She’d missed wearing pants, and sometimes flying around in a gown just wasn’t practical. After she’d asked Rion to order her a set, three outfits had shown up two days later.

Annie waited as Rion finished buckling her into the harness. When his hands reached around her hips to tighten the last straps, they paused. She tilted her head back to see why he’d stopped, and was met with a pair of lips on hers. It was a slow and tender kiss.

“I was waiting for you to do that,” he whispered in a low voice. Annie smiled. He tugged on the fasteners, double-checking. “Secure?”

“Ready.”

As before, he held his family as he fell backwards off the edge of the platform that had recently been abraded to a rougher sur-

face, to prevent any possible accidents in case rain or dew made it slick. In a few more days a railing would also be installed around most of the perimeter.

As soon as they were clear, he flipped over, banked, and headed for The Green.

In the week following her awakening from her coma, Rion was rarely away from Annie's side. There were many times when a physician came into her room to either heal or check up on her, only to find her nestled in Rion's lap and across his wide chest, as they lay together on the bedside chair—one or both asleep, with the warrior's arms protecting her and keeping her warm.

Eight days later Mannion determined Annie was well enough to go home, but ordered Rion to have no physical contact other than what was necessary to care for her until she had completely healed. Her organs were still deeply bruised, especially her brain, he explained, and she would need more time for those to get well.

Giving the master physician his word, Rion had carried her home and put her straight to bed. That same afternoon he had gone to Joberiah's house to fetch Kerr. Having their baby returned to her had been the perfect dose of medicine for Annie's spirits after learning they had lost their second child.

Two more weeks had passed. Chloe and Vadon came to visit, either separately or together, at varying times during the day and night. They let them know they had made plans to announce their vows on Festival Eve, a couple of weeks away.

"Festival Eve?"

"Of the Festival of Life," Chloe explained.

"Oh! The big birthday party!" Annie had exclaimed. "Where everyone turns another year older."

At Chloe's questioning glance his way, Rion had nodded, laughing. "Speaking of vows, you and Vadon will need to be here tomorrow at the beginning of second sunset. We are renewing our

vows before a small group of friends, and we would like you to be our confirming witnesses.”

“You mean we needed witnesses the *first* time?” Annie quizzed him in mock irritation. She picked up the small volume she had been reading from the bedside table and threw it at him. Rion snatched it out of the air from where he sat at the end of the bed.

“We had many witnesses the second time we announced them,” he reminded her with a twinkle in his eye. “*That* was the one that counted.”

“Oh, so the first time was just an excuse to sweet talk me into the sack, was that it?”

“From what I remember, it did not take much coaxing to get you to swoon into my arms.”

“Bet you think you’re God’s gift to women, don’cha, big boy? Think you’re able to get any woman you want? What was I? Just another notch on your warrior belt? Chloe, was he really the heartbreaker he swears he was when he was growing up?”

Chloe continued to laugh as she got to her feet. “You are going to have to ask Vadon that question. Second sunset, you said?”

“A small ceremony,” Rion promised. Which, true to his word, it was. There were less than a dozen people present. Councilman Duvatt officiated during the brief pronouncement. Rion held Kerr, declaring him as his heir and the next Lord of the House of Thunder once he and Annie had repeated their vows.

Later that night, after everyone had left and Rion had closed the front doors, Annie had taken their sleeping son and put him to bed. Rion came up behind her, putting his arms around her before burying his face in her glossy hair as they stood beside the crib.

“Rion?”

“What?” His arms tightened around her. Annie sighed loudly, closing her eyes. She would forever melt in his embrace.

“Can we start having a life together now? For the rest of our lives? I mean, now can we be happy?”

"Yes, my beloved, my beautiful Annie. Now we can grow old together. Does the thought frighten you?"

"Never. Not as long as I can be with you."

"And I with you, my Annie."

"Tell me. When we were at the court, when you did this..."

She placed two fingers against her heart. "What did it mean? I know you told me on the lips was a kiss. Two fingers, two lips."

He placed his own two fingers over hers. "It means we are two as one. That our two hearts beat as one single beat. And should one heart fail, so shall the other."

It was Vadon who had finally told her what had happened to Byric. It was an ancient tradition, the Blood Right, and rarely used, but he admitted that they had all believed Mannion had declared *her* dead, which was why Rion had brutally executed the warrior. Losing the baby was devastating, and Rion would have been equally justified to kill the man for that reason alone, but Annie understood. She tried to speak to Rion about the incident, but he had quietly and firmly told her it was a part of their past he could not bring himself to talk about. Not now, anyway. Perhaps in the future. He had never killed a man before. He hoped he never would have to do it again.

Now they were heading into the city for Annie's first Festival of Life. "I would be, umm, what? Twenty-one?" she'd asked her husband the night before, after they had witnessed Vadon and Chloe's proclamation as husband and wife. "Wow. Twenty-one. God, Rion, it seems like yesterday I was an innocent sixteen-year-old when Foster dragged me north to that cabin in Montana."

"You do not want to continue to celebrate your birthing day on the day you were actually born?" he asked her.

"Not birthing day. Birthday. And, no. That life is over. I'm here now, so it's only right I should celebrate when everyone else does. How old will you be?" She cuddled under his chin, relishing

in his nearness until he determined it was time for bed—she in theirs, and he on the sofa in the living room.

“Thirty-one or thirty-two. I need to check with Vadon to see if I was still with you in Montana when the last Festival occurred, or if it was while I was recuperating after bringing you back. You realize, Annie, that it does not mean I am ten of your years older than you. I would guess more like seven or eight.”

“I know, I know,” she sighed, rubbing her cheek against his tunic. “Time is different here.” In a smaller voice, she added, “I wish you could stay.” She felt his hand where it rested against her back caress her in response.

“So do I.”

Mannion had not released her yet from her exile. The physical intimacy that was so much a part of their lives was still on hold, and the wait was beginning to become intolerable. The needing, and not being able to fulfill that need, was worse than the time after she’d given birth. Back then, her body had been transformed into the role of nurturing mother, and the urges and desires she’d joyfully given in to whenever Rion had approached her were not there at the beginning. Not until later, once she had adjusted and was ready to receive him again. That had been nature’s way.

This time, though, there was no baby playing havoc with her body. Just the opposite. Her healing depended on his physical presence. She needed the sound of his voice and his loving touch when she was asleep and awake. She thrived while lying in his embrace.

At the same time, having endured the emotional war he had faced during Annie’s imagined death, and having killed the man who had tried to destroy her, plus the trauma of his wife’s awakening from her coma, Rion could not make himself stay away from her for more than a few moments at a time. As the days passed, it finally grew easier to step away for longer and longer periods, but she still had to be the first and last thing he saw whenever he left and arrived back at their home. He needed her soft kiss and gentle

affirmation of love before he went to bed, and the first thing he received when he woke up the next morning.

He knew the nightmares he suffered would eventually go away with time. Time, and Annie's love.

Until the physician said she was allowed to resume lovemaking, she and Rion had to be careful not to cause themselves any undue tension or frustration. That meant being unable to sleep in the same bed at night. That meant no more shared showers, or even casually walking around with little or nothing on. At first they had tried to compensate with other means, but those proved worthless. Lovemaking was a deep, physical act, and there was no substitute.

If it was misery for Annie, it was torture for Rion. Burying himself in her, and making deep, everlasting love to her, did much to alleviate the vision of her unconscious body he still saw whenever he closed his eyes. Hopefully, soon, that would also be a thing of the past. She was due to see Mannion for another examination a few days after the Festival.

As they neared The Green, they kept an eye out for Vadon and Chloe, who had promised to hold them a spot. The Festival of Life was like a party, a carnival, and a reason for spontaneous fun and merriment shared by everyone in the city. Like Annie had imagined, it was a giant birthday celebration, full of well wishes, good food, entertainment, and the company of family and friends. In short, it was the biggest event held every master cycle.

Annie spotted the couple first and pointed them out to Rion, who glided down to the park, careful not to jar her. It had taken much pleading and many promises for them to get Mannion to allow her to join the merriment. As they touched down, Chloe hurried over to take Kerr, giving Annie a quick kiss on the cheek in welcome.

"Well, how does it feel to be an old married woman?" Annie teased her as Rion undid the harness.

"Odd you should ask," the woman physician told her. "Our lives have not changed, but *we* have. How do you explain that?"

Annie laughed and kissed Vadon, who'd extended his cheek in greeting. "Hello again, my brother."

"My sister." He smiled in return. "Rion, come! There is someone I want you to meet."

"Vadon, we just arrived."

"And this gives you an excuse because? Bring Kerr. I want to show off my nephew."

"All right." Rion laughed, tucking the wrapped harness in the pouch under his tunic. "I will return shortly," he promised his wife, giving her a quick but soft kiss as Vadon took possession of the baby.

"Take your time," Chloe ordered him. "Everyone has been dying for the opportunity to finally meet Annie, and I promised many people they would get their chance." To prove her point, she took the woman by the hand, and they started off toward a large crowd gathered nearby.

"Chloe, where are you taking me?"

"Everywhere and nowhere," she answered. "It is time our people got to meet you and speak to you, and get to learn who you are. Not some upper lords at a gala, or the odd shopkeeper, but the people of this city. They have heard so much about you, and they have witnessed what you and Rion have had to endure. They need to approach you and find out for themselves what makes you special."

"A-are you sure?"

"Trust me. Ferran! Camisa! Happy Festival! I want you to meet my sister-in-vows. This is Annie."

Annie soon realized she could not remember the names and faces of everyone Chloe introduced her to, but she understood she didn't have to. The people were warm and caring, inquiring about her health, about Kerr, and trying to make small talk. She was of-

ten asked about Montana and the world she came from. She tried to explain as best she could, knowing they wouldn't comprehend much of what she told them.

Every so often she'd search the crowds, looking for Rion. He was never far away. Sometimes he would catch her eye and place two fingers to his lips, making the thin blue ring on his left hand glitter. A ring just like hers that he'd had made for himself and insisted on wearing after they'd renewed their vows this last time.

At other times he was involved in a conversation with some people she didn't recognize. Once she saw him laughing, and she also saw the looks of astonishment on the faces of those around him. Sometimes when that happened, they would glance at her as if she was the cause. Had she really changed him that much?

Near a tent serving refreshments, Chloe got them both a cup and found them a spot of warm grass to plop down on to rest. Annie sipped her cool drink and closed her eyes. "Mmm. It turned out gorgeous today, didn't it?" she asked, raising her face toward the sunlight. There was enough of a slight breeze to keep the place from becoming too warm.

"It is predicted we will get rain before morning," Chloe told her. Tilting her head, she grinned and added, "Well?"

"Well what?"

"Have I totally confused you now after introducing you to so many of our inhabitants?"

"I can't believe how many people are here. How large is the city?"

"A few hundred thousand," Chloe told her. "I would guess about half are present here today. Most of the people I have had you meet are people Rion has known almost all his life." She gave Annie a cautious glance over the rim of her cup. "Rion is no longer the man they have always known. Because you have changed him for the better, they wanted to thank you personally."

"They're very nice," Annie admitted. "I can almost believe their sincerity."

Leaning over, Chloe laid a hand on her knee. "Believe it, Annie. They do care about you. We care about each other, although you had to find out the hard way there are a few of us who want to spoil everyone else's fun."

"Do you think Anitra's here?"

"No," Chloe said bluntly. "But if she were, she would not approach you. She would not dare. You need not fear her anymore. Anyway, these people would not allow her to get near you, even if she tried."

Annie gasped. "*They* wouldn't let her? Why not?"

"Because you have proven yourself time and again to be loyal and loving and honest, contrary to her own malicious selfishness. By showing how much you and Rion care for each other, they have come to care for you."

"I would've thought that my confession in the court about still being married would've made me a tarnished woman in their eyes," Annie said.

"You were forgiven almost immediately."

"I was? Why?"

"Why?" Chloe smiled. "You ask too many hard questions, Annie. By the way, how are you and Rion doing?"

"Hit me, but I'm going to ask you why again. As in, why do you want to know?"

"Probably for the same reason you did not just answer me with a 'fine!' or a 'good!' like you normally would." The woman narrowed her eyes. "I keep getting a strange feeling from you and Rion. It is not unpleasant, but at the same time I sense some tension between you. Is he treating you well?"

Annie took another swallow from her cup to try and mask her embarrassment, even though she knew the physician would be able to see right through her. She dropped her voice before responding.

"Rion treats me incredibly well. Which is probably why we have a problem."

"I do not understand."

"It's all right. Honestly! Give us another week or so and everything will be hunky-dory again. Promise!"

"Hunky... Annie, you are not making any sense." Chloe tried to smile. "Does this have anything to do with your recuperation?"

"Kind of."

"Kind of? I take that as a yes?"

"Chloe, it's really all right. We're just having to work through a few... things. Hey, where do I put the cup when I'm finished?"

"In the basket, over there beside the tent." Chloe watched as Annie got to her feet and took both cups back to the tent before rejoining her.

"Where to now?" Annie asked, as if their original conversation was over.

"This way." Chloe directed with a nod of her head. She led the way past several more brightly colored tents bearing banners and refreshments. Once they neared a small grove of tall blue-green shrubs, Chloe pretended to engage her in some light-hearted comments, and grabbed her hand in friendship. It took her a few moments to finally get the answer she was seeking. She stopped in the middle of their walk to turn and give Annie a caring look.

"You are a bundle of frustration inside," she observed, squeezing the woman's hand. When Annie bit her lip and remained silent, she added a knowing smile. "Annie, when was the last time you and Rion made love?"

"Mannion says I still might have some bruising inside. That it's too soon. He made Rion promise no physical intimacy until he released me."

"When do you see Mannion again?"

"Three more days."

"How do you feel?"

Annie blinked. "How do I *feel*?"

"Your health. Any nausea? Any dizziness? Any lack of appetite? Any shakes? Loss of sleep? Headaches? Lack of coordination? Trouble walking or running?"

"No. No. None of that." She shook her head.

"Have you had another menses?"

"Yes, finally, thank God."

"Does Mannion know?"

"Not yet."

Chloe smiled warmly. "Good. That means your body has returned to normal."

"Normal except for...well, you know."

"If your body is back on schedule, the rest of your life should be as well," Chloe told her.

Annie stared at her, speechless. When she was able to find her voice, she asked, "B-but Mannion said—"

"I will let Mannion know my findings and tell him what I told you."

"But...but won't you get into trouble contradicting his orders?"

"Never mind that. Just promise me you will be very careful at first. If it hurts, be more gentle. Better yet, just stop for a moment before continuing. Go slowly. Do not try to make up for all this time in one night," Chloe advised her softly. "Remember, you have the rest of your lives to love."

Annie hugged the woman tightly, who hugged her back just as warmly. "You are wonderful," she whispered. "Thank you."

"You are very, very welcome. Come. It is time we rejoined our men. Oh, and one more thing."

"What?" Now the woman was glowing, almost radiant with the news she was keeping inside.

"Do not tell Rion yet what I have said. You know what will happen if you do."

“What?” Annie asked before figuring it out for herself. “Oh, yes! You’re right. Very well. I promise I won’t say anything until we go home.”

Chloe laughed. With both of them giggling like schoolgirls, they hurried to find where their husbands were busy discussing work with colleagues and friends.

The rest of the day passed by in a blur. Rion proudly showed her off to people she’d heard him speak of, and to others she knew he’d either grown up around or knew by association. It soon became clear to her by the way they acted around him and responded to him, that her husband was highly respected among his peers. At one point a warrior by the name of Clevall laughingly asked Annie if she was aware of the incident on the training fields a few days ago.

“Nooo,” she said, casting her eyes toward her husband. “He doesn’t tell me much about what happens at work. Guess he figures I wouldn’t be too interested in what a bunch of sweaty men do on the job.” This drew a hearty laugh from the half-dozen or so warriors and messengers who had gathered to hear the tale.

Clevall explained. “We had some of the new young lords getting ready for their second week of training. Already we could tell which ones were going to need help, and which ones were too full of themselves after they had flown effortlessly through the first week of basics. Anyway, the second week of training was their first time with the swords.”

“Wooden swords,” Rion was quick to intercede.

“Yes, but heavy. Very heavy. Blunt-tipped, although they can still give you a nasty wound or bruise if handled wrong,” Clevall continued. “Anyway, there is this young lord named Kloster. If ever a youngling reminded me of Rion in his youth, this brash but gifted lord does. We had heard that Kloster was already bragging to his fellow trainees that he could outplay the lot of them, and even

went so far as to wonder aloud how he would fare against his trainer.”

“His trainer?” Annie’s eyes widened. She turned to Rion. “You?” She was answered with a smile. “What happened next?” she asked the warrior.

“This is where it gets good. Kloster did not know who his trainer was. We drew names to find out who we would spar. So here goes Rion into the arena to face Kloster. This youngling sizes him up and he sees that Rion’s right wing is off-center. So he makes the mistake in believing Rion is a rejected warrior, and he questions Rion about his abilities as a Lord of Thunder.”

Annie gasped. “He *didn’t*.”

The men laughed. Clevall nodded, enjoying the retelling. “All of us are watching and listening to this interaction, and we are astounded by this young lord’s audacity, but we figured Rion would whip a little humbleness into him. Every time Kloster goaded Rion with a question or remark, Rion either remained silent, or gave him just one-word answers.”

Another warrior named Mattix spoke up. “He kept asking Rion why he no longer walked the pathways, or if he had ever walked any in the first place. He even said that maybe Rion was one of those lords who had never been able to fulfill their duties as a true warrior, and thus had been relegated to teaching future leaders when they themselves were incapable.”

Others around the small circle new to the telling, including Annie, gasped again. “And all this time no one told him who Rion was?”

“No one. It was going to be a great joke.”

“Then what happened?”

“The youngling was good. Very good. Very gifted with the sword. But he was no match for Rion. We could see Rion was playing with him, toying with him, but Kloster believed he was actually an equal. He lunged and parried, and did all the pretty stuff

he had learned, but he also kept goading Rion, trying to make him break, trying to force him into making a mistake. It was that one last statement, I believe, which managed to finally crawl under Rion's skin." He paused to look at Rion. Annie looked at her husband, eyebrow lifted.

"So who's going to tell me what Kloster said? And what did you do when he said it?"

Rion chuckled. "Let us just say that he compared my ability with my *sword* to my ability with my *husbandly* sword." The look he gave her made his intention crystal clear and Annie found herself blushing a bright red, much to everyone's amusement.

Clevall spoke up. "It was not a breath later that young Kloster found himself flat on his back, weaponless, and with the tip of Rion's sword pressed into his neck. The youngling was flabbergasted. He had no idea how he had fallen so quickly, nor why he had not been able see the deflection coming. He just stared up into Rion's face, which was as dark as storm clouds. We are all in shock, and we actually thought Rion might hurt him drastically. There Kloster was, knowing he was about to receive the harshest blow of his life, when Rion said in that low, threatening way he has, 'Only *one* person in my life has ever defeated me. Only *one* person in my life has ever brought me to my knees. And do you know what I did when that happened, young lord?' Kloster shook his head, so scared his feathers were quaking, and looked up at Rion who is not even breathing hard. Rion gave him one last threatening stare and said, 'I married her.' Then he threw down his sword and walked away, ignoring the taunts and wails of laughter at young Kloster's expense."

Around them the warriors burst into laughter, including Annie. "So...so who finally told Kloster who his teacher had been?"

"I did," Clevall admitted. "Oh, and, trust me, several of us had a grand time watching the expression on his face when he realized he had insulted not only *Grand* Lord Rion, and husband to the

otherworlder Lady Annie, but also the warrior who had killed—” Immediately realizing his mistake, Lord Clevall pressed his lips together and bowed his head. Everyone around suddenly grew silent, until Annie reached out to lay a hand on his arm.

“It’s all right,” she reassured him with a soft smile. “Thank you for telling me that story. I will cherish it, and enjoy reminding Rion to keep his own training skills honed to perfection, or else face the very real wrath of a dissatisfied wife!”

The laughter that followed her statement was loud enough to draw curious glances from people in the surrounding area. Throwing his arm around her waist, Rion grinned when he planted a kiss against her hair and led her back toward the center of The Green to find a refreshment tent.

They enjoyed a meal by themselves, introducing Kerr to a few random, exploratory bites before letting him have his milk substitute. Later, as they lay out on the soft grass, the baby sound asleep beside them, Rion noted her change in attitude.

“You are my old Annie come back to me,” he murmured, reaching up and tucking some loose strands of hair behind her ear.

Annie smiled down at her husband lying stretched out on his back, and took his hand to kiss the palm. “I have everything I have always wanted. A husband who loves me with all his heart. A child. A home. Friends. Family. Rion?”

“What? Was there something else you forgot to include? Your listed sounded pretty complete to me.”

“We still want more children, right?”

Rion suddenly became serious. “Yes. I want you to bear us more children if you are capable, but that is not something we can take for granted anymore.”

“I know. I just wanted to make sure that, since the accident, you haven’t changed your mind.”

Placing a hand to the back of her head, he guided her face down to his. “When we are allowed to begin making love again, if

at any time our passions produce another life, know that I will guard you and our children until my last breath.”

“And if I’m never able to give you another baby?” she asked softly, tears welling unbidden in her eyes.

In answer he pulled her to him and kissed her until she stopped crying. She pressed her cheek against his chest as he confessed, “You have already given me more than I have ever dreamed possible. Every day we share now is a blessing. A gift. As if someone has said, ‘You have suffered much, and now you will be rewarded.’ I love you, my Annie.”

“I love you, Rion.”

“Have you ever been sorry I brought you here to my world?”

“No.” She shook her head and sniffed, comforted by the steady rhythm of his heart echoing in her ear. “Never.”

“Even after you found out the truth about me and Anitra? Even after Byric attacked you?”

“I’m with you. That’s all that matters. So quit harping about it and kiss me again before I decide to get up and go see what Chloe’s doing.”

Laughing softly, Rion did as he was told although he knew he and Annie were being watched. It no longer bothered them. They would never again hide their true feelings for each other.

Later that evening, right after first sunset, the populace gathered in the center of The Green to listen to Grand Lord Narund of the House of History proclaim the date of the festival, and to wish everyone a blessed new year of life. He read out the names and parentage of the children who had been born since the last festival, including Kerr’s. Rion proudly bounced his son in his arms as Annie stood beside her husband.

When darkness finally descended after second sunset, everyone began to fly back to their homes. Annie and Rion bid goodnight to Chloe and Vadon before Rion opted to carry his family in his arms instead of using the harness.

Once home, Annie watched her husband casually head for the bathroom as he dragged his tunic over his wings and head. She knew he was going to shower first, as was his habit, leaving her to take her own bath at her leisure. Quickly she tucked their sleeping son into bed, then ran through the connecting doorway to toss her own tunic and pants onto their bed before creeping into the shower. Silently she closed the stall doors behind her before throwing her hands around his eyes as he stood beneath the warm spray.

“Guess who.”

At first he froze in surprise. She could feel him smiling into her hands. Almost as suddenly, his demeanor changed, and he reached up to take her hands away.

“Annie, it is not wise for you to be in here,” he began to say, keeping his back to her.

“Why?” Unable to help herself, she pressed herself against the velvety softness of his back and wings, especially his buttocks. She felt him tremble at her touch.

“Annie...”

“Let me bathe you.”

“No. I mean...” He sighed loudly. “I mean, it has been a long and wonderful day—”

“And the day is not over,” she whispered. She ducked under his wings and arm, coming around to face him, which placed her directly under the spray of warm water. She closed her eyes to let the water sluice over her body, knowing he was watching her every move.

Lifting her arms, she pushed back her hair from her face, realizing how her breasts would also lift toward him. Water ran in rivulets over them, and arched off the tips of her nipples. She threw back her head, then straightened and opened her eyes. Giving him a small grin, she let him suffer his torment just a moment longer. Then she threw her arms around him and pushed him back against

the wall of the shower with her body. "Kiss me," she begged, her mouth already wet on his.

He kissed her, but she couldn't feel his hands.

"Annie, why are you doing this?" he asked tightly, almost choking on the words as his body refused to listen to his mind and reacted to the feel of her skin, her wetness, and her touch. His erection stiffened until it almost jabbed her abdomen.

"I promised Chloe not to tell you until we got home. I've kept my promise. Now you keep yours."

"My promise?"

"To see if our passions can produce another life," Annie told him. "Love me, Rion. Make love to me. Now. I'm dying to feel you inside me."

"What if I...hurt you?" he asked, his mouth already tasting her face, her neck, her shoulders. His hands pressing her tighter against him, pressing and stroking, feeding on her hunger as his consumed her.

She refused to answer him. Instead, she wrapped her legs around his waist as Rion lowered her carefully down into the structure. He slid into her incredible warmth with utmost gentleness, afraid of damaging her. Afraid they might still be doing this too soon after her release from the hospital, despite Chloe's assurances. Afraid they may never fuse into one soul again if her injuries had been too great.

But Chloe would never jeopardize their love. And the temptation was too strong.

When she gasped and clutched his arms, he started to pull back. "No, no no *no*. Please, don't stop," she begged. She looked up at him, her eyes a deep, shadowy green, heavy with unfulfilled passion. "Rion, this is the first time we've made love since we renewed our vows. It's time to make me your wife in all ways."

He lowered himself on top of her, shielding her face from the water as the heat wrapped around them inside and out. With every

slow stroke she moaned his name, overcome by his delicious penetration. He kept from pressing too deeply, saving that for a later time, but for now the feel of herself encasing him, swallowing him, and enveloping his body with her arms and legs, was a sweet madness she couldn't escape, and never wanted to end. Water splashed over their heaving bodies. He groaned as she tightened around him.

Annie urged him on, lifting her hips to accept more of him. She understood his reluctance and drew her arms around his waist to press her hands against his buttocks, digging her nails into the rock-hard muscle. Rion answered by increasing his rhythm. They were both panting from their exertions, from the tension of holding back, and from the all-consuming need that was taking over their minds and bodies.

"Oh, Annie...Annie...I cannot...I cannot..."

Rion gasped for breath, unable to sustain himself any longer. His release came quickly, exploding like flares in the night, but his last orgasmic thrusts were enough to push her over the edge of her own climax, and Annie cried out, shuddering as her nails drew thin trails of blood across his buttocks.

He rolled them away from the waterfall until they lay trembling against the far corner of the shower. He found her mouth, and she parted her lips to let him do with his tongue what his body had just done to hers. For long moments they remained pressed tightly together, their bodies still melded as one. It wasn't until the water began to grow noticeably cooler that Rion reluctantly pulled out and released her. Tenderly he lifted her into his arms and stepped out of the shower, lowering her feet to the floor just long enough to towel dry them both off. Annie kept her arms wrapped around him, her face buried in his neck, as she remained lost in the disembodied aftermath of their lovemaking.

When he was done, Rion carried her into the bedroom and slid her beneath the cool sheets before releasing her.

"No. Don't go. You don't have to go anymore," Annie whispered, reaching back for him.

"I will return. Give me a moment, my love."

Distantly she heard the shower being turned off and then the bed dipped slightly as he rejoined her and pulled her against him until their bodies touched. She felt him kiss her temple.

"Did I hurt you?" he asked softly.

"No. Never."

"How do you feel?"

This time she looked up to see herself reflected by the lone candle in his Montana sky blue eyes. She smiled and tightened her arms around his waist. "I feel like the most beautiful woman on two worlds," she told him.

"See? I told you that you would believe me one day," he smiled.

"Will you make love to me again later tonight?"

"As long as I do not hurt you, I will."

"And make another baby?"

"If we are blessed, yes."

"Rion?"

"Yes, my beloved?"

"Thank you."

"For what?"

"For choosing me to love."

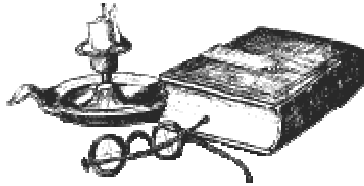
Sighing deeply, Rion held her tighter as hot tears welled into his eyes. "No, my incredible Annie," he whispered against her cheek. "Thank you for choosing *me*."

But she didn't hear him as she was already fast asleep, safe and loved and warm in her husband's embrace.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Linda loves to write romance with a fantasy or science fiction flair. Her technique is often described as being as visual as a motion picture or graphic novel. By day she is a kindergarten teacher, wife, and mother of two who lives in a small south Texas town near the Gulf Coast. But at night she delves into alternate worlds filled with daring exploits and sensual, erotic romance.

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