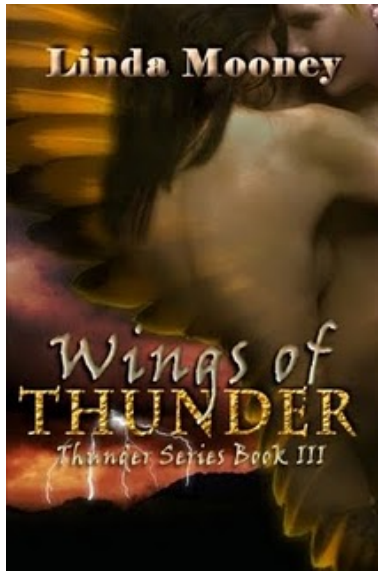


Linda Mooney

Wings of
THUNDER
Thunder Series Book III



WINGS OF THUNDER

by

Linda Mooney

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WHAT THEY ARE SAYING ABOUT *PASSION OF THUNDER*

Fallen Angel Reviews Recommended Read

“The powerful and sensual sex scenes between Annie and Rion (in *Passion of Thunder*) add a deep, abounding passion to their devoted relationship. Rion's commitment to Annie drew me to him more than any fictional hero ever has.”

Fallen Angel Reviews

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. Reading romance, always a guilty pleasure has now become a real joy!”

Renee's Book Talk, Blog Talk Radio

Two Lips Reviews Recommended Read

“I devoured this book, alternately smiling and shedding tears along the way. I guarantee that readers will want to read this book over and over again.”

Two Lips Reviews

WHAT THEY ARE SAYING ABOUT *MY STRENGTH, MY POWER, MY LOVE*

“The premise of this Science Fiction/Romance novel caught me off guard. I was blown away and completely enamored with the idea. Linda Mooney takes you on a beautiful journey to the stars and beyond. She has a wonderful ability for writing stunningly beautiful scenes and the expertise for making an emotional connection through her characters. She is a talented and powerful writer and I highly recommend *My Strength, My Power, My Love*. It is a necessary read for all lovers of science fiction or romance.”

Renee's Book Talk, Blog Talk Radio

WHAT THEY ARE SAYING ABOUT *HEARTCRYSTAL*

“Linda Mooney has done a top notch job of world building. You get a story that will make you laugh a little but mostly it will twist your heartstrings to pieces. You may want to keep a box of Kleenex nearby while reading (*HeartCrystal*).”

The Romance Studio

“So if you enjoy touching futuristic romances with wonderful characters and exciting plots, then you might want to read (*HeartCrystal*).”

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Romance Junkies

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Joyfully Reviewed

“I recommend (*Runner’s Moon book 3*) *Simolif* to anyone who likes his or her erotica with a sci-fi twist.”
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“Be warned, though. If you have not read the first book yet, odds are you will want to after reading (*Runner’s Moon: Tiron Book 2*).”
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Sandeflay

HeartFast

HeartCrystal

My Strength, My Power, My Love

Lord of Thunder

Passion of Thunder

Dedication

With eternal thanks to those who buy and enjoy my books.

Chapter 1

The Decision

“Green beans. Raw, just-snapped green beans.”

“What?”

“And corn on the cob. Just shucked, with little tassels of silk still clinging inside the rows. You boil it in water until the kernels turn gold, and you eat it dripping with fresh-churned butter. Oh, and you gotta have crispy fried chicken. And a thick slice of hot apple pie so tart it makes your mouth sing for the rest of the evening. Dad used to put some cheddar cheese on his. Umm, I can almost taste it now. I used to make an apple pie that would take the blue ribbon at the county fair.”

Chloe stepped back from the counter and paused to stare at Annie. The woman was slowly stirring a pot of cammonflower soup, but her movements were automatic. Clearly her mind was elsewhere, as was her inner vision.

“What else?” the woman angel ventured softly, not wanting to rudely awaken this woman who had become more than a friend to her, more than the sister-in-vows she had become.

Annie gave her a brief glance as a tiny smile dimpled one cheek. “Ice cream. If there was one thing a warrior could bring back from my world that I desire more than anything, it’s some ice cream.” She cocked her head slightly. “Strawberry, preferably, but I’d accept vanilla. Of course, *how* they would be able to bring it back would pose a problem.” Her back remained facing the woman angel as she went back to stirring the pot.

“That would be...nice,” Chloe managed to murmur. Glancing down at where she had been peeling and slicing aga bulbs, she laid the big green root and her knife on top of the counter, and wiped her hands on a cleansing cloth. “I will be right back, Annie. Will you excuse me?”

“Yeah. Sure. Go ahead. I’ll finish that aga if you need me to.”

“I am almost done. I will not be long,” Chloe promised, excusing herself from the kitchen. She hurried into the living area where their husbands were in deep discussion about something work-related. She noticed Kerr was sitting in Vadon’s lap. The baby was furiously gnawing on a chaka bun to help relieve the irritation caused by his first teeth coming in.

At her entrance, the two men gave her barely a glance until they noticed the look on her face. “Is something wrong?” Rion asked. Immediately his eyes went to the doorway leading into the kitchen before going back to her.

Steeling herself, Chloe gently asked, “How long has Annie been talking about her world?”

The effect of her words washed over his face, leaving him pale. “A while. What is she talking about this time?”

“Foods from Earth. Things she calls beans and corn and pie.” Slowly shaking her head, Chloe repeated her question. “How long has she been like this, Rion?”

The angel warrior bowed his head. His large hand tenderly stroked his son’s bare back and gently brushed the tiny wings sprouting from the boy’s shoulder blades. “I caught her talking to Kerr one morning while she was feeding him, a little over a week ago. She was telling him about the mountains in Montana and something about wheat fields in Ohio. I have no idea how long she has been telling him those things.” He looked up and noted the worried look on the physician’s face. “It is not unusual for someone to miss their home.” Rion made it sound like a statement of fact. In truth, he intended it to be a question and needed her to answer it.

“Have you been to see one of the Keepers?”

“Why would he need to see a historian?” Vadon finally spoke up. Chloe gave her husband a patient smile. Looking back at Rion, she asked again.

“Have you gone to the Hall of History since you brought Annie here?”

Instead of answering verbally, Rion shook his head. He reached out and picked up his son from Vadon’s lap and dropped him in his own. The baby gurgled happily. Chloe made an exasperated sound.

"Rion, do not waste any more time. You need to go over there and talk to one of them. Soon. No, tomorrow."

"I am busy tomorrow," he curtly told her. A flush of heat rose in his face, but Chloe remained undaunted by his bluster. The Lord of Thunder may cause others to cower in fear when he displayed his well-known temper, but she knew the real reason behind his reluctance. The man was terrified.

A tug on the sleeve of her tunic drew her attention back to her husband. "I am floundering in the dark here, Chloe. Please explain yourself. Why must Rion go to the Hall of History?"

"Because Annie is an outworlder. When Rion brought her over to our world, he did something that has only been done less than a handful of times in our history." She glanced over her shoulder to see if they were being observed. Fortunately the doorway was empty. Putting on her best frown, she turned on the man who was her husband's older brother and lowered her voice.

"I am surprised and ashamed of you, Rion, for assuming everything would be all sunshine and flowers once you brought her here! Especially after she found out about Anitra. And then what she had to endure during the court summons. Not to mention nearly losing her life when Byric tried to kill her. Annie has had to adjust to a world that is nothing like her home, and she has done so without complaint or regret, but you cannot expect it to remain that way forever."

"I realize that," Rion tried to intercede. Chloe cut him off with a curt wave of her hand. Her anger was growing more intense, but she couldn't help it. Annie was as precious to her as the sister she never had.

"I told you long ago it might catch up with her. Sooner, if not later. Her life has changed dramatically from what she knew, and yet you expect her to simply adjust and forget her past?"

A dark cloud passed over Rion's face. "Of course not," he snapped.

"Then go to the Hall. Find out about the other outsiders who came here. Find out what happened to them. How well did they cope? How were they able to handle the change?" She lowered her voice even further until it was a fierce hiss. "I sense a growing detachment from her, Rion. A mental separation. She is beginning to relive her life on Earth. You may have to hire a Dreamer to give her surcease, because the mind is one area where no physician can tread. One way or another, if you do not find out how the other outworlders in the past were able to survive the shock, you could lose her again. This time permanently."

Her words struck home. She noticed how his eyes narrowed in fear, and he clutched Kerr more tightly against him. The baby squirmed in his father's grasp, when his eyes caught the sparkle of the wedding band on the man's left hand. Cooing softly, he beat on the ring with his fruit bun.

"Very well. I will go tomorrow."

"First thing?" Chloe urged.

Rion nodded. "Right after first sunrise."

It was the response she had been seeking. If Rion said he would go at first sunrise, he was as good as his word. Finally satisfied, Chloe straightened up and went back into the kitchen to help finish preparing their evening meal.

Rion glanced over at where Vadon had chosen to remain quiet. "So, you think I have been negligent as well?" he growled softly.

Vadon smiled and slowly shook his head. "No. Not negligent. Fearful." At the questioning look offered him, he nodded. "I know you all too well, Rion. When you do not want to hear the truth, you do not seek it. That is why you have not gone to the Hall before now. You do not want to know how the other Otherworlders survived on our world...that is, *if* they survived."

"Annie is strong," Rion protested.

"Yes, she is strong. And she loves you beyond all doubt. But when you brought her over here, both of you were traumatized. You both nearly died after her husband tried to kill you. To have you survive after such an incident is a miracle. But after her near-death at Byric's hands, that makes two miracles, Rion. Surely you are not willing to risk her surviving a third attempt on her life."

"*What* attempt?" Rion quickly barked. His tone of voice was enough to cause Kerr to pause and stare up at his father.

Vadon leaned over and placed a hand on the muscled shoulder. "Her mental stability, brother. She has been here, what? A little over a year and a half? It has been three months since she was brought out of her coma. In all that time has she ever shown signs of homesickness?"

"No." Not that Rion could recall.

“Would you not consider that odd?”

Rion shrugged slightly.

“Rion, if you left this world, the only home you have known all your life, and you were forced to live on a world totally alien to you in all ways, would you not sometimes wish you were back here? Or that you could visit it? Or just *see* it, if only for a short time?”

This time there was the sparkle of tears in the man’s eyes. “I did not force Annie to come live here with me.”

“But it was the only choice you had. You know our kind cannot live on Earth.” He glanced down at the baby playing with his toes. “You may not want to hear this, Rion, but I am telling you because I love you, and I love Annie. Take no more chances. Go to the main Hall and find out all you can. That way you will be prepared.”

“Will you come with me?”

Rion never admitted weakness, and he never asked for help. Vadon knew deep in his heart that, before Annie, the man never needed anyone, and never sought anyone’s advice. If he did, he believed it would make him appear weak in the eyes of others, or so he thought.

Vadon knew Rion loved Annie with a passion that was beyond description. They had been through more heartache than anyone would be expected to survive. He knew why Rion was reluctant to visit the Hall. But the man had to face the fact that ignoring the possibility of something else happening to his wife wasn’t going to keep it from occurring.

Or maybe...Vadon gave Rion’s shoulder a squeeze and let go. Maybe the man already knew it.

“Yes. I will go with you. We will seek out the Grand Lord of History together and see what he has to reveal. Rion?” He waited for the man’s blue eyes to lock onto his. “Knowing the truth will only give us the foresight to be prepared. You know that, right?”

Reluctantly Rion nodded. Rion was the strongest man he knew, but he had one fatal flaw, one true weakness: Annie. The woman who was more than his wife. She was his reason for living.

“Vadon? Thank you.”

“For what, brother?”

“For kicking me in the butt when I need it.”

The tears had been replaced with a twinkle Vadon was well acquainted with. “You are welcome.”

“Welcome for what?” Annie called from the doorway. The pot of soup she held in her hands curled steam into her face.

“For kicking his butt when he needs it most.” Vadon chuckled. They got to their feet, anticipating her next words.

“Well, good for you, Vadon. Next time he needs it, I’ll send a courier over to fetch you. Hope you two are hungry. Chloe says I’ve made enough to feed a small army.” Placing the pot on the table, she disappeared back into the kitchen. The two took their seats but not before Vadon gave Rion another nod.

“Tomorrow. Right after first sunrise? I will come for you.”

Rion smiled. “I will be waiting.”

Chapter 2

The Scrolls

Thunder rumbled in the distance. Vadon glanced over his shoulder and saw the distinctive black roil of clouds. At the same moment, a gust of wind sideswiped him and Rion, pushing them downward a good ten feet before they were able to correct themselves. They were angling between several apartment towers, heading for the Hall where an archivist was waiting for them. They flew in tandem, as they had a habit of doing.

“That storm has all the markings of a tosis!” Rion yelled down to his brother, voicing aloud what they both were thinking.

“How soon before you think it will hit us?”

Rion cast an appraising eye at the horizon. “Three cycles, maybe less. We must hurry so I can get back to the way station before it gets too bad to fly.”

Vadon bit back his immediate reply as they both banked to prepare for landing outside the Hall of History. The enormous cylindrical-shaped building had an elongated landing platform to accommodate large crowds, and also for frequent visitors who used traps to get from one place to another.

The Hall of History was a favorite place for schools to take students on a field trip. As the brothers landed, a class of about twenty students spotted them, many of whom recognized the bronze-colored Lord of Thunder. Rion ignored them, knowing protocol would prevent them from approaching him and Vadon unless he signaled he was willing to meet with them. If any lord refused an audience, it would be assumed he was on an important mission. Although Rion and Vadon’s presence at the Hall was not business related, Vadon knew his brother would always place Annie and Kerr’s welfare above his job and position.

They hurried into the main entrance and went in search of Lord Narund, the Grand Lord of History. It was Narund who had told Rion months before that it was possible to bring Annie through the rip in the storm, to live with him on his world. Rion hoped Narund would now be able to tell him the full story of those transplanted outworlders. But in order to find him, they would need the services of any Lord of History, identifiable by his robes of state.

Like most of the other buildings on this world, the Hall was a tall structure. But unlike most buildings where the entrances dotted the outside of the structure like rungs on a ladder, the interior was high-ceilinged to accommodate the millions of sealed vaults containing nearly every written record in their history. Walking through the vast entrance, Vadon was aware of how every sound echoed like the sound of bells.

It wasn’t long before they found a woman wearing the familiar brown, red, and gold. Her long, wavy hair was almost rust-red in color, as were her wings. She was occupied at a table with a set of scrolls open before her, and she handled the delicate documents with her hands wrapped in fabric. The fact that she wasn’t using one of the sealed examination rooms told them the documents were more recent; rarer documents could only be examined under very rigid conditions. The men stopped just short of accosting her and waited to be acknowledged.

Looking up from the scroll she was perusing, her eyes widened to see Rion patiently standing nearby. Her voice nearly wavered as she said, “Lord Rion?”

He gave her a nod of deference and smiled. “Lordess. If I may, I need to speak with Grand Lord Narund. It is urgent.”

Quickly, the young woman recovered from her initial surprise. “I am sorry, but Lord Narund just left for Valeeshan. Lord Crossing is in charge. Or can I be of help?”

Rion frowned. Valeeshan was a good two-day journey. Plus there was no telling how long the man would be gone, and common courtesy would not allow Rion to ask. His frown deepened.

“Please. Allow me to try and assist you,” the woman insisted.

“I have come seeking information.”

“Is this of a personal or professional nature?”

“Personal.”

She nodded and gestured toward a series of hallways at the end of the room, leaving what she was doing to come back to later.

They followed her as she led them to a small room with a single window to let in light. The private cubicle contained a small rack, an equally small table, and four backless stools. It was a place where they could talk without having their words echo for others to hear. Once they were inside, she motioned for them to sit.

“My name is Siba. How can I help you?”

Taking a deep breath, Rion took the plunge. “Lordess Siba, as you know, I am married to an otherworlder. Recently, she started to show signs of extreme homesickness for Earth. I worry for her mental, as well as her physical health. What I am needing to know is...the other women, the ones who came to Parra before her. What happened to them? Did they have long, happy lives here? Did they bear children? Did their children all have wings? Did their husbands—”

Siba lifted a hand to shush him. “Lord Rion, if I may?” Pausing long enough to let him catch his breath, she smiled before continuing. “A few months ago, when Lady Annie was recuperating in the hospital, Lord Narund had several researchers start going through all of the annals for specific information. In short, he began gathering every entry regarding outworlders.” Siba nodded at Rion’s surprised expression. “I believe he anticipated your questions.”

She got to her feet and waved for them to follow. “Fortunately, I know where he keeps those ledgers. I am within my rights to retrieve them for you.”

They exited the small study, went back into the main lobby, and flew up to another platform where she led them into the inner offices held by the Lords of History. Grand Lord Narund’s office was expansive, with a view overlooking the city. Rion glanced out the huge wall of windows at the massive jet-black clouds gathering at the edge of the city, but said nothing.

Indicating a pair of stools around a huge, crystalline table, Siba exited through a narrow side door. Not long after Rion and Vadon had taken a seat, she reemerged with a carry-all filled with scrolls. Laying the carry-all on the table, she unbuckled and opened it.

Rion eyed the dozen or so rolled ledgers. “These do not look like the original scrolls.”

“No,” Siba agreed. “The original scrolls are too fragile. They are not allowed out of the hermetically sealed chambers where they are stored. The Under Lords and researchers must wear protective gowns and gloves whenever they are handling them.” She lifted one scroll and untied the cord keeping it bound. “Any information needed is transferred to a new scroll.”

“How can we be sure the information is correct?” Vadon asked.

“Each ledger is marked and sworn by the Under Lord who transferred the information. Then another Under Lord double-checks the transfer, before validating it. This scroll with the gold cord contains a generalized listing. The other scrolls contain the actual information. The binding cords are marked by dates.”

Slowly unrolling the sheets, the woman angel pressed them to the table, where they remained flat. Rion stood and leaned over the table as he scanned the information. The approaching storm was beginning to block the sunlight, dimming the interior of the room. Bowing his head closer to the table, he squinted at the tiny, precise script. After a moment, he shook his head. “Help me out here. It looks like there were four other outworlders brought in before Annie.” He glanced at the Lordess. “Only four?”

Siba studied the writings. “You are right. There have been only four others.”

“I thought there might have been more.”

Pointing to a portion of the ledger, Siba said, “According to our historians, the last one was in...” She did a quick mental tabulation. “Umm...one hundred eighty-three master cycles ago.” She sighed loudly. “That is a shame.”

“Shame?” Rion quickly repeated.

“That there is no one alive who would remember who she was.”

“What happened to her?” Rion whispered. “What happened to all of them?”

“I am sorry,” Siba apologized. “I have not had time to read over them, but I would be happy to help interpret for you.”

“I have been taught the old language,” Rion told her.

Siba laughed lightly. “It is not the old language that needs interpreting. It is the handwriting.” She reached for the carry-all and began searching the tags for the scroll with the earliest date. “I must admit, I am as curious as everyone else as to when other outworlders have been brought here. Oh! This seems to be the earliest record.” She started to pull the scroll

from the rest, when a sudden gust of wind came through the nearest window and tried to blow the sheets from the first scroll off the table. Another deep roar accompanied the rising gale, which sounded closer with each passing second.

"It is moving faster than we anticipated," Vadon remarked.

Rion agreed. "That storm looks to be a bad one." To Siba he said, "We will have to come back another time to read these. I need to get over to the way station."

"Would you prefer to take them with you?" Siba offered.

"May I?"

"Of course. They are just copies."

Rion gathered them up and placed them back in the carry-all. Siba helped him refasten the briefcase. When everything was secured, Rion shoved the satchel at Vadon.

"Please take these to the house and make certain Annie and Kerr are in the safe room. Do you remember the key?"

"Yes."

"Hurry."

"I will." Vadon rushed out of the room as Rion turned to the Lordess.

"Thank you for your help."

"My pleasure. Let me know if I can be of further service. I hope you find what you are seeking," Siba replied, but the man had already left the room. Another huge wind pushed against the building, and this time she felt the room shudder slightly. In the next instant the rarely heard scream of the siren blasted the air, which could only mean one thing.

Tosis.

The woman angel rushed from the room to seek immediate safety.

Chapter 3

The Tosis

The last place where Rion wanted to be was at the way station. But the last thing he needed to do was to desert the people who were depending on him. There were no less than a dozen of his men over on Earth, and any one of them could attempt to reenter their world through this storm. If they did, he had to be there to see to their safe arrival and to schedule them for their debriefing.

At the thought of debriefing, Rion chuckled softly. How many times had he ignored the mandatory rule when he had been the one walking the pathways? Now, when he looked back on it, he knew he had deliberately flaunted authority, just so they would have cause to ban him. Or to place him on suspension. Anything, just so he wouldn't have an excuse to walk the pathway, possibly for the last time.

The siren's wail of warning filled his head. In the next instant, a crack of lightning nearly deafened him. Rion banked slightly, enough to glance behind him at the storm that was gathering strength with every passing second. It was going to be a big one. He frowned and corrected himself. No, it was going to be a major one. One that would leave destruction in its wake. Parra hadn't seen that kind of tosis for as long as he could remember.

Arriving at the way station, he was met by Callumed, who gave him the duty roster and a summary of their preparations. As he glanced over the brief report, Rion's eyes darted back to the storm, and then to the horizon. On a good, clear day, the ebony tower where he and Annie lived could be seen, but barely. It was always a tiny black sliver in the distance, yet it was visible enough for him to lock onto every evening, homing onto it like it was a beacon. The apartment was invisible now, swallowed up in the equally dark clouds.

For all the frustration and fear that was brewing inside him, as potent as the storm that was brewing in the skies, Rion gave thanks that Vadon had gone to take care of Annie and the baby. He could put the majority of his worries to bed, knowing his family would be safe in the little interior room in their apartment. Vadon would return to the way station as soon as he was satisfied Annie and Kerr would be all right. And Chloe would be at the hospital, preparing for the influx of wounded in the event the tosis was as devastating as it promised to be.

"It is approaching from the north," Callumed said.

Rion turned to him, scowling. "The clouds are east."

"Then you had better go look north."

Handing the report back at the man, Rion hurried from the platform and half-ran for the other end of the building. The moment he rounded the corner, the landing deck was already swaying from the hard gusts thrusting against it. Directly above them, the clouds were spewing blackness across the glasslike ceiling. A sheet of pure orange energy suddenly burst from the thunderhead, and the world exploded like a bomb.

Rion and Callumed were blasted off their feet. Rion was slammed into the side of the building. The force of it knocked all breath from him, and he pitched forward onto the landing deck, gasping for breath as excruciating pain crawled up his spine and dug in with knifelike talons. He had hit the wall with his back, and the impact on his already permanently damaged wing sent fresh agony through every nerve and muscle.

He had no idea what happened to Callumed. The world had been transformed into a cold and windy blackness. More lightning crackled above him. Although the buildings were insulated, there was still the risk of being struck dead-on. Rion managed to crawl back through the doorway and into the landing room, where Idonus discovered him struggling to get to his knees.

"Rion! What—" He helped Rion to his feet. "What happened?"

"Wind shear." Rion managed to indicate outside with a nod of his head as a wave of nauseating dizziness washed over him. "Callumed was with me when it struck. He went over the side."

"I will have searchers check the ground," the man told him, and held out an arm. "Are you going to be all right? Heavens, you are bleeding! Did you hit your back? Let me signal for a physician."

“No!” Rion lifted an arm to stop him, realizing too late the pull of muscle across his damaged wing. He gasped and groaned at the burning rush of pain. Another fierce blast of wind shook the tower, but this time it was accompanied by a low howl. At the sound of the storm’s banshee cry, Rion felt a chill rattle through him. “Get everyone on ground level!” he barked. “Hurry!”

Idonus had already turned to head for the inner slide tubes made specifically for those moments when actual flight wasn’t possible. Watching him disappear into the safety of the corridors, Rion rose on wobbly legs. With the suns blocked by the inky clouds, the station’s crystalline walls glowed from the absorbed light from the planet’s two suns. The pearlescent shine gave the landing room an eerie appearance, but it provided him with enough visibility to make his way to the tubes.

Folding his wings tightly against his back proved difficult. Rion gritted his teeth and rammed his back against the smooth inner surface of the tube. The act was enough to close his wings so he could fit into the slide, but he nearly passed out from the agony. Holding onto the straps, he prayed he could remain conscious until the storm had passed. Then he flipped the release switch.

He dropped down the chute at unbelievable speed. At nearly the last moment, a compressed cushion of air slowed his descent until he touched down at ground level. There was a few seconds’ pause as he waited for his hatch to open—someone else ahead of him was exiting beneath him. As the silvery door slid to the side, two pairs of hands reached in to extract him.

“Rion! Thank the heavens!” a voice called out. In the same instant, a multitude of voices attacked him.

“We have a tosis, Rion! A monster one!”

“What can we do to help? It is wreaking havoc! It is tearing a path through the city!”

“There are at least eight rips open right now to the other earth.”

The banshee scream coming from the tosis rose several decibels in volume. It was like a high-pitched shriek of anger buzzing in Rion’s head. Giving himself a shake, he hissed at the fresh jolt of pain and tried to concentrate as the building shuddered around them.

“Where is Dimarkus? Has anyone heard from him?” He had to raise his voice to be heard above the nervous babbling of the crowd gathered around the tubes.

“Where did that blood come from? Rion, you are bleeding!” Gereesus pointed to the inside of the tube where a large scarlet smear painted the inner wall of the cylinder. At almost the same time, the tube doors sealed shut as another angel descended, but the sight of blood had been visible long enough for many of them to see it. Blassen, one of the angels who had pulled him out, stepped behind Rion to view the damage.

“It looks bad, Rion. What happened?”

“Never mind me. Callumed was with me up on the third tier when we were hit by a wind shear. I fell inside against a wall, but he went over. We need to find him. Get him out of the path of that tosis.”

“It is worse than that,” Daygart stated as he rushed into the hall. “Come to the other side and listen. Towers are falling.”

Altogether, the crowd rushed to the other side of the tower, keeping far enough away from the opening leading outside so as not to be sucked out into the winds. The day had turned into night, and very little was visible. But the distinctive sound of crashing glass and shattering crystal could be heard. The tosis was tearing through the city like a sword through paper. Rion felt his heart almost stop at the thought of Annie and Kerr alone in their apartment.

The silver tower, as their building was referred to, was one of the tallest towers in the city. Their home was fifteen stories above the ground. And even though the building was more modern in design and not squatter or thicker than the homes built years ago, its structure incorporated more modern methods and materials specially created to withstand the unique weather of this world. Still, Rion couldn’t help but worry.

Another unholy scream of wind suddenly shifted direction and blasted into the hall where the men were gathered. Moments later, the thin light coming from the walls went out, leaving them in terrifying darkness.

“Everyone! To the center!” Rion bellowed. If anything was to happen to the way station, he hoped they would be safe in the core of the building.

They packed tightly into the room which usually served as a meeting chamber, fumbling and bumping against each other as they tried to maneuver without light. Rion ordered Gereesus to take roll. As everyone responded with their

names, his thoughts went back to Annie and Kerr, and especially to Vadon. Had his brother stayed with the family, or did he try to get back to the way station?

His back and wing was sending blistering pain down his spine and across his shoulders. He must have hit the wall just right, causing more damage. Rion wondered how badly his flying would be affected this time.

The room quieted. Gereesus spoke up. "Callumed, Forrding, and Fleet are unaccounted for."

"Forrding and Fleet went to check on the rift opening up directly over the city," someone called out. Rion thought he identified Cayden's voice, but it was difficult to tell above the muted but still loud wailing of the storm.

"Let us hope they found shelter," Gereesus commented. The others murmured their agreement.

"Until this thing blows over, everyone stay put," Rion ordered them. His words were immediately punctuated by the screech of crystal on crystal as part of the way station met its doom. The building shook as a section fell victim to the tosis. A huge crash nearby made Rion jerk in response.

Not much longer. He hoped he was right. These storms never lasted more than a few minutes, and never longer than a full cycle. But, then again, this was a tosis, the worst of the worst, and they were never predictable.

Closing his eyes, he silently prayed as the others around him did the same.

Chapter 4

The Aftermath

Silence descended over them. Rion jerked to attention, drawn out of his semiconscious state when he finally became aware of the cessation of the storm's roar. The other men realized the worst was over as the walls slowly resumed brightness.

Opening the door proved difficult. It took several of them applying pressure before the sliding panels opened far enough for them to exit one at a time. It took longer for everyone to take in the amount of destruction caused once they reentered the main gathering hall.

Now all the crashing and grinding noises they had heard made sense.

Huge chunks of the way station had fallen from the observation towers and landed on the lower sections. Sheets of crystalline glass punctured the walls and ceilings like enormous blades, slicing through with enough force to embed themselves in the floors.

Not a window had escaped being blown out. Not a piece of furniture remained upright. Debris littered the floor. Everything was in utter shambles.

Stunned, each man walked to the far end of the building, emerging into the bright sunlight, and into a world that no longer resembled the one they had known.

Platforms had been ripped from many of the towers. Whole buildings had been toppled. The sound of screams drifted on the quieted winds. Overhead, red flares calling for emergency help burst in the sky. Two...then ten. They multiplied, too many to count. Signals from people needing immediate aid. People dying.

Annie!

Rion began running for the east side of the building as hot pain shot through his back, reminding him of his injury. When he rounded the corner, more horrific destruction was visible. It looked as though the tosis had tried to dig a furrow directly down the middle of the city, through the heart of the marketplace, and out toward the mountain lakes—a furrow that was as wide and as deep as a valley.

He turned, searching the horizon for the thin streak of black obsidian that was his home. Slowly, as the truth sank into his body with icy fear, he realized the tower no longer rose in the distance. In fact, very little stood upright. The horizon was low and empty.

His lungs refused to draw a breath. He took two huge gasps of air before he let go with a cry of pure fear. Rion tried to launch into the air to go to where Annie and Kerr should be, but with the first downward thrust of his wings, fire arched throughout his body. Every muscle locked as nerve endings burned, and he fell face-first onto the grass with a grunt.

"Rion!"

Ignoring the call, he tried to stretch his wings, but the fresh damage was too severe. Every little movement now was pure anguish, nearly throwing his system into shock as he tried to force himself past the debilitating pain.

"Rion!"

The next thing he knew, Cayden grabbed him by the wrist and helped to get him to his feet. Rion struggled, trying not to pass out.

"Annie...Kerr..." He sensed the messenger angel peering in the direction where the tower should be.

"Let me get you to the hospital," the man urged.

"No. I must get to Annie."

"You are bleeding heavily," Cayden protested. Rion clamped a hand down on the man's arm. Messenger angels did not go through the years of arduous training as the Lords of Thunder were made to endure. With a simple flex of his powerful muscles, Rion knew he could easily break the man's arm, but that was not his intent. Still, Rion's tightening grip got the point across.

"If I have to crawl, I am going to find Annie and my son!"

Pale-faced, the messenger angel nodded. "Then let me drag you."

It would not be easy for the lighter-weight angel to carry Rion, but height was not needed at the moment. Right now, speed was more important. The sooner they could reach the silver towers, the better.

Cayden arched his back, pounding the air with his wings and holding onto Rion's wrists until they both cleared the ground. Aiming them horizontally, the man beat a path straight for the heart of the city, dodging the remains of buildings, homes, and shops.

They passed unbelievable chaos, ruins so total that it was impossible to distinguish what had been there before. People were starting to fill the air, taking the injured to the hospital they hoped was still intact, mourning the discovered dead, or searching for the missing. Cayden kept himself and Rion away from the main thoroughfare, managing a few more feet of altitude until they barely cleared the pedestrian areas.

Everywhere they looked, the city appeared to be completely devastated. The nearer they got to the towers, the more Rion could feel his heart shriveling. There was no way Annie and Kerr could have survived the fall if the tower had toppled. Even inside the safe room, the plummet would have killed them.

They came over a large pile of rubble, and immediately Rion's worst fears were realized. As Cayden lowered him to the ground, he was fighting for breath and sanity.

"Rion..."

Rion whirled on him. "My deepest thanks for bringing me here, Cayden. Go now. Go help your own family. They need you."

"Jypson is still over on Earth," the messenger angel reminded him of his older sibling. "Mother, Father, and Tumeara are in Chellespion visiting family." He hurried to catch up with Rion's long strides. "Let me help you look for yours. I have nowhere else to go."

Grateful, Rion nodded, too choked up to answer. Massive blocks of black obsidian lay scattered like tumbled toys. Furniture and personal belongings dotted the grasses and sidewalks. The silver towers held twenty apartments in each of its three obelisks. Twenty apartments, one rising above the other, each with their own landing platform. Now, not a single building stood more than two or three stories high. Shredded sheets of platform material were everywhere.

He had no idea where to start, but he knew he had to begin somewhere. Somewhere in those piles of rubble was a large, box-like container. A container built of the strongest metal alloy known, and big enough to hold three grown adults. A grayish box that contained his life's most precious possessions.

Rion had no idea if any of the other apartment dwellers had installed a safe room in their homes. At the moment, it didn't matter.

"They would have been in a safe room," he called back to the man as he stepped gingerly over dangerous pieces of polished glass. Almost immediately, his foot came down on a leg partly exposed underneath a slab of wall. Quickly, Rion reached down to rip back the pant leg.

Male. A man.

Pressing his fingers to the artery behind the knee, Rion could not feel a pulse. He found a broken stool nearby. Tearing off part of the hem on his tunic, he tied it to the stool then placed the piece of furniture directly above the spot where the body lay so that the makeshift flag fluttered in the breeze. Rescue teams would know what the signal meant.

Rion moved on. Several feet away, he could see Cayden picking his way through the destruction. Right now a fully intact box-like room would stand out amid the rubble, or so Rion hoped.

Overhead, more red flares popped and sizzled as angels crisscrossed the sky, carrying the dying and wounded. Another man landed on the other side of the towers to begin looking for his family, Rion surmised.

As he and Cayden made their way toward the only part of the building left standing, it became evident that the tosis had plowed straight through the towers, literally shoving them to one side, bending them over until they broke, brittle as saplings. Jagged sheets, like repositioned walls of glass, stood on end where they had been driven into the ground upon impact. Rion could see himself reflected a thousand times in their angled surfaces.

The towers had been made to withstand winds up to two hundred miles per hour. The crystalline structures were guaranteed not to shatter. Nodding to himself, Rion could see that the architects and builders had done their jobs well. But the tosis that had gouged its way through the city had been stronger than anyone had ever anticipated. The narrow, stilt-like towers had been too tall and too thin to withstand the forces that had shoved them over. The walls, floors, and ceilings

didn't crack under the pressure—they broke when the buildings hit the ground.

Mentally, Rion counted each section of the towers as he clawed his way over what was left. He found a second victim, then a third, and each time he left a little marker over the location.

He spotted the box-shaped room as soon as he climbed over a small mountain of furniture. It sat on end, nearly perpendicular to the ground. Instinctively he beat his wings to rush over, but another hard burst of pain sizzled through him, causing Rion to hiss as he paused momentarily and forced himself to wait until he was able to move again.

By now his body was covered in small cuts, some of them deep enough to bleed, especially around his legs and hands. Still, he slipped and slid over the glassier bits, fighting to reach the safe room.

He ducked underneath the metal box, and Cayden hailed him from the other side. As the messenger angel headed toward him, Rion beat on the side of the box with a fist.

"Annie! Annie, can you hear me?" He beat on it again, placing his mouth close to the box as he yelled. "If you can hear me, bang on the wall!" Rion paused and pressed an ear to the side of the box.

Dead silence.

Frantic, he searched for the opening to the box, finally discovering it above his head where he couldn't reach it. Not with his wing and back the way they were. "Cayden! Fly up and see if you can open the door!" he yelled at the man.

Cayden quickly lifted over to where the panel was located, but as he tried to land on the side to reach the panel, the safe room shifted precariously. "The room is too unstable," Cayden called back.

"Then go over to the other end and push down."

"It will fall!"

"No, not if I brace it and lower it gradually," Rion argued.

The messenger angel gave Rion a surprised, then dubious look. Although it was a well-known fact that Lords of Thunder had tremendous strength and endurance, it was clear the man was doubtful whether Rion could support the room on his own when he was badly injured.

"Are you sure?"

"What else would you suggest?" Rion asked. "I have to get inside!"

Cayden nodded and waited for Rion to position himself underneath the box. At Rion's signal, the messenger slowly lowered his weight on the upper end of the safe room.

There was a squeal of metal upon glass as the box shifted. But working together, they were able to get the cannister leveled out. Letting go, the metal container finally thumped to the ground with an eerie, almost hollow sound.

Rion rushed to the door where Cayden was already trying to pry it open. "The panel's been dented," the messenger angel told him.

"Then I will need to find something to cave it in."

Rion searched around until he found a stool. For a second he froze, realizing the piece of furniture was from his own home. Shaking it off, he hurried back to the box and started hammering at the corner of the panel, hoping to dent it enough to where they could peel it back.

A half-dozen whacks finally gave them a hand-sized hole. Rion pressed his face to the opening and peered inside, but the metal container was pitch dark inside, since it was not made of the same solar-energized material as most buildings were. He couldn't see more than a few inches inside, much less to the far end of the box where Annie and their son would be lying.

"Annie! Annie, wake up! Annie, answer me!"

Grabbing the door with both hands, Rion braced himself and pulled, straining to fold back the panel until his muscles bulged from the tension. Little by little, the doorway relented, and the opening gradually widened. Cayden added his two hands when there was enough room, and the two men continued to pull.

It seemed like an eternity before the hole was wide enough to allow a body through. Rion struggled to get inside, but Cayden held him back. "Let me, Rion."

Rion nodded, acquiescing to the man's common sense, including the fact that the messenger angel was a lot less bulky. He watched anxiously as Cayden slipped inside the opening. He heard the man feel about inside as he searched. As the seconds ticked by, Rion was about to try and squeeze himself into the hole when a voice overhead shouted his name. It was Vadon, coming down to land.

Rion felt an enormous sense of relief come over him when he saw his brother. In the next moment, Cayden's head popped through the hole in the canister, a surprised expression on his face.

"Rion, the safe room is empty. No one is inside."

"*What?* Impossible! I told Vadon to see that Annie and Kerr—"

"Rion!" Vadon called out again as he joined them.

Rion whirled on him. "Where are Annie and Kerr? Where—"

"They are at my home," Vadon hurried to tell him. "They are safe."

"But why are they with you, when I told you to take them to the safe room?" Rion protested, then immediately realized how hysterical he sounded. Biting his lip, he tried to calm himself down as Vadon squeezed his shoulder.

"I saw the storm approaching, and I made the decision to take them home with me where Annie would not be alone. You told me before how terrified she was of storms, remember?" Vadon gently commented.

Rion nodded. "Forgive me. My fear..." He drew a deep breath and tried again. Hot tears burned in his eyes, and he wiped them away with the back of his hand. "Thank you."

"Come," Vadon smiled, and stepped back to spread his wings.

"Wait."

"Rion is injured," Cayden spoke up as he finished exiting the canister. "He cannot fly. He needs medical help."

Rion saw his brother quickly scan him. "I was thrown into a wall by the toxis. My wings are useless. Can you fly me there?"

"Together I think we can manage him," Cayden commented.

Vadon nodded. "I agree."

"To your house first," Rion snapped, rebuking their outstretched hands. "No hospital until I have seen Annie."

Vadon frowned. "You are outnumbered two to one, you durgg-headed idiot! I would rather face your ire than Annie's. So first we take you to the hospital, and then I will bring Annie to see you. Whether you like it or not!"

"You are not taking me there until my heart knows my family is safe!" Rion angrily argued. He bowed his head and pressed a trembling hand to his forehead, leaving behind a smear of blood. Lowering his voice, Rion raised his eyes to let his brother know of his emotional pain. "Please, Vadon. You know they are well, and I believe you, but..."

Vadon relented, nodding. He grabbed Rion's fist and dug his fingers around the thick wrist. Cayden did the same with the other arm, and the men lifted into the air.

Chapter 5

The Reality

Is there anything of me at all in him?

Annie watched in amusement as Kerr tried to pull himself up, using her leg and pants to steady himself on chubby legs. The baby cooed and showed off his newest tooth as Annie smiled down at him. The boy's wings, now feathered and looking like actual wings, flapped awkwardly. Fledgling attempts, Rion had told her. First to find his balance, then to actually attempt at being airborne. Annie ran a hand over Kerr's thick blond locks. From the tip of his toes to the top of his head, the baby was the spitting image of his father. Which made Annie wonder for the hundredth time if there was anything in her son that made him *her* son.

The tosis was over. She could relax. The past hour had been filled with terror as she, Kerr, and Vadon crouched down inside the little storage closet in the center of the apartment. The wind sounded as if a siren was blaring directly above them, preventing them from communicating. Annie found herself crying uncontrollably, unable to stop herself despite the fact that Vadon was there, holding onto her as tightly as she clung to Kerr. But like his uncle, the baby was unaffected by the circumstances surrounding them. In fact, Kerr napped on his mother's shoulder, oblivious to the danger and the fact that their tower shook like a dog fighting for a bone. It hadn't been too many months ago when Kerr had cried during the storms. *Maybe it's a sign he's growing older. Older and more like his father every day.*

Once the winds died down, they had emerged from the closet to find the squatty apartment still standing. But the front door was gone, and the landing platform hung at a crazy angle, ripped from its moorings. They stared in horrified awe at the view from the open doorway, now just a hole in the wall. The devastation they saw in the distance was unbelievable.

"I am going to the way station to get Rion," Vadon told her before launching. "Stay away from the door. You should be fine while I am gone. Just in case, though..." Reaching around the door frame, he removed the flare gun and flares from the compartment outside, and set them on the floor nearby. Giving her a nod, he jumped from the doorway. Annie watched him spread his wings, bank slightly, and head toward the cluster of buildings where the Lords and messengers of Thunder gathered.

She vaguely remembered him reassuring her that Chloe was at the hospital, and it had underground bunkers specifically built for storms like this one where they could evacuate the patients. He had no worries about his wife's safety. And with Annie and Kerr taken care of, his next priority would be to make sure Rion was all right. And to let Rion know they were also fine.

Annie continued to stare out over the chaos while Kerr squirmed in her arms. The baby whimpered, letting her know he was hungry. Annie returned to the inner room where she left the knapsack containing food, formula, and diapers. A bag of milk would suffice for now until Rion returned to take them home and she proceeded to put Kerr down for a nap.

It didn't take long for the child to fall asleep. Annie laid him on the bed in the spare bedroom, and was walking back into the living area when she spotted outside what looked like three men coming toward her. Two of the men were dangling a third between them, and by the rhythm of their wings, they were moving swiftly.

Annie watched as the three figures steadily grew bigger and more distinct. A moment later, she recognized the man being carried by his arms. Alarmed, she got as close to the opening as she dared and waited. Seconds before they landed, her fear grew as she noticed the blood on Rion's clothing.

No words passed between them once Vadon and the other man released her husband, and Rion wrapped her in a tight embrace. He was trembling, filthy, and exhausted. His face was white with pain and stress, and his lips were cold where they pressed against her forehead. It took a while before either of them could speak.

"Annie...my Annie..."

"Rion, what's wrong. Is that your blood?" Pulling back slightly, she looked up into his worried gaze. A movement over his shoulder drew her attention, and Annie saw Vadon fire a red flare out the door.

Red. Immediate emergency help needed.

The other angel was gone.

Pressing her lips together, Annie reached up to touch her husband's cheek and gave him a stern glare. "What's wrong, Rion? Whose blood is this? Where are you hurt?"

Rion shook his head. She could almost see his relief easing through him. "The pain will eventually go away, now that I know you are safe." His eyes glanced around the living room. "Where is Kerr?"

"Asleep in the guestroom," Annie told him as she helped him over to the sofa to sit. "Talk to me, Rion. What happened to you?" Another thought entered her mind, and she gasped. "Did the way station survive? Is everyone there all right?"

"There have been casualties," Rion told her in a soft voice. He pulled her down to sit next to him, and once again gathered her to his chest where Annie could hear his heart rapidly thudding.

But he's here, and he's alive. She knew her husband never complained about any aches or ailments he may be suffering. To him, they were part of the dangerous job he had been born to do. Still, it bothered her to see the drying bloodstains smeared on his tunic and pants.

Not only that, but...wasn't his wing hanging a bit more off-center than usual?

Suddenly remembering he had been carried over to the apartment, rather than arriving under his own power, Annie gave him a shove backwards and stared intently at her husband. Not waiting for an explanation, she crawled around the sofa to look at his back. The reinjury to his wing made her sick to her stomach. Blood covered most of his back. She could even see the muscles quivering underneath the skin of his debilitated wing. He had to be in tremendous pain at that moment.

"Rion. Oh, honey. What happened?" She couldn't touch it, although she wanted to. Instead, Annie let him take her hands in his.

"Callumed and I were watching the tosis approaching. We were hit by a strong gust that threw me back into the wall. Callumed...I hope he survived."

"Why aren't you at the hospital? A physician needs to look at that," she scolded.

"We started to take him to the hospital, but he protested." Vadon gave her a lopsided grin. "You know how argumentative Rion can be when he sets his mind on something. He was determined to see you first, and make sure you and Kerr were unharmed. Cayden and I finally agreed that you should be top priority, if nothing more than to shut him up so he would agree to see a physician."

The 'I'm sorry, but I tried' tone in the younger man's voice made her chuckle. Rion's hard-headedness was almost legendary. She started to ask him more when Vadon said, "Courier approaching."

It was a courier angel approaching with his stylus and pad. As he landed, he took one look at Rion's bloody clothing, and began to take notes.

"Physician Rhon is having us collect information from those who signaled. Depending on your injuries, you will be placed in queue for healing. How badly are you injured?"

Vadon stepped forward. "My wife is Physician Chloe. Will you please tell her and Physician Rhon that Grand Lord Rion is unable to fly."

The courier stared in surprise at Rion, finally recognizing Annie sitting with him. He made another note on his pad. "Is there anyone else here in need of medical attention?"

"No," Annie answered.

The courier nodded. "You will get a notification within the cycle. You were luckier than most. You are blessed." Giving them another nod, he took off.

"Luckier than most?" Annie turned to Rion and Vadon. "What did he mean?"

"It means we still have a roof over our heads," Vadon said. Ignoring Rion's upraised brows, he told Annie, "You and Rion are welcome to stay as long as you want. Rion, I am going back to the way station to help with the rescue efforts. Now that the physicians know you are here, help should arrive shortly."

"Whoa. Wait a minute." Annie reached out to grab Vadon's arm. "What do you mean we can stay as long as we want?" She glanced back to Rion, then to Vadon again.

Rion nodded. "Thank you, Vadon. It is probably better for me to wait here, anyway. The dying are probably already filling the hospital to overcapacity."

“Vadon! Rion! Will one of you please tell me what’s going on? Why are we staying here? Why can’t we go home?”

Reaching up, Rion clasped her other hand resting on his shoulder. He waited until his younger brother took off before he lifted his face to look at her. Besides pain, there was intense sadness in his Montana sky blue eyes.

“We cannot go home, my Annie. Not now. Not ever again. At least...at least not the home we knew.”

Annie felt the blood drain from her face. Her legs almost gave way. “Did the tosis destroy the apartment?”

“Yes,” he whispered.

“Oh, no! Your family home? It’s really gone? Everything is gone? *Everything?*”

“Yes. Everything. But we can build again, Annie. The whole city will have to be rebuilt.” He gave her hand a squeeze as he looked out the open doorway. “But there is no need to worry. We are indeed blessed.”

“How? You just said we’ve lost everything.”

“No. Not everything. We still have each other. I still have you and Kerr, and my family is more precious to me than anything else in this world. The rest is material and can be replaced.”

He tugged on her hand, drawing her back down beside him and into his embrace. Annie rested her head in the crook of his thick neck and sighed. She understood now why her husband was acting the way he was. Losing the only home he had ever known had devastated him. But losing her and Kerr would have killed him.

Sighing, she clung tighter to him. Oh, well. It wouldn’t be the first time she had had to pick up the pieces of her life and move on. It seemed to be her lot in life.

This time, however, she could pray this time would be the last.

Chapter 6

The Loving

Rion rolled over and attempted to find a more comfortable position. Although he tried not to shake the bed any more than he had to, Annie could tell how restless he was. Either the medicine had not kicked in, or he was in more pain and discomfort than the drugs could handle.

Sighing, she turned onto her back and reached over to give him a comforting touch and found a small hill of discarded bedding. "Can't sleep?"

Her husband grunted in reply. "Too much on my mind."

As the courier had promised, a physician's assistant had appeared a little more than a cycle after the report had been filed. She gave Rion a powder to prevent infection and relayed orders to rest until he could be examined. Soon after, Rion told Annie about searching for her and Kerr at their apartment, and the state of the entire city after the storm. Annie let him talk, knowing that the loss of his family home was more upsetting to him than he was letting on.

As he told her his story, she had him remove his tunic so she could cleanse the wound of debris and dried blood. The act reminded her of the first time she had seen him in Montana. Of the enormity of his injuries after a storm had thrown him into the trees, puncturing his side with a large branch, and nearly tearing his wings off. With love and care, Rion had survived that fall. Annie wondered how many more times his wing could withstand such treatment and still allow him the ability to fly.

By the time she was finished, the physician angel arrived and began working on Rion's back. The man stayed nearly a full hour before he ordered Rion to rest. Of course, Rion protested, saying that he could still help with the rescue efforts from ground level. But the physician strongly told him that if he didn't rest as ordered, his wing would not only take longer to heal, but there was a greater chance that it would not heal to the point where Rion would be able to fly again. It was the threat of losing the power of flight that convinced her husband to take it easy the rest of the evening.

They were now guests of Vadon and Chloe, and there was no way Annie could guess how long they would have to be dependent on the couple. To help ease some of the burden, she did a little cleaning then started supper. When Vadon arrived home later that evening, exhausted and covered in sweat and dust, he was surprised to find that Rion had managed to prop pieces of the destroyed landing platform against the doorjamb. The improvised doors weren't solid enough to withstand another severe storm, but they were adequate in providing them with a little privacy and some protection from normal weather.

It was well after dark when Chloe landed on the tiny landing pad that Rion and Vadon had jury-rigged. She looked totally drained, her emotional state even more fragile after dealing with the injured and dying all day. She gratefully ate the dinner Annie had cooked then went straight to bed at Vadon's urging. The rest of them sat in the living area and talked about the tosis. When they finally retired for the night, Annie made sure Rion got a full dose of his medicine, hoping it would also help him sleep.

Rolling over to face him, the lack of light prevented her from seeing him. Afterstorms were striking, much like aftershocks from an earthquake on Earth. The sky was filled with black clouds, blocking all light from the two moons. Thunder rumbled in the distance but she could hear her husband's breathing. She could almost hear his heart beating, it was so loud. At the foot of the bed, Kerr snored softly in his improvised cradle.

"Are you hurting?"

"Some." Which meant a lot.

Reaching over to him, her hand finally encountered a heavily muscled arm. Almost immediately his hand found and closed over hers. "You are safe. I have accepted that," he started to explain until his voice hitched. If she touched his face, she knew she would find tears.

"All right. You've accepted it," Annie whispered. "But you're still recovering from the fear you felt when you thought Kerr and I were dead. It's all right, Rion. You have nothing to be afraid of, and nothing to be ashamed of, either. And no

reason to believe you're to blame...for anything."

"I should have been here with you when the tosis hit."

"Vadon protected us. Thank God he convinced me to stay here instead of leaving me at the apartment like I asked him to. Besides, you had your men to protect."

"Which I failed to do. We have not found Callumed yet." He turned his head in her direction then raised her hand to his lips. "Vadon told me of your fear."

"Well, if it's any consolation, I didn't pass out. At least that's an improvement." Annie giggled softly as his lips lightly moved down the inside of her wrist and inner arm. It tickled. It also felt very arousing.

He pulled her toward him as his teeth tenderly nipped the crook of her elbow. His warm breath heated her blood to the point where she could feel her breasts aching for his touch, but Rion continued to tease. Annie giggled again.

"Are you sure you're well enough to do this?"

"I need you, my Annie. You are a greater medicine than anything those physicians can give me," he replied in a voice now rough with building desire.

"What if we wake Kerr?"

"If our lovemaking in the past has failed to awaken him, this time will make no difference."

She allowed him to keep tugging on her arm, letting him guide her where he wanted her to go and how he wanted to proceed. She felt his other hand pulling on her nightgown. Normally they slept bare, but as guests Annie had opted for one of Chloe's shifts. Rion, however, had no qualms about keeping to his old habits.

Quickly, she helped him to drag the material over her head and toss it over the side of the bed. He gave her another little tug, and Annie threw a leg over his to straddle him. Already the thick pole of his erection nestled against her mound, hot and pulsing with expectation.

"Is this wise with you lying on your injured back?"

"It hurts less if I do not have to keep my wings aloft," Rion whispered. The hand that had pulled off her shift now glided down her side, caressing her ribs, her waist, and her hip. His fingertips lightly stroked her skin, titillating her senses, making her wet. She adjusted herself on top of him, grinding herself against his groin. Rion groaned softly. "Sweetest heavens, when was the last time I told you I love you?"

"This morning."

"Then let me say it again. I love you, my Annie." The hand reached behind her to press against her back. She leaned over to kiss him as his member speared her stomach. Smiling, she grabbed him with both hands and squeezed. Rion gasped.

"Careful. If you keep that up, I may not last long enough to give you your pleasure."

"I'm not worried. You haven't failed me yet."

She kissed him again, letting her lips linger on his as she squeezed him again, then slowly began stroking him with long, languid movements, enjoying the feel of delicate skin sliding over rock-hard muscle. She liked to gently run her nails over his trembling length. It not only teased him unmercifully, but it also made him harder. This time when she did it, he almost choked.

"Your hands are like fire."

"Oh, yeah? How about this?"

Lifting up on her knees, Annie guided the bulbous tip to her entrance. Little by little, she lowered herself over him until the head was just inside her. She wiggled his stiffening erection, rubbing the silky tip against her clit as Rion bucked his hips. He wanted inside her, but she wasn't ready yet.

"You like to tease, my love," he accused her in a soft growl.

"I like the fact that I have the upper hand when I'm on top."

"Oh? You believe that?"

Actually, she didn't. It was taking every effort not to drop down over him and let him plunge deep inside. She loved the feel of him within her. She loved the way his thickness quivered, eliciting a similar reaction from her inner muscles when he held still.

Her husband was more impatient. Both large hands gripped her buttocks and drew her down over him, letting him slide all the way inside. He hissed as he raised his hips again.

"You are burning me alive."

Leaning over him, Annie gingerly placed her hands on his chest and moved her hips. She felt his girth stretching her, milking her into a frenzy of wetness. It took very little effort to pump herself over him; his hands kept her centered, working her steadily, relentlessly.

It felt wonderful. A perfect blending of bodies and hearts. His breathing escalated, as did hers. He was reaching far inside her, deep within her. So deep, it felt as though he was bumping against the entrance to her womb. Her womb, which felt empty and barren, devoid of life.

She wanted another child, as did Rion. Chloe had promised she would become fertile again, but it would take time. Time, patience, luck, and hope.

Hope.

At the thought, Anne squeezed her vaginal muscles until Rion grunted. It was all he could tolerate. Wrapping his large hands around her waist, he started pumping her up and down, driving himself inside her—hard, steady, and deep. Gradually increasing speed as their release began to build. He was in full control, now, and Annie readily surrendered.

This was when she could lose herself in his lovemaking. This was when she could let herself go and let the powerful thrusts completely overwhelm her. Closing her eyes, Annie rode him, keeping her knees pressed to his hips as the feeling of perfection spiraled upward. Lifting her higher with each moist slap of flesh.

She barely had time to draw a full breath before her orgasm suddenly burned bright and hot like a flare arching in the night sky. Yet Rion continued to pound himself into her, even when she tightened around him.

He gave a strangled cry. Annie felt his hands loosen his grip as he rammed her down over him a few more times. Breathing heavily, he finally stopped, and Annie curled on top of his chest as minute shudders continued to run between them, ticklish and deep. After another long moment, and their breathing grew more shallow, Annie lifted her face to kiss him on the jaw.

“I think your medicine is kicking in, dear sir.”

“Is that your professional medical opinion?” he teased drowsily.

She laughed softly and started to roll off of him. Rion stopped her, pinning her in place by wrapping his arms around her protectively.

“Stay.”

“I’m not too much weight on you, am I?”

“If I roll onto my side, the pain is greater. But I cannot sleep without holding you near me.”

Annie snorted. “You’re also still inside me.”

Rion answered with a barely perceptible movement of his head. “All the better,” he replied.

Annie waited for him to continue. A minute passed, then another. It wasn’t until she heard his soft snore that she realized he had finally succumbed to sleep. Smiling, she rested her cheek on his sternum and let herself drift away as well.

Chapter 7

The Invader

The bright yellow sleeve of the little shirt stuck out amid the grays and blacks of the crumbled building like a tiny ray of sunshine. Annie plucked it out of the ruins and stared at the piece of clothing she had made for Kerr from material scraps. She had managed to find a couple more items she could add to the pouch she'd made from her tunic top. Turning around, she carefully made her way over the debris to where she had started a pile of personal belongs.

Rion had taken a transport trap over to the way station to help over there. As there were no more traps to be hired, Vadon had flown her over to the remains of the apartment tower so Annie could begin searching for anything worth salvaging.

The storm had caused an incredible amount of destruction. There wasn't a building that hadn't suffered some sort of damage. Businesses were either closed or open for only a few brief hours, as those owners and their families were having to pick up the pieces of their own lives.

Every survivor was engaged in rescue operations. Annie looked up to see a group of angels in the distance digging at a spot where layers of building material were heaped. In fact, there were people scattered everywhere, picking through the rubble like she was, looking for survivors, the dead, or personal possessions.

Rion had offered to help her, but she knew he was greatly needed back at the way station. Chloe had given him strict orders not to use his wings for the next few weeks, at the very least, in order for the medicines to have a chance to heal him. Rion detested having to rely on the trap for transportation, but he agreed with the woman physician that if he disobeyed, he could very well lose all ability to fly for the rest of his life. Before he'd left, Rion promised Annie he would follow Chloe's edicts to the letter, and give his wings time to heal. Annie knew what the promise had cost him in terms of pride, but she trusted him. He would chew at the reins, but she knew he would obey because he knew he needed to be able to protect and care for her and Kerr—a promise he could not keep if he lost his ability to fly.

After dropping the baby off with Joberia and Minet, Vadon left her here in the general vicinity next to the safe room, where he believed the remains of their apartment would be located. With the clouds blocking the sky, it was difficult to tell how long she had been going through the mess, but she guessed no more than a couple of hours.

A brisk wind threw the scent of rain at her. Overhead, more gray clouds tumbled, dropping spots of rain every so often. Vadon told her that after the fierceness of the tosis, there would be scattered showers, some of them real thunder-boomers, for at least a week. Right now, she could tell another line of squalls was preparing to dump another inch or two on the area, and the ground was already saturated. She made a mental note to ask about the possibility of flooding in this area.

She gathered up the edges of the tattered gown and knotted them together. It wouldn't hurt for the stuff to get rained on a bit more. It all needed a good scrubbing anyway once she got it back—

Home.

Longing and the pain of reality pierced her chest. Their home was gone. Rion and Vadon's family home, where the boys had grown up, the only home Rion had known, was gone now. Very little was left that she could salvage: a few books, some clothing, a small jeweled barrette that Rion had bought her soon after Kerr had been born.

Stepping over a set of crumbled blocks, Annie thought she spotted another tiny flag of color underneath a slab of rock. As she reached for the material, one of the suns managed to sneak a ray of light through the amassing clouds. The thin beam struck a corner of one slanted avalanche of crystalline panels, and bounced back into her face. Curious, she dug through the pile, shoving aside the larger pieces when she could, until she reached the spot where the light sparkled.

It was Rion's chaster. Dented, scraped, but intact, the little gold lightning bolt insignia in the middle had managed to attract the sunbeam, thus catching her attention. Annie smiled and tucked the necklace in her pants pocket. The emblem had been in Rion's family for generations. He would be thrilled to get it back.

Rumbling sounded overhead. Another gust of wind pushed at her back, and followed with a splatter of raindrops. She

turned to go back for the bundle of belongings when she heard her name.

"Lady Annie!"

It was Galbrichon, a friend and one of the messenger angels who worked with Vadon. The man lighted nearby where there was solid footing. She flashed him a smile.

"Hello, Galbrichon! Are you looking for me?" The sky growled in answer, making her glance upward.

"I was sent to get you out of the coming storm," the man answered, holding out a hand to help her over the debris. Annie gave him the bundle, which he held for her until she could join him. She clutched her belongings as the man lifted her in his arms and took off with huge, downward sweeps of his dark brown wings.

"How is the work progressing over at the way station?" she asked once they were high enough where the winds wouldn't push them back to the ground.

Galbrichon gave her a puzzled look. "I would not know. I have been helping to escort the wounded over to the hospital."

He wouldn't know? "Who sent you to find me?" she asked in surprise.

"Vadon."

"Oh. Thank you."

They were nearly to Vadon and Chloe's apartment when the skies opened up, and rain began beating down on them. By the time they landed on the covered temporary platform, both of them were soaked to the skin.

"How about something warm to drink before you go?" she offered. From the look on his face, she knew he was about to turn her down, when she added in her best motherly tone, "If you get sick because of all this running around in the rain, I'm going to feel responsible. Come in and at least dry off in the bathroom."

The big man smiled and followed her into the apartment. By the time he emerged after toweling himself dry, Annie had fixed him a cup of hot brolade. The messenger angel accepted it with a word of thanks.

"You might as well stay for a few minutes until this downpour starts to let up. Where will you go from here?"

"I will need to go to the way station first to let Lord Rion know where you are. Then I need to get back to the midway to help with the rescue efforts."

"Is that where Vadon is, over at the midway?" Annie searched her mental map for what she knew were clusters of apartment towers located between the city's center and market area, and the far perimeters of the city. Although those towers were not as tall as the ones she and Rion had lived in, they had to have sustained acute damage as well.

Galbrichon nodded and finished off his drink, handing her the empty mug. "Thank you for the brolade." Before Annie could reply, he took off in the slowing rain. She watched him disappear into the mist, then turned to go back inside where she planned to clean what few possessions she'd found, and fix herself a light lunch.

She had barely had time to hang up their clothes to dry when there came a pounding on the front doors. Hurrying to answer it, she was stunned to find a trap waiting for her.

"Your presence is required at the hospital immediately," one of the carriers told her.

Oh my God! Rion! What had happened to him?

As fear seized her, Annie hurried into the box-shaped conveyance and anxiously twisted the hem of her tunic on the brief trip over. Every so often she would glance out the windows with curiosity to see the enormity of what the tosis had done to the city then quickly pull away. To see it firsthand was heartbreaking, and just as emotionally wrenching as it had been when she'd seen what was left of her home.

She wished there was a way she could question the carriers. Find out who had hired them. Chances were, though, they knew no more than she did. The carriers were sent out by the company hired. All they were given was the beginning and ending destinations, and the name of the client they were to transport.

As they neared the enormous white tower that was the hospital, Annie could see that the structure had not gone unscathed. Large sections of the outer surface were missing, and an enormous crack crawled up the eastern side of the building. In several places temporary landing platforms had been erected to replace the ones ripped away by the storm.

The carriers started to lower the trap to the ground where a small group of angels were waiting for her. Immediately, Annie spotted her husband, and her relief brought tears to her eyes. The trap had barely set down when she rushed out of the transport and threw herself into his arms.

"Whoa, whoa. Why the tears?" he asked her with concern.

Annie continued to cling to him, but she was unable to stop the wide smile spreading over her face. “The carriers said I was needed at the hospital. I was so worried it was because of you.”

“Then blame me,” Chloe spoke up. “I sent the trap before speaking with Rion first.”

Wiping away her tears with the back of her hand, Annie turned around with her husband’s arms still holding her. She could breathe easier now. Time could resume, her heart could continue beating, and the suns could carry on across the sky.

It was then she finally noticed the other people standing nearby. Among them was Councilman Dimarkus, the only man Rion had to answer to when it came to his work at guiding and assigning the Lords of all the Houses of Thunder. They all wore very concerned looks on their faces. Even Rion’s forehead was furrowed with worry.

“What’s wrong? If Rion isn’t injured, why did I need to come...oh, no! Kerr?”

Rion hastened to reassure her. “No. Kerr is fine. No. We need you here because of something we have been fearing for a very long time has finally come to pass.”

Annie shook her head. “I don’t understand. What are you talking about?”

“Lady Annie.” Dimarkus stepped forward. “Yesterday during the storm, several rifts opened between your world and ours. We tried to cover them all, but as soon as we positioned a man or two at one of them, it would close and another would open. Sometimes a rift would remain open for a long period of time, but for another it would only exist for a matter of seconds.”

She remained silent, listening and patiently waiting for the man to come to the point. Knowing her husband and son were not the cause of the emergency, she could relax.

“During the height of the tosis, a machine from your world came through one of those rifts,” the councilman continued, and at that instant Annie knew what the man was trying to tell her.

“From Earth? A machine? You mean an airplane? You’re talking about an airplane, aren’t you? An airplane made it through one of the rifts, didn’t it?” She looked up at Rion. “Where is it? Where did it land?”

“It crashed over in the midway. The man who rode the airplane is in the hospital,” he told her.

“He survived? The pilot’s alive?”

“Barely,” Chloe said. “We have had to keep him in a coma so he could heal. But he is fighting consciousness now. That is why we need you.”

Annie had a faint idea what they were talking about, but she had to be sure. “You want me to be there when he wakes up?”

“If you would. Please.”

“And if you can, find out who he is. Where he is from. Why he is here. And how he was able to get here.” Rion said.

Shrugging, Annie smiled. “Sure. I would love to help.” She took a deep breath and slowly shook her head in disbelief. “Wow. Someone from my world. You know, it’ll be nice to be able to talk to someone from Earth again.”

“That is what we thought, too,” Rion told her, but there was a strange sound in his voice that caught her attention. Annie glanced back up at him, but his face didn’t reveal anything other than his love for her. His embrace would always be her real home, where her heart would always find comfort.

“All right. I got it. Is there anything else you want me to do?”

Chapter 8

The Pilot

Wherever he was, it was quiet. And dark. Maybe nighttime.

Had to be careful. He could be in enemy territory. Caution was the word of the day.

Ian managed to crack his eyelids a fraction of an inch. No, not nighttime. *Low light*. Or maybe it was a lamp. He opened his eyes all the way.

He was in a room...somewhere. A hospital room? It looked like one, except...

He took a sniff, searching for the telltale odor of alcohol or disinfectant, and immediately he heard a rustling sound coming from the other side of the room. Curious, he managed to turn his head slightly to the left to see what was making the noise just as the light began to brighten.

An incredibly beautiful woman was standing not ten feet away, watching him. The smile on her face was warm. She was young, no more than twenty years old. And she was wearing a mint green outfit that was almost as gauzy and sheer as a nightgown. With black hair that tumbled over her breasts in a glory of curls, she was almost too lovely to be real.

Are you daft? Where's your manners? Clearing his throat, he managed to croak, "Well, 'ello, pretty lady."

The woman laughed lightly. He watched her lay a book down on the chair at the other end of the room where she had been sitting before walking over to stand by his bed. As she drew closer, he could see the faint smattering of freckles on her face. In the dim light it was hard to tell what color her eyes were, but they were warm as she greeted him.

"Hello, yourself. How do you feel?"

The accent was definitely not Brit. Nor did it sound like anything from one of the Scandinavian dialects. In fact, it sounded American.

"Well, I thought I would feel like a bloody truck had run me down, begging your pardon, but at the moment I think I'm doing good just to wake up alive." He lifted his grin. "I *am* alive, right? I mean, this isn't heaven, is it?"

The remark tickled her, and she giggled softly. "No. This isn't heaven." When she shook her head, the ebony tresses played across her breasts. Involuntarily, his eyes dropped to note the full hips. A woman's figure.

"Where am I, then? Is this a hospital? Forget that. Of course it is. In that case, who are you? You're not my doctor, are you?"

As the woman came closer into the light, he finally noticed she had the most beguiling green eyes he had ever seen. Dark green, like clover. Her full lips were moist, and her coal-black hair shone in waves despite the low light. His fingers itched to reach out and touch it. Her visage belonged on photographs and in the theater. Or, better yet, painted by a master, to be permanently displayed in a museum, *Mona Lisa* be damned. There was no way in the world he could tear his eyes away from her.

"My name is Annie. And, yes, this is a hospital, but, no, I'm not a doctor." She bit her lower lip for a second, the sight of which drew his gaze as he stared at the pearly teeth nibbling those dark pink lips. Kissable looking lips. She didn't seem to be wearing a smidgen of makeup, like most women tended to do these days. If women knew how awful tasting lipstick was, they'd never wear it when they went out on a date with a bloke.

"Are you sure you feel all right? That was a nasty crash you were in."

Drawn from his reverie, he paused to take inventory. "I, uhh, I remember ejecting from the plane at the last minute. Huh. I'm not that bad off, considering." He looked back at her. "If you're not a doctor, are you by chance a nurse? Because if you are, then I *know* I'm not home."

Annie laughed again as she blushed a rosy hue. And right then and there he knew he was in love. "I'm not a nurse either. Not technically. Just think of me as your welcoming committee. What's your name?"

"My name? Ah, yes. Ian Ufton Davenport the Third, madam, although I would be honored if you would call me 'Ian'."

Annie smiled again as she bobbed her head. "Ian. I like that. It's different. You don't sound like you're American. Where are you from?"

"Tell me first where I am." Damn it, his training was kicking his arse with both feet, reminding him to follow the standard prisoner protocol. Yet a little voice in the back of his head was insisting he was not a prisoner. In fact, he was beginning to get an uneasy feeling about this whole thing, in spite of the angel of mercy standing nearby.

"Welllll, that's going to be a bit...difficult. What else do you remember?" she asked.

Ian jerked his gaze back up to those emerald green eyes. "Remember? Hmm, let me think. There was this awful storm that caught me unawares. It shut down all my instruments, and forced me to fly blind. I remember..." He squinted as he tried to dredge up those last few desperate minutes. "I would swear I kept the nose up. I know I tried to rise above the storm, but I must've been mistaken. I remember piercing through this one odd orange cloud, and when I emerged, I found myself smack in the middle of this city. I pulled the plane up, hoping to avoid crashing, but the bloody wind...'scuse me, but the wind just about tore off one of my wings, and I went straight down. Barely had time to bail out and pull my chute."

He lifted a hand to his head, and was surprised to discover no bandages circling his scalp. A second look around didn't reveal any familiar hospital trappings, either. No trays of bandages and ointments. No nothing. In fact, if Annie hadn't told him he was in a hospital, he would have never known. "You said your name was Annie? And you're not my nurse?"

"No, I'm not your nurse. Like I said, I'm just a...friend."

"Am I in the States? Over in America?"

She quickly shook her head. "No. You're in a different...country."

Something about her hesitancy made him curious. Or maybe he was dreaming it all after whacking his head during the crash.

"But you *are* an American, right?" he tried to clarify.

"Yeah. I'm originally from Ohio. Where are you from again?"

"London. England."

Her smile brightened, and her entire face lit up. Her beauty simply took his breath away. "Ah! That explains your accent!" Annie giggled, and Ian wondered what she was doing here if this was another country. The daughter of a bigwig diplomat?

"So, what country is this? Where is here, Annie?"

Immediately, that thin worry line creased her brow, and she nibbled on her lower lip again. "Well, that's going to be a bit difficult to explain."

"How difficult can it be? You said I'm in another country. What country?" A thought came to him, dark and evil with intent. He could feel his blood freeze with the idea. "I *am* in enemy territory, aren't I? Are you being held captive here, along with me?" He shot a hand out and he wrapped his fingers around her wrist. Although she felt fine-boned, he could tell she was strong. Annie jerked in surprise, but his grip held firm. "Are they using you to pry information from me? Is that it? Are you really a spy trying to beguile me into leaking crucial information?"

"No! No, you're mistaken. I'm not a prisoner here, and neither are you. Let go of me!" She twisted her arm, struggling to release herself. When his fingers refused to budge, Annie stopped pulling and let out an exasperated sigh. "Look. I came here to be with my husband, who's from here. I was asked to be with you when you awoke because the others didn't want you to go into shock."

Her voice and expression was sincere, and if there was anything Ian prided himself on besides his flying skills and his service to Her Majesty, it was his ability to read other people. This woman wasn't his enemy, and deep down he believed her when she said she was a friend.

Fine way to treat an ally, old chum!

"My apologies, madam. With the war and all..." He released her and watched as she rubbed her arm where he had held her. It was then he noticed the sparkle of a ring on her left hand. Left hand, left ring finger, the way it was done in the States. "I came here to be with my husband."

Well, sod it! The woman is taken! Hoping to hide his disappointment, Ian asked, "Can you at least tell me if I'm in friendly territory?"

"Is the war still going on?" Annie asked instead of answering him.

"Still going..." He blinked in stunned surprise. What country hadn't heard, or been affected, by the war? Was there even a spot on Earth that continued to remain totally oblivious to what was going on?

"Please tell me. What's happening over there?" Annie whispered with growing apprehension.

Over there? Ian's eyes widened as he stared at the lovely creature before him. "What do you mean, 'over there'?"

She sighed and looked away. After a moment, she looked back at him. "Are you with the British Air Force? Or do you call it the Air Force? What do you call it in your country?"

This time he allowed his training to take over. Until he knew what he was dealing with, it would be best if he stuck to the protocols that had been drilled into him. Suddenly all business, Ian tried to resume his professional persona. "Wing Commander Ian Davenport, of Her Majesty's Royal Air Force, at your service, madam," he brusquely answered.

A little smile appeared at the corners of her lush lips, and his faux persona went out the door. "Wing Commander...that's funny. Well, Mr. Davenport, there's no need to go all Royal Air Force on us here. To be very honest with you, you're on another planet. Yes, I said another planet. On another world called Parra. You flew your plane through a rift between Earth and this one, and crashed just outside of the heart of the city."

Another world? Is the woman's daft? He stared slack-jawed at her, not quite certain he had heard her correctly. "Run that by me again, love? Did you just say I'm on another world?"

Annie nodded, her face serious. "Yes. You're on another world."

He glanced around the room. "But this place looks so normal. Are you absolutely certain?"

She snorted and grinned.

Bloody hell, she has dimples!

"The room may look normal to you, Mr. Davenport, but I was asked to be here when you woke up for a reason. You see, the inhabitants here are not like you and me. I mean, they don't look exactly like us, and they were worried that if you saw them first, you might—"

"What are they? Don't tell me they're bloody little aliens?"

"No, sir. They're..." A sound interrupted them, and Ian saw her glance over where a door had to be located, although he couldn't see around the corner at who was entering the room from where he was lying.

A woman stepped into the room. She reminded him of one of those Grecian statues with her flowing red gown and thick, brown hair tied behind her. And her enormous brown wings that extended behind her.

"Jesus bloody Christ!" He could feel his shock speed like ice water through his veins.

The red-dressed angel looked at Annie. "Do you think he will let me examine him?"

"Have I died and gone to Heaven?" Ian interrupted, unable to take his eyes away from the woman angel...until a second thought struck him. "How come your wings aren't white? I thought angels had white wings."

"I am not an angel..." She paused and glanced again at Ian.

"His name's Ian Davenport," Annie hastened to supply.

The woman angel thanked her and turned back to him. "Ian Davenport. My name is Chloe, and I am your physician."

His eyes raked over her. "A doctor?" Looking to Annie, he said, "Is that what you meant when you said the creatures here aren't like us? Is it because they have wings? Is everyone else on this planet an angel, too?"

"With the exception of me and you, everyone else on Parra has wings," Annie told him. She turned to Chloe. "Are Rion's treatments done for the day?"

"Yes. I came to tell you. I did not know he would be awake yet." The woman angel—

—*Damn it all, she's a bloody angel no matter what she says!*—

—gave Ian a warm smile. "Are you ready for another treatment, Ian?" Her voice was soothing, comforting. Despite his initial shock, he found himself relaxing.

"What kind of treatment?"

"We do not heal people the way you are used to," the angel named Chloe told him, still using that soft, soothing voice. "It is more...how did you describe it, Annie?"

"Hands on."

"Hands on?" Ian repeated. "You mean, like a faith healer?"

Annie shook her head. "No. Not a faith healer, Ian. You'll discover that these people have a real...umm, power. They have real healing abilities. You'll understand better when she touches you." Turning to the woman angel, she asked, "Can I go see him now?" Chloe gave Annie a nod, and Annie thanked her. "If you need me, Mr. Davenport, just let someone know, and they'll send for me," Annie told him. "Don't be afraid. You're in excellent hands."

"Can't you stay?" he asked, reluctant to let her go so soon.

"I'm sorry, but I need to go home. I'll be back tomorrow, though," she promised with another one of those life-giving smiles. After dropping a quick kiss on the woman angel's cheek, she left, taking the sun with her.

He stared at the edge of the wall where she had disappeared as the woman angel approached him. He was vaguely aware of her laying her hands on him, one on his arm and the other on his shoulder, until the sense of warmth began permeating his body. Ian blinked and looked up at her. "So, what's my prognosis, Doc?"

"Chloe," she gently corrected. "You are doing excellently."

"How long have I been here?"

"Three, umm, days."

"Three *days*? After a crash like the one I just had, and no broken bones, I'd say that was a bloody miracle, right?"

"On the contrary, Ian. You suffered several broken bones and had some internal bruising, not to mention a mild concussion, but we managed to heal you without too much difficulty."

He stared at where her hands were resting. The warm, sweet sensation continued to flood every part of him. It was as incredible as it was unbelievable. "Are you sure you're not some kind of faith healer? Where's your stethoscope? Or your pills, or your blasted needles?"

Chloe continued to smile gently at him. "We do not use needles, although we do use medicines. After another day or two, you should be well enough to leave here."

"And go where?"

"No need to worry. Annie is checking into accommodations for you, although it will be very difficult at this time. That storm that you flew through also caused an enormous amount of damage to our world. We are just now starting to rebuild our lives as well as our city."

She moved around to the head of the bed and placed her fingers on his skull. Ian closed his eyes blissfully. "So tell me, Chloe, do those wings actually work?"

He heard her chuckle. "Yes, they do."

"Can you tell me a little more about this world of yours?"

"I would rather you discovered it on your own, Ian," she said.

"Then can you answer me a few questions about Annie?"

There was another chuckle. "Like what?"

Whatever the woman angel was doing, he was starting to feel light-headed. Drowsy. No telling how much longer he would manage to stay awake.

"Is it true she came here to be with her husband?"

"That is true."

"Her husband's one of you, then, I take it."

"Yes. In fact, Annie's husband, Rion, and my husband, Vadon, are brothers."

His eyes flew open. "Bugger that! You're in-laws!"

"Yes," Chloe replied just as a heavy blanket of healing spread over him. The sensation blocked his thought processes, preventing him from asking any further questions, and Ian drifted back into a psychically medicated sleep.

Once she was finished, Chloe left the room and went to let the others know the strange man was now aware of his surroundings.

And the danger he represented was only beginning.

Chapter 9

The Truth

He's from Earth. He's from home.

The litany continued to repeat itself over and over in the back of her mind as Annie washed Kerr's diapers in the kitchen sink. She couldn't get the man's face out of her mind's eye. The red-gold hair and blue eyes. And that accent.

He's from Earth. He's from home.

All right, he wasn't from Ohio, or even from America, but he was from Earth. He had eaten the same foods she had eaten. Breathed the same air. Seen the same one sun and one moon. For all the differences between them, there was a lot more they had in common. And the best part of all, they wanted her to be Ian's unofficial liaison.

He's from Earth. He's from home.

Her homesickness rose up in front of her like an immense black beast. Trying to ignore the tears, she scrubbed the cloth diapers with renewed vigor. Once she wrung them out, she took them into the bathroom and spread them out over the shower doors.

"Maybe this time I'll remember to take them down before people start taking their baths tonight."

On her way back to the kitchen, she wiped her eyes on the hem of her tunic and tried to put on a calmer face. The others would be home before too long. She needed to see what kind of dinner she could throw together from what little there was in the cold box. There was no "typical" workday on this world, but since the tosis, most everyone didn't quit until it was either too dark to see, or they had no strength left.

Because the buildings were individually built to absorb their energy from the two suns, the main sources of light and energy used to cook and heat had not been disrupted. The same was true for the water supply, which was pumped from underground rivers. That much of life as it had been remained intact.

Unfortunately, the same could not be said for the loss of fresh food. This world's open air markets were open almost daily, with a consistently fresh abundance of produce and foodstuffs. Daily life revolved around a visit to the market nearly every other day. But when the tosis plowed through the main market area of the city, everyone lost their main connection to their food supply. As a result, everyone was cut down to one meal a day, and even that was becoming a struggle. Everyone's first priority was to find survivors. Their second was to find enough to eat.

Annie gave a sigh of relief. The cold box held a half a pound of begga roots and two large sheaves of borkwell, thank goodness. It would be enough for four grown adults.

In her nearly two years on this world, Annie thought she had learned as much as she could about the customs and the people who lived here. She had taught herself how to prepare and cook their food. She had done all she could to embrace this new world for her husband's sake, and for the sake of their son.

But it was getting to the point where she found herself starving a little bit every day for the world she'd come from. And the pit of hunger continued to grow. Yes, Rion had helped however he could. He'd asked those Lords who walked the pathways over to Earth to bring back whatever little tidbit they could tuck safely into their clothing. Usually they returned with a newspaper, sometimes a book or magazine, a trinket, a hanky, or even a small toy for Kerr. Whatever they brought back, it couldn't be organic. No food could make the trip through the rift. Not even a flower would survive.

The other Lords were happy to oblige however they could. Annie was a rarity among them, and she had proven her devotion to her husband and her new home. If the odd little item brought a smile of thanks from her, that was payment enough. And for a while, it had been enough. Or so she had thought until Wing Commander Davenport crashed into her life.

Annie paused from peeling the begga roots she was preparing for supper. She thought she heard something in the living room. She turned to go check when Rion strode into the kitchen. He embraced her and held her tightly before giving her a loving kiss.

She glanced around him. "How did you get here?"

"Turoff and Basilam dropped me off. And before you ask, Vadon is bringing Kerr home." He glanced at the pot. "What are you fixing?"

"Braised begga roots with sliced, pickled borkwell. Any word yet on when new shipments of food will be arriving? It would be nice to have something fresh for supper." She looked up at him. "It's going to take a while before everything is back to normal, won't it?"

Rion released her and walked over to the small table and chairs at the corner of the kitchen. Collapsing on one of the tall, padded stools with the low backrests, he leaned against the wall for support. He was exhausted, and covered in grit and grime. It would take a lot of scrubbing to get those clothes clean.

"Annie, to be honest, I do not think our world will ever be the way it was. At least, not in the near future."

She continued to peel and slice the roots, but she could hear what he was not saying as clearly as she could hear what he was saying.

"You're talking about Mr. Davenport, aren't you?"

He nodded.

"You're thinking that since he found his way in, it's just a matter of time before others follow him, don't you?"

"Not just me, my Annie. I spoke with several other Grand Lords today. We are worried for several reasons. For one thing, there are probably people searching for him. The war on your world is increasing in intensity. More people in...airplanes? More people in airplanes will come through the rifts, and we are afraid we will not be able to stop them." Rion slowly shook his head. "Our worst fears have been realized."

"No. No!" She turned to face him, waving her peeling knife at him in emphasis. "You can't make all these assumptions just because one man found his way over here. You have to tell the other Grand Lords they're jumping to conclusions!"

"I am sorry, Annie, but one of those conclusions just jumped into our world, and now he is stuck here just like you are!"

Stunned, she stared at her husband as his words sunk in. "What do you mean, he's 'stuck' like me?"

Rion was instantly contrite. Getting to his feet, he went over to where she stood at the sink, but Annie backed away as she stared at him in disbelief.

"Answer me, damn it! What do you mean, I'm stuck here?"

"Forgive me. That is not what I meant."

"Then explain yourself," she demanded. "What did you mean when you said I was stuck here? I thought I was able to go back if I chose to. Hell, your Council almost had me returned, or have you already forgotten?"

His eyes widened in fear. "I misspoke, Annie. I did not mean it that way."

"Horseshit! What's going on, Rion?"

He grabbed her by the arms to prevent her from moving away. The tension between them was palpable. Bowing his head for a moment, he slowly looked back up at her. When he finally spoke, it was low and soft.

"The people on my world are very much like the people on Earth. They cry when they are sad, and they fight when they feel threatened. You have learned that about us. And when people hurt, they lash out in anger. This tosis has hurt our world, our city, and our people. We have been left extremely vulnerable, making us too quick to place blame. So they are seeking answers. They are also seeking..."

"A scapegoat?" she offered when he stumbled. "You're talking about a scapegoat."

"Someone to blame for their misfortune."

She nodded. "That's a scapegoat. So they're accusing *me* of causing the tosis? Is that what you're saying? That's ridiculous, Rion!"

"Not you individually," he hurried to say. "But our people already know about the airplane. They know the pilot survived. And they know he is from Earth."

Annie's mouth dropped open. "Are they blaming the tosis on Ian?"

"They are not blaming you or the man for the tosis," Rion emphasized with a little shake of her arms. "What they are saying is that by having you here, and now with him here as well, our life as it has been for thousands of years has come to an end. And the massive tosis that swept through our world was an affirmation of that prophecy."

"Prophecy? What prophecy? What have you been hiding from me? Damn it, Rion! What haven't you told me?" She was mad now. Mad and hurt. And worried.

He raised a weary hand to his forehead. “Because of you and the pilot being here, prophecy says this may signal the end to our world. And to the end...of us.”

Chapter 10

The Conversation

The hospital didn't have wheelchairs. Instead, two burly angels—there was no other word he could find for them that would fit—came into his room with a padded set of straps, which they used as a sling to sit him in.

"Where are you blokes taking me?" Ian inquired with a grin.

"The physician has ordered you to get some sun and fresh air." One of the men smiled back.

Quickly and efficiently, Ian was placed in the sitting hammock and lifted between them. They proceeded out of the room and down a long hallway, where they passed more angels, of which a couple wore the red robes of physicians. Ian watched with fascination all the industrious activities. If one were to dismiss the fact that everyone carried a huge set of wings on their backs, it would be very easy to accept his being in a hospital anywhere on Earth.

They reached a huge solarium, the likes of which Ian had never seen before. The vaulted ceiling had to be at least fourteen or fifteen meters above them. Besides the ceiling, the walls were solid windows or glass between enormous, carved columns. At least Ian assumed that was the way the room was supposed to be. Most of the windows were gone now, especially the ones in the ceiling. Still, the day was pleasant and bright. From where the orderlies lowered him onto a low divan, he could see both suns—

Dear God in Heaven!

Stunned, Ian stared at the two balls of light arching almost overhead. One appeared to be slightly smaller than the other, and more yellowish than the other. The bigger one was redder, but seemed to follow the smaller one. Together they cast a definite orangey glow over everything.

Ian caught himself hyperventilating and mentally tried to calm himself down.

It's all right, old boy. Calm down. Take deep breaths. You knew you were on a different world. You knew because you'd been told, and because you'd seen and talked to those angel people who were making you well again simply by touching you.

Yes, he knew it, he had been told it, and he had seen proof for himself in the people who inhabited this world. But still, seeing two suns up in that tangerine-colored alien sky had been a kick to the gut.

It's true! Great gollywogs, I really am on a different planet!

"Mr. Davenport?"

Ian jerked away from gazing at the ceiling. A young woman angel in a pale lavender gown approached him. She was pretty, with her light brown hair and wings, but too childlike for his taste.

"I'm Ian Davenport. And who might you be?"

"I am Belli. I am a notifier."

"A what?"

"My job is to notify a physician or assistant if a patient is in distress and needs immediate medical aid. I saw you were having difficulty breathing. That is why I came over."

"Thank you, sweetie, but I'm fit as a fiddle. Just taking a gander at this place."

The angel's face screwed up a bit as she tried to fathom what he had said. Given the fact that he seemed to be in a good mood, she smiled back, gave a slight nod then backed away.

"Maybe I should have asked her how long they plan to leave me here," he murmured. The lounge he was seated on reminded him of deck chairs. The back could be raised or lowered to allow a person to either lie down or sit up with their legs elevated. Ian glanced around. It appeared that all the patients were given loungers, if he was to assume that everyone wearing a pale blue gown like the one he had on were patients.

Raising a hand, Ian looked over his shoulder to signal for the notifying angel. Belli approached him again, still smiling.

"Can I be of assistance?"

"How about a nice cup of tea?"

"Tea?"

"Never mind. I need some information."

The angel appeared puzzled. Again. "Information?"

"Yes. Can you tell me how long I'm going to be here?"

"I am sorry, but you would need to ask a physician. Only they can tell you when you will be dismissed from their care. Would you like for me to call for one for you?"

"No, no. That's not what I... Never mind. How about providing a little company? Pass along some gen to this newcomer?"

"Forgive me. Some what?"

Bigger that. It was becoming increasingly clear they were facing a language barrier, even though they both were able to converse in the Queen's English. Ian's eyes casually roamed around the room, when he spied another possible answer.

"How about a book, love? Could you get me a decent piece of literature? Maybe you have access to whatever it is you call a library here?"

Belli smiled. "Yes! We have libraries here. What topic interests you?"

Ian shrugged. "Surprise me."

"I will return shortly," the angel promised and hurried away.

"Boy, she sure left in a big rush. Is something wrong?"

The voice of a true angel came from directly behind him. Ian twisted around in his seat, eager to see her.

"Annie!"

Annie laughed. "You certainly don't sound like you're in pain. Hello, Ian. So, how *are* you doing?" She paused next to the lounge, almost close enough to where he could reach out and touch her.

"Blimey, I've missed you! Where have you been? Why haven't you been back to visit me?"

He couldn't get enough of her. It was as though his eyes were drinking her in, storing up the sight of her in her dark blue blouse and pants to help get him through the long, lonely nights. Today her hair was pulled back in some sort of braid. Her face was freshly scrubbed until her freckles shone.

"You are a sight for sore eyes," he added before she had a chance to reply.

"Thank you, and I apologize. Hold on..."

He watched her walk over to where a low, padded stool sat unattended, and bring it back to where he lay. As she sat down, he noticed the volume in her hand. Annie saw where his eyes focused.

"Here." She handed him the volume. "I brought this for you to read."

It was a thin book. Ian glanced at the spine. *The Complete Poems of Edgar A. Poe*. "Thank you, love. How did you know Poe is an addiction of mine? Thank you." He gave her a warm smile. "I have missed your heavenly smile. How have you been? *Where* have you been? How long can you stay?"

Annie laughed again. Ian made sure to memorize the sound. In fact, he willed himself to memorize every moment they were together.

"I have to confess. I'm the one who put the bug in Chloe's ear to give you some time in the sunroom. I detest those little hospital rooms. They're so depressing."

From the tone of her voice, Ian suspected she had spent quite a bit of time herself in the hospital, either as a patient or a visitor. Although it wouldn't be polite to ask her the details, the insight intrigued him.

Adjusting himself until he was comfortable, Ian laid the book on his belly and folded his hands over it before giving her his best smile. "Well, I appreciate the bug. Now that you're here, you have yourself a willing audience. Talk to me, Annie. Tell me everything. Anything!"

"Where would you like for me to begin?" She giggled nervously this time. "Truth is, I'm anxious to hear *you* talk. I've...gosh, Ian. I miss my world."

"How long have you been over here?"

"Almost two years. Rion brought me over after my husband tried to kill me and the baby."

Ian gave her a puzzled look. "Wait up. I thought you said your husband was an angel."

"Not originally. I was married over on Earth. My first husband had bought some land in Montana, and he took me there to watch over the farm while he went in search of his fortune in the silver mines. He left me there for three years. I had no idea if he was alive or dead when I met Rion."

The memory still hurt her, he noticed. Yet she didn't seem reluctant to talk about it, so he watched her closely as she gave him her story.

"It was after a really bad thunderstorm passed through the valley that I discovered Rion. He had flown through the rift between his world and mine, like you did, but he'd been struck by lightning, or that's what we think. He fell onto the trees and was badly hurt. I managed to get him back to the cabin so I could take care of the worst of it and nurse him back to health."

"And you two fell in love?"

Two spots of color appeared in her cheeks, as well as an extra sparkle in her incredible green eyes.

"Yes. If it weren't for Rion, I wouldn't have survived another winter."

"If it hadn't been for you, neither would he," Ian observed.

The color became a full blush that lent a glow to her whole face. Ian's breath hitched in his chest. *Gor, you are more beautiful than any angel on this planet.* Ian bit his lips to keep from saying it aloud, afraid of what Annie might say or do if he did. He was about to tread on another man's property, which was not proper. However, it wouldn't quell the feelings building inside him. And even if he wanted to back away from these feelings, he couldn't.

"You survived the winter together. Then what happened?" he urged her to continue.

"My first husband returned. Out of the clear blue. But by then Rion had already left to return to his world."

"He abandoned you, too?"

"Oh, no!" Annie held out a hand as her eyes widened. "Rion returned to see what he needed to do in order to bring me here to be with him."

"So, your first husband never met Rion?"

An exasperated look shadowed Annie's face. It was immediately followed by a darker, more despondent expression.

"When Foster found out I was pregnant, he tried to kill me...and the baby. I tried to ex-explain to him that it had been almost four years since he left me. I tried to tell him I thought he was dead...and I was lo-lonely. I was tired...and cold...and hungry. I tried to tell him about Rion, but he beat me...and he tried to kill my baby."

Two tears rolled down her cheeks where she hastily wiped them away. Guilt blossomed inside him, and Ian reached out to take her hand.

"There, there, love," he said gently. "I didn't mean to dredge up the bad memories. No need to go on with your story for my sake."

"No." Annie pulled her hand away and forced a smile. "No, it's all right. It's been almost two years. You'd think I would be over it by now." Clearing her throat, she sniffed and continued. "Rion managed to stop Foster before he could kill me."

"Well, that's a bit obvious," Ian playfully retorted. It elicited a soft laugh from Annie.

"Yeah, you're right. Rion started to bring me back here, but Foster shot him in the back, and nearly killed him. It's a miracle we made it through the rift."

"What happened to the baby?"

Annie brightened. "Oh, Kerr? He's big and healthy, and cutting teeth, poor baby."

"Bit of a nummer, eh?"

"A what?"

"He's biting on everything? Drooling a lot? That sort of thing?"

Annie giggled. "Yeah. That sort of thing."

"So what does your husband do over here? Why did he fly through the...rift?"

"He's a Lord of the House of Thunder. I know, I know." Annie smiled, holding up a hand to stay his next question. "You'll eventually find out about the Houses. In fact, I'm sure you'll understand them a whole lot better than I do, seeing as you're British."

"What does being a Brit have to do with it?"

"Well, don't you have your lords and ladies and counts and all over in England? I remember reading somewhere about them, but I didn't pay much attention to it at the time."

"Most of the titles nowadays are inherited, rather than appointed," Ian informed her with a grin.

"Same here, but the title also means a responsibility and a lifelong job." Her face suddenly brightened. "Oh, my

goodness! What time is it? Hello! Notifier?"

A male angel hurried up this time in answer. "What is the problem?"

"What's the time?" Annie asked as she got to her feet.

"Sixteen and two past midday, Lady Annie."

"Oh, crap. I'm late." Turning to Ian, she said, "I'm sorry, but I promised to pick up Kerr before now."

"It's purely my fault. Blame me for keeping you." He tried to rise, as any proper gentleman would when a lady exited the room, but Annie pressed him back onto the lounge.

"That's bull, and you know it. Look, Chloe says you'll be able to leave the hospital in another day or so. I came by to give you the book, and to let you know I'm looking into finding you a place to stay." Annie flashed an apologetic smile. "But it's so good to talk to you. We have to talk more. I need to know what's going on on Earth."

"You mean the war and all?"

"Everything!" She leaned over and grabbed his hand to give it a squeeze. "You have to tell me everything. Catch me up on the latest news. I don't care if it's good or bad. All right?"

"It's a date," Ian promised.

Annie released his hand and hurried away, but not before turning around and waving goodbye just before she left the room.

Sighing loudly, Ian watched until she was completely out of sight. It was like watching a candle being extinguished. He muttered a curse word under his breath, but it did nothing to stop the longing that followed in her wake.

That was your treat for the day, old boy. But on the good side, you know you're going to get to see her again, and hopefully soon.

Making a face, he picked up the book of poems, and started to open it, when the volume automatically opened to a page near the middle of the book. Apparently the poem held a special significance to Annie, since the page was smudged at the top and a bit of paper was jammed in the spine as a makeshift bookmark.

"'Annabel Lee'." His eyes scanned the page. Turning to the next page, his eyes caught one stanza in particular.

"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."

Annabel Lee. Annie.

Ian wondered if there was a connection, or if it was merely coincidence.

Chapter 11

The Dinner

Chloe was already home when Rion arrived. After he thanked the men who airlifted him over, Rion walked into the kitchen, expecting to see Annie. His sister-in-vows was still in her physician reds as she stood over the cooker.

“What are you doing here?” he asked, glancing over her shoulder. “Mmm, bonnic and bey noodles?”

“I finished my rounds and decided if I did not devote a little time to my own life, I may regret it later.” She slapped the hand attempting to steal a noodle. “I am used to Vadon’s tricks. Do not think you can get away with it with me.” She scrutinized him. “I could ask the same of you. Why are you back at this time? Are you feeling unwell?”

Rion took a seat on a stool. “I promised to take Kerr for the afternoon. Minet said she needed to look for food, and Annie said something about visiting with the stranded pilot. Minet should be here soon.”

“How do you feel about that?”

“About what?”

“About Annie visiting the man from Earth.” Chloe gave him a hard stare.

Rion returned it. “Why do you ask? You know better than I do how homesick she has been. Despite the fears and all the talk about the prophecies, his appearance could be the medicine she needs.”

The woman physician smiled. “We can only hope. Now, tell me the truth about yourself. How are you pain-wise?”

He sighed loudly. “I am managing the pain. It is the inability to go where I need when I need that irks me. I am chewing at the reins, as Annie would say. Ah! But I have been a good boy and have not stretched myself,” he reassured her before she could ask. “I have not even preened myself...although...”

She saw the gleam in his eyes and laughed. “Please! I do not need to know about your and Annie’s preening habits!” She laughed again. “At least your spirits are intact. I know it has been hard for you not to fly.”

“Hard is not the word I would use. More like ‘inconvenient’. ‘Impossible’. ‘Irritating’. ‘Troublesome’.”

“All right! All right! You made your point!” Chloe giggled.

“Can I help with anything?”

“No. We are eating off the cooker today. I am not setting the table. Why not go ahead and take a shower? If you need me to, I can give you a bit of healing after we eat.”

“Sounds good. To tell the truth, Mereth ordered me to go home.” Rion ran a hand through his long, blond hair, and bits of rubble and dirt came away on his fingers. He looked at it and chuckled. “He made a deal with me. He would handle the rebuilding of the way station if I dealt with the reports and paperwork.”

“It sounds like you got the better deal,” Chloe remarked.

“I hate paperwork, but I have no other choice. I fear doing greater damage to my back and wings if I help in the rebuilding process.”

“Ah. You were caught between a stone and a...what is it Annie calls it? A hard place?”

“Yes. Actually, I think it is between a boulder and a hard place. Never mind. A hot shower will definitely put me in a better frame of mind to tackle the work while I keep an eye on Kerr.”

Walking into the spare bedroom that he and Annie were occupying, he was delighted to see the small pile of clean clothing lying on the bed. Apparently Annie had been able to find some of their things at the site of their toppled apartment building. After a good scrubbing, she had dried them and laid them here to put up later.

Rion picked up the patchwork jumper she had made for Kerr. Their son was growing rapidly, and he knew many of Kerr’s things no longer fit him. Fortunately the jumper might still fit. If not, Annie would be able to adjust the little outfit to make it last another month, hopefully.

He let out a huge sigh. Another month. Heavens knew their world had gone through a major disaster that would not be rectified in a month’s time. Maybe not even in a year’s time.

Maybe not even in my time.

People were picking themselves up, dusting themselves off, and plunging in with both hands to try and resume what their lives had been like before the tosis, but it was hard. It was so damn hard, it was almost impossible. Thank the heavens the search and safety squads from nearby cities were arriving to help, along with market vendors.

The delicious odor of braised bonnic wafted into the room. Fresh food. Rion wondered who Chloe had spoken to in order to bring the meal to the table.

Grabbing a pair of pants, he headed for the bathroom. Although he and Annie had not had the chance to talk about rebuilding, he was anxious to bring up the prospect to her. Why not build from scratch instead of buying or renting a place in another tower? He was particularly interested in them going someplace different. Not leave the city entirely, but maybe find some land on the outskirts?

The stinging streams of hot water ran over his scalp and enormous dark gold wings, washing the bits of dirt and grime down the drain. He turned around to let the nearly scalding heat beat at his back, right where the bullet had left a pinkish scar. The pulsing movement of the water made him suck in his breath and grit his teeth against the pain, but in this instance, it was a good pain.

Pressing his hands to the shower wall, Rion lowered his head. He had been thinking long and hard about moving out of the apartment in the silver towers ever since he'd first brought Annie over to this world. The apartment where he and Vadon grew up had been his parents' home. And in his mind, it would always be his parents' home.

"Annie deserves a place of our own. Our own home where we can create our own memories," he commented to himself.

"What kind of memories did you have in mind?" a voice behind him inquired.

Rion whirled around to see Annie holding the shower door slightly open and grinning at him. Her eyes slowly roamed down his naked body, and he felt himself react to her scrutiny. As his erection swelled, she giggled.

"Come join me." He motioned for her.

She gave him another long look, adding a rueful grin. "You're tempting, but..."

Rion stared at her in surprise that she would actually decline his offer. "But what?"

"But I was wanting to ask a favor."

It didn't take much for Rion to guess what her favor was about. "Does this have to do with the man from your world?"

Her face reddened as she smiled and nodded. "Yes. Ian."

"His name is Ian?"

"Ian Davenport. Don't you remember me telling you? He's a pilot with the R.A.F. I mean Royal Air Force. Oh, Rion, he's going to catch me up with what's going on over on my world! Would you mind if I stayed a bit longer? I was thinking about having a trap take us down into the city so I could show him around. And he could tell me about England. Let me know everything about the war and all."

Rion gave his wife a puzzled look. "Why would you be concerned about the war over there?"

Annie frowned. "Why wouldn't I be?" Her tone was defensive, challenging. Rion tried to soothe her ruffled feathers.

"That war has nothing to do with us."

He realized after he'd said it, it had been the wrong thing to say. Annie's frown deepened and added a heated sparkle to her eyes.

"Pardon me, but *anything* that has to do with my world is important to me! And it affects me as well, too! Just because I don't live over there any more doesn't mean I'm supposed to dismiss what's happening. Besides, if it wasn't for that war, he wouldn't be here. And in case you forgot, mister, Kerr is half of me...somewhere. But he's half of me, and that means my world is his world, too! It's his heritage, and he has just as much a right to learn about it as he needs to learn about this one!"

She closed the door, putting an end to their argument. Rion opened it slightly, enough to watch her stomp out of the bathroom. Sighing, he finished his shower and dressed. By the time he walked into the living area, Vadon had arrived. His brother was playing with Kerr on the sofa. Rion glanced toward the kitchen and debated whether to apologize now, or wait until the two of them were alone in the bedroom.

"If you are looking for Annie, she left," Vadon offered, giving his brother a curious look.

"Left?"

"Yes. And she did not look happy."

It was an unspoken question, wondering if Rion and Annie had had another squabble. Rion gave a little shrug.

"She has left to visit with the newcomer."

"I am not surprised." Vadon stood and picked up Kerr to hand the baby over to his father. "Annie is starved for any word about her world. Having a visitor is just the medicine she needs right now."

"You are sounding more and more like your wife," Rion teased, but his smile was forced. Vadon gave him another questioning glance.

"Sometimes it takes someone looking in from a distance to see how much a person is happy...or hurting."

"I am not preventing Annie from going to the hospital to see the otherworlder," Rion snapped. Immediately he regretted his tone of voice. "Forgive me. I am..." He paused to find the right words, when Vadon laid a hand on his shoulder.

"No more. I call a truce through dinner. We can discuss it further afterwards."

Sitting around the dinner table and discussing the day's events managed to lull Rion into a more favorable frame of mind. Much of their conversation revolved around the clean-up and rebuilding.

"Most of the damage was done to the living areas," Vadon observed. "I overheard someone say there has to be at least eighteen thousand left completely homeless."

Chloe looked up from where she was wiping sauce off of Kerr's mouth. The toddler was shoving noodles into his mouth as fast as his chubby fist could manage the slippery food.

"The majority of injuries we have been seeing are the result of flying glass," she commented. "We had expected to see more contusions and broken bones."

Rion nodded. "Have you noticed that our older apartments are practically untouched?"

"You are talking about Joberia and Minet's place, right?" Vadon said.

"Exactly. The shorter, squattier buildings may not be as aesthetically appealing as the towers, but if they had not been here, I am certain the destruction and death toll would have been double," Rion commented. "Our forefathers may have been more intuitive than our later generations give them credit for."

The others agreed. "Hopefully the builders will take that into consideration during reconstruction," Vadon hoped.

Steeling himself for the inevitable, Rion turned to Chloe. "About the new outworlder..."

"Ian."

He nodded. "How is he doing?"

"He is doing well," Chloe hesitantly replied. Rion knew he couldn't press her for details, as it would be against her credo as a physician.

"I bet he was happy to see Annie."

"Of course. She is someone like him."

"You mean wingless?" Rion smiled.

Chloe returned the smile. "That, and the fact that they both hail from the same world...although from different parts of it, I would guess. He speaks with a different accent."

"Young?"

This time he got a piercing stare from his sister-in-vows. "Young. Very handsome. The kind of man who takes chances because he must. In a lot of ways, he is a lot like you, Rion."

Rion gave a nonchalant nod and took a drink. He knew both Vadon and Chloe were closely watching him, and not just because of his health. A few more moments passed in silence before Chloe announced she was going to take Kerr into the bathroom and give him a good washing. Vadon clapped his brother on the shoulder. "Why not help me with the dishes while Chloe takes care of Kerr? When we are done, I have something to show you."

"Show me what?"

"Patience," Vadon grinned. "Now, do you want to wash or dry?"

Chapter 12

The War

Something about Wing Commander Ian Davenport sent shivers through her, but Annie was at a loss to understand why. They weren't shivers of trepidation. Just the opposite. He was like the unapproachable hero who had stepped out of the silver screen and walked up to her. He was the Christmas gift she had been allowed to open before anyone else.

More than anything, he represented *home*. Her birth home. Her Earth.

Of course, the fact that he was panty-melting handsome *and* he had that irresistible English accent had to count for something, right?

Annie knew she'd been suffering from homesickness. She had expected to, considering the vast differences between Parra and Earth. Maybe that was one reason why she shied away from making any close friendships on this world...not that she'd made a whole lot back in Ohio or Montana.

The trap bumped slightly as it was set upon the landing platform. Crawling out of the tiny compartment, she smiled and thanked the two carriers, who thanked her back. Their jobs were among the few who remained in demand after the disaster. If Rion had not permanently hired a trap to always be at her disposal, Annie doubted she would have been able to get to the hospital this quickly.

She hurried through the entrance, returning the smiles and greetings of those who wished her a good day. The other physicians and assistants knew of her, although she did not know many of them personally in return. Part of that was because of her uniqueness among them. Part was because of the fact that Rion was Grand Lord of Thunder among the elite group of rift runners. And part had to do with her recent history after Rion brought her over.

All in the past. She was well and happy—

No. Not entirely happy. And to say differently would be a lie. But things were definitely looking up now.

Annie paused in the hallway before the door to Ian's room. In the few short hours since she'd met him, she felt as if she'd regained a part of herself. A part she had thought she'd left behind on Earth. That part of her humanity which made her an Earth woman.

Her sense of self.

Smiling, she gave a little knock on the door. A muffled voice gave her permission to enter, and she walked in to see Ian busy eating. His expression lit up when he caught sight of her.

"Well, 'ello, pretty lady!" The accent was thicker than usual. Annie suspected it was done on purpose as she giggled.

"I caught you in the middle of your dinner. I'm sorry," she started to apologize when Ian waved it off.

"Madam, I don't care if I'm dead asleep. If you come to visit, I want to be awakened immediately! To what do I owe the honor of today's visit?"

He started to put away his tray. Annie stopped him. "If you stop eating just because I show up, the physicians will be miffed at me, and future visits will be monitored. Go ahead and finish your meal and I'll chitchat. Deal?"

"A plausible solution, my dear, however..." He glanced down at his tray. "Would you happen to know *what* I am eating?"

"If I told you, you still wouldn't know," Annie teased.

"I figured as much. Any chance I could order a bit of mutton or braised beef in the future?"

Annie shook her head. "As far as I know, there's no meat on this world, although I've eaten some vegetables that could almost pass for chicken."

Ian gave her a comically sad face. "Pity. This world's bereft of the glory of Beef Wellington, or even a decent shepherd's pie. So, tell me, madam, to what do I owe this visit?"

"Huh? Oh! Sorry. Actually, you asked me to come back, and I did promise. Remember?"

"Quite. And I'm delighted you did. I was on the verge of dying of boredom when mealtime arrived. You just became dessert."

He flashed her a smile of gratitude, which made her blush all the way up to her hairline. To cover her embarrassment, Annie walked over to where the single chair sat on the other side of the room, and dragged it over to the bed. Once she sat, she was even with the man sitting up in his bed.

"Since I'm the one partaking, maybe this would be a good time to tell me more about this brave new world," he suggested before taking another bite.

Annie took a deep breath as she gathered her thoughts. "Oh, gee whiz. There's so much to tell you about this place."

"Do you like it here?"

She looked up to see him intently watching her reaction. "Yes, I do."

"Even with those horrific storms?"

"The tosis don't appear that often," she told him. "We usually get enough warning to seek shelter. Unfortunately, this one happened to be the granddaddy of them all."

Ian wiped his mouth as he nodded. But before he could reply, the dull rumble of thunder vibrated through the walls. "Appears to me the storms aren't quite over," he observed ironically.

"Rion says those are like the aftershocks from an earthquake. They'll disappear after another day or so."

"Your husband Rion told you this?"

"Yes. Of course. Why?" Annie scrutinized the Englishman. "I believe him."

Ian hurried to correct himself. "I didn't mean he was wrong. Forgive me. I was making sure there wasn't another Rion."

Annie quickly smiled. "That's something else I like about this world. No one is allowed to take another person's name. That way you never get confused about who you're talking about."

He stared at her in disbelief. "Ever?"

"Nope. Never."

"Even if the bloke is dead?"

"The Hall of History keeps records of all names. Whenever a couple prepare to have a child, they have the records checked first to see if a particular name they want to name their baby has already been taken. If it hasn't, they register the name."

"That may sound all well and good, but what if they plan for a boy and end up with a girl?" Ian grinned.

Annie replied with a shake of her head. "They know beforehand if they're having a boy or girl when they go to the registry."

He gave a bark of laughter. "Ahh, now I know you're jesting with me."

Ian's comment made her laugh softly. "Trust me, Ian. There isn't a thing here that surprises me anymore. Oh, I admit I was a Doubting Thomas like you when I first arrived. You've felt what the physicians here can do. Do you really think I'm pulling your leg?"

Ian laughed again, this time heartily. "No. I know you wouldn't lie to me. But you must admit that there are plenty of circumstances to adjust to. This world, the two suns, the people..." He dipped his utensil in the remains of his meal for emphasis. "The food." Giving her a scrutinizing look, the airman asked, "What has been the most difficult thing for you to accustom yourself to, Annie?"

She didn't have to think twice about her answer.

"Being loved."

Ian's reaction was not what she expected. "Pardon me? Being loved?"

"Yeah." The heat was rising again in her face, but there was no way to stop it. Besides, she had no reason to lie. "It's a long story. To be very honest, Ian, other than the fact that I miss Earth, there's no one back there I would go home for."

"Not for family or friends?"

"No," she softly admitted, gazing down at where her hands were clasped in her lap. "No one cared about me. Not me as a person, anyway. Oh, if I didn't do my chores, or did what was expected of me, I certainly got punished for it. Or yelled at. They noticed me then. But when I did good...well, no one cared. I mean, no one cared enough to give me a pat on the back, or tell me 'job well done'. That's one of the reasons I left my family farm as soon as I was able."

"Let me guess. You ran away to marry your first husband?" Ian surmised.

Annie nodded.

"Yet it was Rion who finally gave you the love you deserved?"

There was an odd sound in his voice. It wasn't anger or surprise. In fact, it wasn't anything she could put her finger on. Annie shrugged it off.

"Yes. He treated me in a way I'd never known. He showed me what it was like to be in love...and to be loved. Truly loved." She started to say more, to let him know how much her life changed even before Rion brought her over to his world. However, a quick glance at the funny look on his face made her realize the man either wasn't interested in her life story, or he simply didn't understand the enormity of her confession. Annie pressed her lips together for another moment. "Tell me about the war."

Ian was taken aback by her sudden change in topic. Yet, like a true gentleman, he accepted her decision without further questioning.

"Where shall I begin?"

He was finished with his tray. Pushing it to the foot of the bed, he swung his legs over the side and scooted forward until his feet touched the floor.

"Do you think it would be possible for us to walk the hallway, Annie?"

She stood and reached to take his arm. "I'm sure there wouldn't be any harm in getting a little exercise. I would imagine you have a bit of cabin fever."

"You have no idea." Ian chuckled and gave a tug on the back of his tunic. "Am I decent?"

Laughing, Annie assured him the simple top and pants would not offend. They left the room and started down the hallway, heading in the direction of the entrance, although Annie knew Ian wouldn't be aware of the fact until they got there. Every so often someone passed them but didn't try to stop their progress. She also noticed how Ian tried not to lean too heavily on her.

"Mmm. The war. At the time I was, uhh, diverted, things weren't looking too happy for the Allies. Hitler's army was routing..." He paused and gave her an apologetic grin. "Do you really want to hear the details?"

Annie shook her head. Her arm was now linked through his as they slowly strolled barefoot through the hospital. It was a strong arm, not as heavily muscled as her husband's, but a nice one, nonetheless.

"It doesn't really matter, does it? Rion was right. The war doesn't affect us."

"The less you know, the better, I say. It's a bloody horror story over there."

"How did you end up here, Ian? Why were you in that plane in the first place?"

"Ah. Right. What led up to my being here?"

"Were you in a battle?"

"Sadly, no." Ian chuckled. "I wish I could say I was, to make me appear more heroic in your eyes, my dear Annie. But the truth is I was in the middle of training a squadron from the Netherlands East Indies Air Force. The Finnish government had recently acquired a full fleet of Gladiators from us, and I had been ordered to help school their pilots on how to fly them."

"What are Gladiators?"

"That's the name of the model of my plane. A Gloster Gladiator. I had formerly been attached to the 94th squadron that was stationed in the Sudan..." He suddenly broke off then gave a soft laugh. "Begging your forgiveness, madam. One part of me is shouting rules and regs about divulging confidential information, while the other is telling me it doesn't matter anymore." He started to say more when his expression changed to surprise. She understood why. "God's gravy! Where are we?"

They had arrived at the immense entry leading out to the landing area on that floor of the hospital. Annie silently admitted to herself that she never tired of watching people landing and taking off with huge sweeps of their beautiful wings.

"We're at the fourth floor landing bay."

Ian frowned slightly. "Landing bay? Look at them! Dear God!" His obvious delight made her laugh.

"Let's move over here so we're not in the way," she suggested as a physician angel brushed past them with an "excuse me". They took a stance near the wall, directly out of the line of traffic.

Another minute or two ticked by as they silently watched the activity. At one point, two angels landed carrying a third in a sling between them. Before they reached the corridor leading into the hospital, the physician angel who had passed Annie had his hands on the unfortunate soul. Together, the foursome disappeared back down the hallway.

“From the storm?” Ian asked softly.

“Yeah. He was one of the lucky ones.”

“Let me go out on a limb here and say there are no cars on this world, correct?”

“No. No cars. No wagons or horses. Everyone provides their own transportation,” Annie told him. Seeing his gaze rake over her shoulders, she smiled, having already anticipated his next question. “For people like me and you, there are traps. They’re like little carriages you can hire to take you places.”

“For people like you and me?” Ian reemphasized.

“And for others who are too old or too ill to fly on their own.”

“You said we were on the fourth floor? Are there stairs leading up and down inside for people like you and me?”

“Of sorts. But mostly everyone goes from one floor to the other this way.”

He stared a moment longer at the activity. “Reminds me of a bloody birdhouse!”

At the remark, Annie burst out laughing.

Chapter 13

The Others

Rion eased down on the sofa as Chloe helped divest him of his tunic. As soon as her cool hands touched the ragged scar, he could feel warmth melting away the persistent pain. A deep groan vibrated in his chest before he was aware of it.

"Have you been putting up with this kind of misery for long?" the woman physician inquired. Rion heard the edge of intolerance in her voice, knowing it wasn't the first nor the last time he would hear it.

"It is almost a constant thing," he admitted, steeling himself for her righteous anger.

"And yet you do not seek any relief? Why, Rion? No. Forget I asked," Chloe immediately backtracked. "One of these days you will finally come to realize that, by letting your pain remain, you are debilitating yourself. And when that day comes, it may be too late to save yourself...or those you love who may need you."

He groaned again as a flash of heat probed deeply into the scarred muscle tissue.

"Good pain?"

"Yes," he managed to mutter as he pressed the side of his face into the sofa cushion.

"If it is any consolation, I can tell you have been telling me the truth. You have not worked your wings in any way."

"I cannot afford to lose the power of flight," he grouched at the woman. He earned a soft chuckle in return. "How are they?"

"No change, but that is the good news."

Rion tried to peer over his shoulder at her, and failed. "What is the bad news?"

"There's no change. I need for you to sit up."

He obeyed as Chloe crawled over the sofa to kneel behind him. She worked on his shoulders, threading her healing power down through the tissue until she reached his shoulder blades.

"I need to pulse that wound you sustained," she told him. "Normally, I would put you to sleep before attempting it, but Vadon said you two need to talk."

"Go ahead and pulse me."

He felt her hands pause. "No."

"Chloe—"

"No, Rion. Remember me telling you how debilitating pain can be? This would do that to you, and although I have no doubt you would be able to suffer through it, it would leave you weak and dizzy. No. I will wait until you are ready to go to bed."

Her hands lifted away, and he turned to see her step back onto the floor. He started to say more when she turned and walked over to the doorway.

"Tell Vadon I will be over at the hospital to see if there have been any emergencies that need an extra attendant. I should not be gone long, but just in case..."

Rion nodded. "Thank you, Chloe, for everything."

She gave him a weary smile, and for once Rion realized how much working on him had tired her out. "It is I who should be thanking you," she replied enigmatically, then turned and slipped through the makeshift doors.

He was pulling his tunic back on when Vadon emerged from the back with a naked, squirming Kerr in his arms.

"Chloe left to check in at the hospital," Rion informed his brother.

"Yes. She told me she might leave. There has been an influx of freshly wounded coming in from the afterstorms." Laying the toddler on the floor in front of his father, Vadon said, "Here. I cleaned him up. You can entertain him. I will be right back."

While Vadon disappeared back into the rear of the apartment, Rion played with his son, tickling the bottoms of the baby's feet with Kerr's own feather tips. Amid the coos and giggles, Rion remembered a comment Annie had thrown at him before stomping out of the bathroom.

Kerr is half of me...somewhere. But he's half of me, and that means my world is his world, too! It's his heritage, and he has just as much a right to learn about it as he needs to learn about this one!

Rion grimaced at the memory. Annie was right, as she usually was whenever she got angry at him. He knew his wife never made waves, never challenged anyone unless she was provoked or one hundred percent certain about what she was talking about.

A noise behind him drew him back to the present. Vadon re-entered the room. A glance at the satchel his brother was carrying instantly perked up Rion's spirits.

Seeing Rion's reaction, Vadon laughed and dumped the load of scrolls on the sofa between them. "What? Did you think I would not have protected these as well as your wife and son?"

Giving Kerr the empty satchel to play with, Rion began searching for the scroll tagged with the earliest date. Vadon found it first and handed it over. "Are we looking for anything in particular?" he asked as Rion untied and unrolled the copied ledger.

"Basically everything. I need to know how long they were over here, how they died, and any problems or complications," Rion told him.

"Very well. I will take the second outworlder. Did the Lordess say there had been only four before Annie?"

"Yes. Four."

The next few minutes passed in near silence as both men read through the short documentations. At their feet, Kerr babbled baby talk as he happily gnawed on the straps.

"Vadon, listen to this. The first recorded outworlder was named Roberta. She was brought here by Broughton, Lord of the third House of Thunder."

"Third House? That would be...uhh..."

"Joston's House," Rion supplied.

"Huh. Does Joston know his House was the first to bring over an outworlder?" Vadon wondered.

"Maybe. Maybe not."

"He could have some information not supplied in the scrolls," Vadon suggested.

Rion agreed. "I will ask him later."

"When did it occur?"

Rion checked the date on the scroll and did a quick mental tabulation. "Nearly sixteen hundred master cycles ago."

Vadon gasped. "What happened to her? Did she have any children?"

"It says here that she fell from her apartment and died from her injuries. The scroll notes it was a very windy day." Rion paused for a moment then continued. "She was twenty-two." He paused to scrutinize the tiny handwriting. "As far as I can tell, she did not have any children. There is no mention of any, so I will assume there were none."

"Does it say how long she was here?"

"Sixteen moon cycles."

Vadon shook his head. "Does it say anything else? Any mention of pining for her home world?"

"No." Rion rolled up the scroll and retied it. Nodding at the document in his brother's hands, he asked, "What have you found in that one?"

"First of all, this one is dated nine hundred master cycles ago. Koynon from the eighth House of Thunder brought over a woman named Eva. She remained for a total of seventy-three days before petitioning to be returned to Earth. However, when she hit the barrier at the rift, she suffered a seizure and died before making it over. There are...there are numerous entries regarding her deteriorating state of mental health. She was not happy."

Rion gave a little growl of frustration. "The eighth House hasn't existed for hundreds of master cycles."

"Most likely because of what happened to the otherworlder," Vadon commented. "I will also bet that her death is what brought about the decree that otherworlders could not be returned to Earth."

"You are probably correct," Rion said, picking up the next scroll. He unrolled it, and his eyes automatically dropped to the bottom to find the cause of death. What he found surprised him. "Vadon!"

"What?"

Instead of answering, he went back to the top to start reading. "This one...it was...six hundred twenty master cycles ago. Mary, brought over by Proctoran, of the seventeenth House of Thunder. Vadon, she died when she was...seventy-

four!”

“What?” Dropping his scroll, Vadon leaned over to read along with his brother. “How old was she when she was brought over?”

“Hold on. Let me see. Twenty. She was twenty.” Rion turned to give his brother a look of complete shock. “Vadon, she survived here for more than fifty master cycles!”

“Keep reading! What else does it say?”

Rion tried to still his shaking hands, but they insisted on keeping pace with his frantic heartbeat. An otherworlder who had survived? And for an extraordinary length of time! Why hadn’t he been told this information sooner? Surely the Lords of the House of History knew about this woman!

“How did she die? Of old age?” Vadon persisted.

“Hold on!” Rion growled. “This writing is difficult to decipher.”

“Do not blame the penmanship when your hands are shaking like you have palsy,” Vadon countered, then added a sympathetic grin.

Rion forced himself to focus on the ancient language written in tiny, cramped script. “It says Mary was tended by Geel and Fomillath, of the sixteenth and thirtieth Houses of Healing. She often spoke of her home world, but she never requested to go back. She had...she had two daughters and a son.”

“Any of them wingless?”

“It does not state.” Blinking, Rion turned the scroll to get more light from the wall. “Hmm.”

Vadon socked his brother lightly on the shoulder. “I know that ‘hmm’. What did you find that stumps you, as Annie would say?”

“It says she flew.”

“Mary?”

“Yes. But what is odd, the reference is listed under prognosis.” Rion knitted his brow in thought. “How would flying be considered a possible answer or cure?”

“You often take Annie flying...or you used to until recently. She loves the experience, right?”

“She finds it exhilarating,” Rion admitted. “It brings her immeasurable joy when we fly off together.” Sighing, he added, “That is why I must heal, so I can continue to take her sightseeing. In all ways, her happiness is mine, and I love the way she glows when she is content.” He glanced at the remaining scroll. “Is there good news about the fourth otherworlder?”

Vadon scrambled to unroll the document. “Uhh...Gwendolyn, Lord Obaya of the eighteenth House of Thunder...umm, no. She was thirty-one, the oldest brought over. She lived less than three master cycles. She died by accident.”

“How?”

“She mistakenly ate brackel berries. She died of brackel poisoning before the end of the day.”

“Is there any mention of children?”

“No. No mention.”

“What about homesickness?”

Vadon scanned the ledger to the end. “No mention of that, either. But this otherworlder seemed to be beset with many problems. Many physical illnesses. A physician noted she was prone to be allergic to many things.” Glancing back at the scroll Rion still held, he asked, “Who is Lord of the seventeenth House of Thunder? Just think! They have outworlder blood in their veins!”

Rion felt his hands grow cold, and the skin around his face tighten as the realization struck him. “I cannot inquire further about this Mary. Not at this time,” he informed his brother in a soft voice.

“Why not?”

“The Lord of the seventeenth House of Thunder...was Callumed.”

Vadon gasped. “Has his body been found?”

“No, not yet. But his family formally declared him dead as of this morning. They have scheduled his memorial service to be held in three days.”

Chapter 14

The Desire

“Do these people celebrate any holidays?”

“Oh, yeah.” Annie nodded. “Not the ones we celebrate, but they have their own. The biggest is the Festival of Life. Why do you ask?”

They had opted to stay in the landing bay. There was too much going on to leave, so they had found an out-of-the-way spot where they could sit and talk while still observing the hustle and bustle.

Ian pointed to the wide platform extending outside the hospital. As nighttime approached, a cold breeze occasionally made its way inside. They would not be able to stay put much longer.

“Back home, it’s almost Christmas.”

“Oh! Christmas!” The sound of longing was undeniable in her voice. Ian turned to see tears welling in her lovely eyes. “Oh, God, Christmas is my favorite time of year!”

It was amazing how thick and black her lashes were, without any makeup or other enhancements. Why did women on Earth feel that they had to pack their faces with pancake, and cover their real beauty? As usual, it was a struggle to keep his mind on the subject.

He had almost made a fool of himself when she’d linked arms with him. The simple brush of her breast against his arm had nearly been his undoing. He had not been prepared for the shock of discovering that she wore no brassiere, and that the gentle give of warm flesh had been all her.

Even now, the memory of her touch heated the blood in his groin.

“Can you imagine how this world would look with candles in the windows?” he asked, hoping his voice wouldn’t betray his thoughts. “A wreath of holly on the doors?” His grin widened. “A sprig of mistletoe hung in a most convenient spot?”

Annie had already snuggled closer to him, much to his delight. The longer they talked, the more comfortable she became around him. Unfortunately, her womanly scent was filling his nostrils, making her presence a growing concern for his peace of mind.

“They already use candles in their windows. You’ll see. This world is big on torches and lanterns.”

“No electric lights?” He glanced at the luminescence coming from the wall behind them. Annie noticed where he was focused.

“Nope. No electricity. Everything is powered by the two suns. Don’t ask me how they do it, but that’s where they get all their light and heat.” Sighing wistfully, Annie admitted, “This world doesn’t get snow, although it gets quite cold sometimes. At first I didn’t miss the mountains of snow after leaving Montana. But it wouldn’t really feel like Christmas without it, don’t you agree?”

Nodding, Ian added, “Or a tree. They have trees here, don’t they?”

“Kind of. I remember stringing popcorn and cranberries with my brother and sister. We’d make ornaments out of paper cut to look like snowflakes. What about you?”

She paused and leaned back against the wall to rub along the slightly roughened surface. Ian watched her movements with amusement.

“Would you like for me to help you with that? I’m a pretty good back scratcher, if I do say so.”

“No. I’m fine. I have dry skin, and it’s been very scaly lately.” She gave him an embarrassed smile. “Sorry.”

“Not a problem. What were we discussing? Oh, yes. We decorate our trees with little candles and glass ornaments, but no one gets to see it until Christmas Eve. That’s when we light the yule log. Drink a toast with wassail. After dinner we’d have plum pudding...bundle up and go sing carols in the square. The next day would be Boxing Day.”

Annie giggled. “Boxing Day? You punch out people?”

“We Brits don’t open all our presents on Christmas morning. We trade presents the day after with friends and

neighbors.”

“Oh! So Boxing Day means gifts in boxes? That sort of thing?”

He smiled. “Of sorts.”

She rested her cheek on his shoulder. If he turned his head, he could almost bury his nose in her glorious hair. *Maybe sneak in a kiss to her crown.* The thought was tempting.

“Daddy used to take us sleigh riding. It was a big deal when he pulled that old sleigh out from the back of the barn where it was stored the rest of the year. We were the only family in Peersop County to have one. We’d clean it and wax the skids, and Daddy would harness Old Red to it, and we’d go to all our neighbors to deliver packages.”

“Mmm. Sounds like a tradition I would love to share,” Ian murmured.

God help him. It was getting more and more difficult to be the proper gentleman the longer he was with her. Not to mention his willie, which was swinging bigger and thicker than a cricket bat. Ian cursed himself as he recrossed his legs. She noticed his movement.

“It’s getting late. Maybe we should be heading back to your room,” Annie suggested.

“Bugger that. This is the first time I’m actually enjoying myself. Any idea when I’ll be able to leave this place?”

“Ask your physician. I’ll try to put a bug in Chloe’s ear next time I see her.”

“You ditzzy Yanks. A bug in her ear?” Ian chuckled.

As he expected, she blushed that pretty shade of pink that looked good on her. “Not a real bug.” She laughed, slapping him lightly, playfully on the arm. “I meant—”

“I know what you meant,” he assured her. “I was pulling your leg.”

Their combined laughter attracted the attention of several angels passing nearby.

“They must think we’re bonkers,” Ian suggested with a big grin.

“Oh! Before I forget, did I tell you I found a place for you to stay?”

“Really? This world has a hostelry?”

He loved the way she scrunched up her nose when she was confused. “A what?”

“An inn.”

“Oh! You mean a hotel! No, this world doesn’t have such places. At least, if it does, I haven’t been told.”

“Then where do visitors stay? You do have visitors, right? I mean, there are other cities on this world other than the one we’re in, aren’t there? And people come to visit? Take a holiday?”

“It goes back to their individual houses. Depending on the House they belong to, a family of that House offers up a spare room for the length of their stay,” Annie tried to explain. She started to say more when a runner approached them. “Hello, Mattieu!”

“Lady Annie.” The young man gave her a slight bow before turning to the man seated next to her. “You are Ian Davenport?”

“The one and only.”

“Physician Treer has requested you return to your room. It is time for your next treatment.”

“Blast!”

Laughing, Annie thanked the courier and got to her feet, offering a hand to help Ian up. He accepted her offer simply for the chance to touch her without guilt.

Standing face to face, the top of her head came up to his nose. *What wouldn’t I give to be able to close that short distance between us. No more than a slight bend at the waist, old boy, and you could taste Heaven.*

He stumbled slightly as he turned to follow her. Annie was instantly there, holding out her arms and hands to keep him from falling. It was so natural to put his arms around her and receive a hug from his wingless angel.

“Thank you, madam. Your attention is deeply appreciated,” he confessed once they parted.

“You’re welcome. It wasn’t too many months ago when I was in your shoes.” She smiled and took another half-step away to grab his arm. “Come on. Believe me when I say it’s not wise to keep a physician waiting.”

“Do tell. What do they do? Put a little cod liver oil in your tea for revenge?”

Annie burst out in another round of giggles, and Ian knew he would be dreaming tonight of these past few hours.

Dreaming, wishing, and cursing his fate.

Chapter 15

The Questioning

Sitting so long on the floor had stiffened him up. Ian tried not to limp as he and Annie headed back to his room, but it was unavoidable, as well as impossible to disguise.

Although he didn't want to admit it, he was glad to be going back to his bed. The time they had spent in the landing bay, as pleasant as it had been to talk, had not been a wise decision. Common sense told him he needed to take it easy so that he could heal quickly. But any time he could spend with Annie was worth the discomfort.

They turned the corner, into the corridor that ran outside his room. A few feet away they spotted the woman physician angel named Chloe. She was in conversation with a male he had never seen before. The man was tall and red-haired, well-muscled and young. His tunic and pants were dark gray. When the angels caught sight of Ian and Annie coming down the hall, he gave Chloe a quick pat on the shoulder, waved at Annie, and left in the opposite direction.

With a start, Ian realized that the man's wing color matched his hair color. The same was true for the physician Chloe. To further confirm his observation, he glanced back down the corridor where a dark-haired angel walking toward them sported identically colored wings.

Annie paused at the door. "Is everything all right?" she asked the woman.

Chloe smiled. "Everything is fine. In fact, Preath came to tell me that Loysan and his family are prepared to take our new visitor."

"That's great!" Annie gave Ian's arm a little shake. "You'll be staying with Loysan. He's a Lord of Thunder. They've offered their spare room for your stay." She guided him inside and helped him into bed. Chloe followed behind, closing the door behind them.

"Are you going to work on me?" Ian inquired of the physician.

"Lord Treer was called to help assist with an emergency. He asked if I would cover for him." She glanced back at where Annie stood to the side. "I left some dinner for you in the warmer."

"Thanks. Are the menfolk at home?"

"Yes, and babysitting Kerr. Are you heading back now?"

Annie nodded. "Yeah. I'm ready to call it a day. Ian?" She reached out and gave his arm a squeeze. "Thank you for the past couple of hours."

Had he been in London, he would have taken her hand and bowed over it. Perhaps even chanced a kiss on the back of it. It felt like a wiser decision to resist the impulse. "My humblest thanks to you, Lady Annie. Will you grace me with your presence again tomorrow?"

"You can count on it," she promised with a grin. Giving the woman angel a, "See you later!", Annie left the room. To Ian, it was as if she took all warmth and light with her.

A pair of hands came from behind and pressed down on his shoulders. Silently, Ian turned around and lay on his stomach.

"Did you have an interesting conversation with Annie?" the physician inquired.

"It was marvelous. She's a refreshing breath of air." Sneaking a peek at the woman working her way down his back, Ian decided to take the chance he'd been hesitant about taking. "People like me and Annie, we're quite a rarity here, wouldn't you agree?"

"As far as our history goes, you are only the sixth person to make it to our world."

Gentle soothing heat oozed slowly through his body—the sign of healing he easily recognized. Closing his eyes, Ian savored the angel's ministrations.

"It appears you and Annie are becoming fast friends."

A warning flag immediately popped up with her words. Maybe it was the tone of her voice. Or maybe he had been clued in from the slight difference in pressure where she was stroking him. Either way, Ian reminded himself that this

woman was Annie's sister-in-law. *Careful, old boy. Best be on your guard.*

"If it weren't for her, I would have feared for my sanity," he admitted without looking at her.

"I can understand, although I cannot say I have experienced what you have firsthand. I know that Rion and the other Lords of Thunder must deal with the differences between our world and yours on a regular basis, but they have been trained for it. If I personally had to face surviving on an alien world, I doubt I would be as successful as you and Annie have been." She rubbed against the small of his back. "Your internal injuries have completely healed, but you still need additional rest. Your musculature is too lax."

"More bed rest. Yes, madam."

She moved down to the backs of his legs, and concentrated on his thighs and calves. Ian felt this was the time to probe a bit further.

"You said your husband and Annie's husband are brothers, correct?"

"Yes."

"And they're both Lords of Thunder?"

"No. Only the firstborn of each house is designated as the Lord of the House of Thunder. Vadon is the second born son, making him the Under Lord."

All right, Ian could understand that. "What does he do, then? What sort of job does an Under Lord do?"

"He is a messenger. His job is to help the Lords of Thunder as they depart and reenter the rifts between our worlds."

"Help? As in how?"

"Sometimes when a Lord of Thunder returns from your world, he is in need of immediate medical attention. Or he may have news of great importance that needs to go immediately to the Council." She paused briefly as she switched to Ian's other leg. "It depends on what is needed or what the Lord of Thunder requires. How did you get this scar? It looks like a burn."

"Ah. Good eye. I got too close to a gas heater when I was twelve. Burned my pants leg clean off. Nearly took my leg with it."

"Would you like for me to get rid of it?"

This time Ian glanced back over his shoulder at her. "Can you do that?"

The woman smiled gently. "Would I offer otherwise?"

He gave a bark of laughter. "You are one smart duck. Bully for you, and shame on me. No. Let it stay. It gives the ladies something to 'ooh' and 'ahh' over because they think it's the result of a battle wound."

"And I would hazard to guess you do not care to tell them any differently." Chloe laughed. "Well, Ian Davenport, I have wonderful news to impart." She walked around to the foot of the bed and waited for him to roll over and face her.

"You're letting me go?"

She nodded, smiling. "Tomorrow. You will be escorted to a trap, which will take you to Lord Loysan's home."

"Will Annie be there?"

"Umm, she might. Or she may accompany you there. I have not asked her. Look..." Again the woman angel paused, making Ian believe she was trying to find the right words before continuing. "Ian...I have a couple of things I want to say to you, and I hope you do not take what I am about to impart the wrong way."

Rather than respond, he gave her his best you-have-my-full-attention face.

"Before you came, Annie was suffering from homesickness. In fact, it was so bad, it was almost debilitating."

"I can understand. This world is...nothing like Earth."

"Your arrival has made a vast difference in her mental attitude."

"For the good, I hope." Ian grinned. Chloe returned the smile.

"It has. Very much. And because you have helped her in ways I and my powers could not, you have my utmost gratitude."

"Glad I could help. I might add her being here has helped me, as well."

"I know." Chloe nodded. "That is why we asked her to be with you when you first awoke, to help soften the shock when you learned the truth."

Good news, bad news. Ian knew the woman had brought forth the compliment first to help take the sting out of the dressing down, whatever it might be.

"All right. Enough of the sweet cream. You said you had a couple of things to say. What was the other?"

"I am worried for *your* mental health, Ian."

"Mine? What the hell for?"

She pressed her lips together. "I fear you may become too dependent upon Annie."

Too dependent?

"Dependent in what way?" *Careful, old chap. Watch the tone of voice, and never forget where you are, or who you're talking to.*

"You do know that you can never go back to your world, right?" Chloe gently inquired.

"Who says?"

"It is not who says. It is the simple truth. Those who come over are not able to return."

"Did Annie know this when she was brought over?"

"Yes."

Ian mulled over that fact, when another thought struck him.

"But she didn't come over in an *airplane*, did she?"

"No. Rion flew her over."

"So what you're telling me is that, as far as you know, if I managed to get my plane flying again, it might be possible, right? Which reminds me...where is my plane?"

"It was moved to a containment area for safekeeping," she told him.

This was why he wasn't being released today. He had been bombarded with the reality of this world, and all it entailed, and carefully monitored to make sure his mental health remained intact. But there had been one last issue to pass along, and that was the very real possibility that he would have to remain here for the rest of his life. Chloe had been tapped to deliver that message, and to watch to see how he would take the news.

The only problem was it wasn't the thought of spending the next fifty, sixty, or seventy more years on this strange world that bothered him. It was spending it here with Annie. Or without Annie, as it were.

"When can I see my plane?" he asked. A plan was forming in his mind. Vague and wispier than fog, nevertheless it was gradually becoming more cohesive as he grappled with the idea.

"Tomorrow," Chloe said. "We will let Lord Loysan know of your request. Ian, what are you planning to do?"

He shot her a determined look. "What do you think, love? I plan to repair my plane to where it might take me back through that bloody rift."

Her mouth nearly dropped open with surprise. "How? We do not have the parts to repair it, or even the capability to help you repair it."

"Don't worry, madam," Ian replied. "That's my problem, not yours."

Chapter 16

The Warning

Rion watched as Chloe approached the house. He could tell by her wing beats she was tired. It was late, not long after second sunset, and almost dark.

The jury-rigged landing platform was strong enough for taking off and landing, but he feared it wouldn't hold someone his size for very long. And since he didn't have any idea when she would be home, he had chosen to sit on the lip of the doorway instead.

Her feet touched down in the middle of the platform since there was no longer any roof sheltering it. From the look on her face, Rion knew she had spotted him long before her arrival.

"Vadon has already retired for the night," he told her before she could ask.

Chloe nodded. "I take it Annie is also asleep?"

"She is trying to put Kerr to sleep."

The woman physician nodded, walking over to where Rion was sitting and sat down next to him. "Enjoying the sunset? Or waiting for me?"

Rion gave her a mock growl. "You are too damned intuitive. Must be the healer in you."

"Or maybe you wear your emotions on the front of your tunic, Rion," Chloe softly rebuked. "When it comes to matters of the heart, you do not have the ability to hide them or disguise them. Neither can Vadon, and that is what makes me love you both all the more. Now, what is so important you had to wait out here for me, rather than inside? Wait!" she hurried to keep him from answering. "Wait. I think I know. You want to talk to me in private where Annie cannot overhear us, am I correct?"

"Am I that transparent?" he grouched.

Chloe laughed softly and patted his arm. "Only to people who truly know you, Rion. If you had been in pain, it would have shown on your face. The rest was pure guesswork. Now, allow me one more trick. You are wanting to talk about Ian Davenport, correct again?"

"It is all Annie talks about now. When she came home tonight, she kept chattering on and on about Christmas and holidays, and what Ian used to do during the holiday. And what she used to do. And how much alike they were, even though they were from different countries. I..." Taking a deep breath, Rion let it out in one loud sigh. After pausing a moment, he continued in a more restrained tone of voice.

"Back in Montana we shared a Christmas together. It is a festival as widely and joyfully celebrated as our own Festival of Life. Annie and I went into the woods and cut down a tree. Not just any tree, mind you, but she was determined it had to be a pine tree, as I recall. We dragged it home where I nailed a stand into the bottom of the trunk so it could sit upright inside our cabin. She made popcorn and strung it on thread to wrap around the tree. She also took scraps of material and made little stars and figures out of it to hang on the tree as well. She was...she was...her mood was contagious. I had never seen her so full of life and joy and happiness. She made gifts and wrapped them in paper, and added bows, and she took them to the Funderburkes to share."

"They were the elderly couple?" Chloe asked to clarify.

Rion nodded. "Yes. Very good people. Dear friends. They were our neighbors. When she got back, she brought with her a box of chocolate bars." The memory made him smile. "It is a delicacy on her world. Chocolate. It was...a very wonderful gift."

A gift in more ways than he could explain, or even want to tell her. How could he explain the rich, sweet texture of the chocolate when Annie melted some in a mug of warm milk, and thus introduced him to his first taste of hot cocoa? Or later, when they lay by the fire, when he took a piece of chocolate that was melting between his fingers and smeared it across her belly. Annie's shrieks of laughter filled the small cabin as he slowly licked off the treat then afterward rubbed the rest of the bar across her breasts.

We were happiest in that little isolated log home. Alone together, learning how to love and how to receive love. How to show love. Discovering each other, and relishing their differences as well as their likenesses.

A small, pale hand reached over and took one of his, lacing her fingers through his. “Your memories of Earth seem to have left you with as much nostalgia as they do for Annie.”

“I can understand her need to see her world again, Chloe. In fact, if there was any way possible...I would not hesitate to take her there myself and spend the rest of my days on Earth. She was right about one thing. Kerr deserves to learn about her world. He is half Annie, after all.”

A moment of quiet passed. In the distance, lights began to glow as lanterns were lit against the deepening twilight. Rion spotted an angel above the horizon, traveling with the required torch to light his way. He got the sudden urge to stand and stretch his wings as high and as wide as he could, but in the next heartbeat he put that thought behind him. Until Chloe or another physician gave him clearance to fly, Rion knew he had to fight the impulse. Fight it and conquer it. Or else the result could be permanent disability, and that was one finality Rion knew he could never live with.

One day I will fly with you again in your harness, close to my body, next to my heart, my Annie. This I swear.

“Did you and Vadon get a chance to read the scrolls?”

“Yes.” He straightened, grateful for the change of topic, and flashed her a smile.

“Can I assume that smile means you found some helpful information?”

“It depends on what you would consider helpful.” He dragged a hand through his shoulder-length hair. “There were four otherworlders before Annie.”

“You already knew that.”

“Yes. Three of them did not live very long.”

“Three? What about the fourth?”

“Welllll, that is where the scrolls become...confusing,” Rion admitted.

Chloe lightly laughed. “I had to read some of the old scrolls during my training before I became a physician. Confusing is not how I would describe them.”

“The scroll said the woman lived more than sixty master cycles and bore three children.”

“Three? Oh, Rion! That is marvelous! Which House of Thunder?”

His face fell. “The seventeenth House. Lord Callumed’s.”

The news also soured Chloe’s joy. “Oh. That is so sad. And Lord Callumed was not married. Does he have family?”

“Yes, but I am not going to question them about their history. Not at this time. Later, after the memorial service.”

They lapsed into personal introspection as the stars began to dust the night sky.

“I am glad we have this moment to talk,” Chloe whispered. “There is something that happened this afternoon I feel you must know...in case someone tries to tell you second or thirdhand.”

He gave her his full attention.

“Annie and Ian walked to the fifth floor landing bay, and stayed there for a long time. They sat near the entrance so many, many people saw and overheard them.”

Rion watched as Chloe braced herself, licking her lips before proceeding. “They talked and laughed...a lot. They sat close together as they conversed. Rion, I will not swear on this, but it would not be hard to confirm. But I honestly believe Ian Davenport has fallen in love with our Annie.”

In the near dark, Rion could feel his face tighten. The blood rushed out of his heart to pool in the middle of his stomach where it turned acidic.

“Annie...do you think Annie also—”

“No,” Chloe hurried to reassure him, squeezing his hand. “No. Annie does not reciprocate his affections.”

“Are you *certain*?” Rion asked. “You are not a Dreamer. You have not been trained to read her emotions. How can you be certain she does not have...that she does not reciprocate...” He couldn’t finish his question. It was becoming too damn painful to think there was the possibility.

“There is more I need to tell you, Rion, but first you must promise me one thing. Give me your oath as a Lord of Thunder you will not challenge the otherworlder, or else I will get up and go inside.” Her voice was resolute, yet Rion could hear her own concern.

“You have it.”

“Ian told me he plans to repair his plane and fly back to Earth through the rift. I got the impression he might ask Annie to go with him.”

Shock vibrated through him. It was another minute before he could respond. “Will she? I mean, do you believe Annie would take up his offer? Oh, Chloe...what if she wants to go back? What if she wants to go with him?”

“I do not know if she would or wants to. Furthermore, I refuse to think about it. But I warned you that Annie’s homesickness might be deeper and more far-reaching than we knew.”

Getting to her feet, Chloe turned and faced her brother-in-vows, and placed both hands over his. “I do know one thing, though. Annie’s love for you is absolute. Neither would she leave Kerr behind if Ian Davenport should ask her to accompany him. There is no way she would desert you or your son.”

“I must s-speak to Annie about this,” he almost choked.

“Yes, you must. Remember, Rion, when you do, listen to her reply. Listen to what she tells you. Do not argue, do not plead, and above all, do not threaten. *Listen* to her. Then let your heart and your love for her guide your actions and answers.”

“I must also speak with this Ian Davenport.”

Chloe dropped his hands and straightened. “At some point, yes, you must. When you do, Rion, remember also your oath to me. And your oath to Annie.”

He glanced up at her, at the slender figure now a shadow standing before him. “What oath did I make to Annie?”

“Have you already forgotten? ‘Forever, as long as we both shall live. May nothing keep us apart.’”

She quoted part of his marriage vows, throwing the words back at him. Reminding him that he and Annie had already faced many attempts to divide them and permanently separate them. But every attempt had been unsuccessful. In the end, Rion and Annie had grown closer together, and their love had become stronger. Always.

Ian Davenport was simply another hurdle, another obstacle in their path. As long as Rion viewed the man in that manner, rather than as another contender for Annie’s love, he had to believe their love would continue to survive.

Nodding, Rion got to his feet and followed Chloe into the house.

Chapter 17

The Dream

"Take me with you."

Ian turned to see Annie standing not too far away from the tail rudder, but she wasn't staring at the plane. She was staring directly at him. The look in her eyes was one he had been waiting for, had been hoping and praying for.

"Ian..."

The plane was in sad shape where it sat inside a small three-sided building. The place looked like it may have had four walls at one time and held God knew what. But now it was merely a dilapidated building that leaned four degrees to one side. At least it had a roof, which was enough to help keep the worst of the weather off the Gladiator. Ian turned back to Annie. "It doesn't look good."

"I don't care! You'll get it working again. I know you will! You'll have it flying in no time, and when you do, I want you to take me with you!"

Suddenly she was in his arms, holding him, squeezing him so tightly, it hurt his bruised ribs. He didn't care, not when she was finally in his arms, where he could embrace her next to his heart where she belonged.

...where she belonged. God's truth. She belonged on Earth, with him. Not here among these strange yet beautiful people, with their unrecognizable food and complete lack of reasonable transportation.

Her face was nestled against his chest. Her warmth and womanly smell was like heady perfume drenching him from head to toe. When she turned to look up at him, it was to be his undoing, and he kissed her.

No lipstick, no artificial smells. There was absolutely nothing fake or made up when it came to Annie. Not even the way she kissed him back, although he knew there was more terror and excitement in the way her lips kissed him back than desire. Bugger that. She would soon enough.

She was breathing heavily when she broke away from his mouth. Emerald eyes pleaded up at him. "If only for a little while," she begged in that low voice. Immediately his willie stood at attention. Ian loosened his grip on her a minute amount. He had waited too long for the chance to put his arms around her. Now they were alone, finally and completely alone, where no one could see them. If he didn't take advantage of what could be his only opportunity, he'd have no one to blame but himself.

"How would you get back?"

"Rion would bring me back. He'd come and get me. He just won't take me. He refuses to."

"That bastard! Why not?"

"He doesn't want me to go back. He wants me to stay here."

His arms tightened around her. "That's bollocks! Never fear, Annie. Let me get my plane up and flying, and I'll take you with me. You'll get to see your own world again, and to hell with anyone who tries to stop me from taking you there!"

"I knew you would! Somehow I knew you would take me!"

His hand slid down her back until it rested on her buttocks. As he'd suspected, he met nothing but firm flesh beneath the thin material. No panties, no girdle, no artificialness.

He groaned as his dick expanded with a thunderous rush of blood. His head pounded, matching the steady pressure stretching the skin so taut over his rod, he fear bursting a blood vessel. Without realizing it, he rammed his erection against her belly. Before he could apologize, her arms slid down to his hips, and she began to grind herself against him.

"Take me, Ian. Take me."

Her full lips were red and glistening. Her hands were manipulating his butt cheeks while her hips provocatively swayed. She wasn't talking about a plane ride. Not this time.

It was a dream coming true.

Reaching under her knees, Ian hefted her into his arms and hurried around to back of the building where the plane would shield them from casual eyes. He placed her on a stack of horse blankets located on a small pile of hay lying next to the wall. Where the hay and blankets came from, he had no idea. Neither did he have any desire to find out the answer. Not when Annie was ready and waiting for him.

"Take me, Ian. Take me."

He slipped the dark blue top off of her, enjoying the way her mass of black hair fell over her shoulders. He gasped at the sight of her full breasts bobbing with their rosy red tips. Reaching out, Ian fondled one warm breast as Annie threw back her head and closed her eyes.

"Take me, Ian. Take me."

Her nipples tightened, scraping roughly along his fingers and palm. Ian bent down to fill his mouth, sucking and gently teething the hard nubs until her fingers wove themselves through his hair and tugged for his attention.

"Take me, Ian. Take me."

Her pants slipped off without a second thought, giving him the ultimate view of heaven with the curly black triangle between her legs. A quick scramble out of his own pants, and he dove face-first for her thighs.

"Take me, Ian. Take me."

Oh, dear God, she was delectable. So perfect, his willie was primed and ready to be fired. "Beautiful. So beautiful. Oh, Annie."

Her musk was more potent than the richest French perfume. Her wetness on his tongue was better than any wine. She lifted her knees and spread her legs for him. Ian could no longer ignore the dizziness or the raging heat pouring through him. He crawled over the hay, over the blankets, and prepared to plunge into paradise. This first time would be too quick; he wouldn't be able to last. But he would make it up to her the next time. And the next. And the next. And the next...

"Ian."

He wished their first time could have been somewhere more suited for the moment. Not with the odor of grease and oil hanging in the air. Heaven help him, her thighs were more delicate than the finest Chinese silk. He couldn't wait any longer to feel her inner muscles squeeze down on him like a hot vise.

"Ian."

Poising the tip of his erection at her entrance, he looked up, expecting to see absolute rapture on her lovely face.

"Ian Davenport."

His eyes flew open, but his brain refused to click into place. It took several seconds before he could get a mental grip on where he was—

—the hospital.

Fuck me. Then all of that...

...had been a dream. A wonderful, wishful dream that, unfortunately, had busted his balls. He didn't have to look or even reach down to realize his dick was stretched probably harder and longer than it had ever been in his life. Which meant that the arsehole who had been so rude to awaken him before he could reach his moment better have a bloody good reason for the interruption.

"Ian Davenport."

Turning his head, he rose up on one elbow to face the intruder. The man standing at the far end of the room was huge: big, tall, and very muscular. Even in the dim candlelight the stranger was easily over two meters tall and at least fifteen or sixteen stone in weight, give or take a few kilograms. He wore a dark gray tunic and pants, and a guarded look on his face, making it difficult to perceive his intent. His enormous golden yellow wings were so large, they brushed the ceiling.

He exuded authority and power like a born leader. Here was a man who commanded attention without demanding it. If there were air marshals among the angels, this man would be sporting the chevrons. Unarguably, this was one person Ian instinctively knew he should never cross.

"I am Wing Commander Ian Davenport. Whom do I have the honor of addressing?"

The moment the words were out of his mouth, bells and whistles started going off simultaneously in his head, and in his gut. As the angel man's eyes slid over where the sheet was tented above Ian's groin, Ian felt the heat in his blood sliding away, to be replaced with an iciness that was almost nauseating. The realization struck with an almost physical blow. Before the man could introduce himself, Ian knew who he was.

"I felt it was time we met," the giant blond man said with a hint of an ironic grin. "I am Rion, Grand Lord of the Houses of Thunder. You have already met my wife, Annie. And because you have, we need to talk."

Chapter 18

The Threat

After making his announcement, Rion took a single step toward Ian Davenport. One small step that in no way appeared to be menacing until Ian noticed the broadsword belted around the man's waist.

Blow me!

The sword was not for show. Ian would bet his life on it. The giant angel stood with one hand on his hip, the other on the sword's hilt, and a very pissed expression on his face.

It took everything Ian had to sit up on the edge of the bed and present a friendly smile.

"Jolly good to finally meet you, Rion!" He held out a hand as a gesture of welcome, expecting the man to shake it in greeting. When the angel blatantly ignored the offer, Ian tucked his hand back into his lap.

This doesn't bode well for you, old chap. You have trod into this man's world, and taken up with this man's woman. There's no telling how many of their laws you've broken.

Another thought came to him, bringing with it a cold streak of terror.

Gor! What if the man has the power to read my mind?

Rion took another step forward, slowly lifted his heavily muscled arms, and crossed them over his barrel of a chest. The gesture reminded Ian of a man making himself comfortable as he prepared himself for a long stay. Ian couldn't help himself, and he scooted backward on his bed.

This man didn't need a broadsword to take down the Englishman. He easily topped Ian in height and weight, not to mention strength. Although Ian considered himself to be well built and in prime physical shape, Rion's physique far outstripped him. If they were to go after it bare-knuckled, Ian had no doubt who would come up the winner, and in short time.

"You came to talk about Annie, you said?"

"Yes."

Blunt and to the point. The chap was obviously not a conversationalist.

"She is an amazing woman," Ian complimented. "You're one lucky bloke."

"More than lucky. I have been blessed. I understand you plan to fix your air vehicle and travel back through the rift, back to Earth?"

"You mean my plane? Quite! And the sooner the better, I say."

His comment earned him a questioning eyebrow. "Why is that?" Rion asked.

"The war, old man. The war! Our boys...pardon me, *my* boys are dying over there. With my plane out of commission, that's one less fighter to shore up the skies. If I can have a little leeway to brag, I'm quite the ace when it comes to kills."

"You figure yourself to be a good huntsman?"

"I have proof of sixteen confirmed kills."

Rion slowly nodded his head, but his stance never wavered. "Then you plan to leave as soon as you can get your...plane...in working order, correct?"

"That's correct, my lord."

The use of the formal salute earned him a quirk in the corner of the angel man's mouth, but it was something. Ian took a deep breath and decided to hell with it. Might as well get everything out in the open, and to devil with the consequences. If worse came to worse, at least he was already in the hospital.

"Annie is not happy here. You know that, right?"

Rion's head snapped up, and for a split second Ian thought he saw panic in the man's bright blue eyes.

"Did she tell you that?"

"Not in so many words," Ian admitted. "But she misses her world. She misses it in ways you could never understand

because you're not from there."

"I have been forced to remain for several long periods of time upon your world," Rion quickly corrected him.

"Maybe you have, but you've never been faced with remaining there for the rest of your bloody *life*!" Ian shot back. "You've always known it was just a temporary setback. That eventually you *would* come back *here*. Well, it's not that way with her, you bloody winged ape! She's here for the entire duration, and now she's regretting it! And you're too self-centered to realize how much it's tearing her up inside!"

The angel's face was starting to turn red. His breathing was accelerating. Clearly the man was agitated and quickly rising to the melting point. Ian continued, knowing he had Rion's undivided attention.

"Do you actually believe anyone can desert the earth where they were created, forego the air they've breathed all their life, give up every kind of food they've thrived on, *and never miss it*?"

"Annie knew the risks. She knew what she was giving up," Rion hotly defended himself.

Ian blew a raspberry. "That's as barmy a statement as I ever heard one. Annie wanted to be with you. Hell, yes, she would say she knew what she was giving up, but telling you she understood is one thing. Living it is a whole 'nother load of crap!"

"And you believe you have the answer to her problem?" Rion said, his voice lowering as his anger deepened.

"You're bloody damn right, I do! Let me get my Gladiator up and flying, and at the next available rift, let me take her back with me."

"Never!"

"I don't mean forever," Ian nearly shouted back, although deep in his heart that was exactly what he had in mind. "You have your angels stationed over on Earth, don't you? Why not get one of those lads to pick her up the next time he's due to return?"

"It is not that simple!"

"And you're blinkered if you think she's going to forget all about me and my plane, and the opportunity you're going to make her give up for one final visit, one last chance to say goodbye, just so everything can be as right as rain in no time after I'm gone!"

This time the step Rion took toward him was clearly menacing. The man's arm swung across his body, and his hand gripped the sword with white-knuckled intensity. At the last second, Rion held himself in check although Ian could see the muscles in the man's jaws clench and unclench.

"Consider your association with my wife as over," the Lord of Thunder informed him with a hiss.

Ian couldn't help but give a scornful laugh. Rion glared back at him.

"Somehow I can't help but think Annie has a mind of her own," Ian scoffed at the man. "When she sets herself to do something, I bet she doesn't pay a farthing's notice to anything you may order her to do."

"That may be, but I have other ways to prevent you and her from collaborating."

"Collaborating? Oh, is that what we're up to now? We're collaborators? Against whom? You? For what reason? Other than Annie's mental health, tell me, for what reason?"

"You are trying to destroy our marriage."

Ian made another rude noise. "Do you honestly believe Annie is out to dissolve your marriage?"

"No. Not Annie. But you are," Rion told him. "You have managed to worm your way into her affections by preying on her weakness, and I will have none of it, Ian Davenport. I will no longer stand aside and watch as you use her homesickness as a means to drive a wedge between her and me."

Slowly nodding his head, Ian licked his lips as he watched the big man take a stand before him. "Well, well, well. Let me tell you something, your Grand Lordship of Thunder, sir. If Annie loved you the way you claim she does, you wouldn't have to worry about her being with me. Or around me. Or talking to me. You wouldn't need to come chuffing in here and accuse me of throwing a spanner in the works. But because you have, that tells me one of two things has transpired prior to my arrival."

Rion blinked in confusion. "Tells you what?"

"That the only reason she came over here to this world was either to escape her bleeding first husband who was trying to kill her, or because you yourself had made her a lot of promises you knew you couldn't keep, but she believed you anyway. So which one was it, Rion? Did she jump from the frying pan into the fire? Or from the fire into the frying pan?"

The sword made a beautiful ringing sound as Rion started to pull it from its sheath. At the same time, a male physician angel walked into the room. The man gasped to see what he had interrupted.

Rion froze in place, but his eyes remained locked on Ian. No one said a word until Rion slowly slid the weapon back into its case.

“My word is set,” Rion said, loud enough for the physician to hear. “Annie is no longer allowed to be with you, to talk to you, or to be allowed anywhere near you. Am I clear?” Turning his face to the red-robed man, he repeated, “Am I clear?”

“Yes, Lord Rion,” the physician immediately replied.

Giving Ian one final look of disdain, Rion turned and strode out of the hospital room. It wasn’t until the door closed behind him that the physician turned to look at Ian.

“It appears you have made an enemy.”

“Do tell.”

“Do not be so hasty to brush off Lord Rion’s words,” the physician said, walking over to where Ian was sitting cross-legged on the bed. “If you make yourself his enemy, you will quickly find yourself being opposed by all the Houses of Thunder.”

As the man reached out to inspect him, Ian made a face. “It’s not Lord Rion I have to contend with. It’s Annie.”

The physician stopped and frowned. “Then in that case, you will find yourself opposed by all of us here on Parra.”

Chapter 19

The Misconception

She knew Rion remained by himself in the living room long after she got Kerr to sleep. She had no recollection of when he finally came to bed himself, nor was she aware of when he got up and left way before first sunrise.

She was in the kitchen, savoring a cup of brocade and waiting for Kerr to awaken on his own when Chloe walked into the kitchen and poured herself some of the hot drink from the pot on top of the cooker. After taking a sip, the woman angel took a seat next to her at the table.

“Chloe, what’s going on with Rion?”

“He is healing nicely. He is obeying orders not to stretch his wings or to—”

“That’s not what I mean, and you know it. He’s been acting strangely these past few days.” Annie glanced over her shoulder where she could see down the hallway leading to the bedrooms, listening but not detecting any sound from that direction.

“You mean after Ian Davenport arrived?”

Annie shot her a worried look. “Do you think he’s...jealous?”

Chloe refused to meet her eye-to-eye, which told Annie the woman knew more than she was letting on. It also told her she had hit the nail on the head.

“That is something you have to ask Rion.”

The woman’s evasiveness only served to irritate her. “Don’t piss on me and tell me it’s raining, Chloe. Rion avoided me last night. He didn’t come to bed until after I’d fallen asleep. And this morning he was gone before I woke up. Every time I talk to him, he pretends he’s not interested, or he finds some way to cut my conversation short. Chloe, I know he talks to Vadon, and Vadon talks to you. Please be truthful and give me the bottom line. Is Rion jealous of me paying so much time and attention to Ian?”

Sighing, Chloe lowered her cup and reached out to take one of Annie’s hands. “There is a lot more going on than you perceive, Annie.”

“What is that supposed to mean?” She picked up the long-handled stirrer lying on the table in front of her and used it to scratch between her shoulder blades.

“It means you are too wrapped up in what Ian represents to see everything else that is going on around you.” The physician’s eyes narrowed slightly. “Are you all right?”

Annie dropped the stirrer back onto the table and sat up on her stool. “Just an itch. What everything else?”

Releasing her hand, Chloe took another sip of brocade. Annie immediately recognized the expression that settled over the woman’s face. It was her physician persona, as Annie liked to think of it—no nonsense, compassionate, wary, yet truthful.

“Annie, we have known for a while that you have been missing your world.”

“I’m sorry. I know I must be a pain in the butt about it, but I can’t help it.”

“Shhh. No, you cannot help it, and you have no reason to apologize. Frankly I would worry if you did *not* show any signs of homesickness. I also know that Ian is like a tonic for you right now. He represents everything you miss about your world.”

Annie smiled. Chloe’s confession was what she had expected to hear. “In a rather roundabout way, yes, he does. Of course, I don’t understand a lot of what he talks about. And sometimes I don’t understand what he says.” She laughed lightly. “But, yeah. It’s the next best thing to being back on my world.”

“Annie, you know many people saw you and Ian talking in the landing bay yesterday.”

There it was again. She could hear that funny tone in Chloe’s voice. “Were we not allowed to go there?” Annie asked.

“That is not the problem. The problem is...” Chloe hesitated, “Listen, Annie. Please do not take this wrong. In fact, you can clear up a lot of misconceptions—”

It was like lightning going off in front of her eyes, flashing so brightly, it was almost blinding. Annie jerked upright, spilling her drink as she stared at the woman seated across the table from her.

“What misconceptions?”

“Annie...”

“No, no, you used the word ‘misconceptions’, and I want to hear it straight from the horse’s mouth. *What misconceptions?*”

“We are as human as you are, Annie. You should know that by now,” Chloe started to explain.

“You think I’m having an affair with Ian?”

There. It was out. And the idea that Chloe or anyone else would even think she was two-timing Rion was not only preposterous, it was insulting. After all she and Rion had gone through to be together, why would people be so cruel as to believe she would do something so stupid? And in broad daylight, in front of hundreds of people!

“Chloe, do you honestly believe I would have an affair with Ian?”

“In my heart, no,” Chloe admitted. “I know how deep your love runs for Rion, just as I know how deeply he loves you in return.”

“Then why would people be so cruel? Criminy! If I was going to have an affair with Mr. Davenport, I sure as hell wouldn’t make it public knowledge!” Scrambling to her feet, Annie began pacing the kitchen, emphasizing her next words with her arms.

“Rion and I have gone through hell to be together! We’ve almost died. Chloe, I love my husband! I love being with him, and I’ll go where I need to go to be with him! But I’m not going to lie and say it’s been all rainbows and roses living here, and you of all people should know that.”

The woman angel nodded without replying. Annie stopped her pacing to face the woman.

“When Ian showed up, it was like a miracle. Yes, he’s warm and funny, and he’s very sweet and polite, but damn it, he’s *home*! A different part of home, I’ll grant you that. But he understands me when I talk about Christmas and presents, and a bunch of things Rion vaguely knows about, and none of you do. But, Chloe, do you honestly believe I would do such a thing as to...” She sighed again, too upset to continue.

The worst part of this whole thing was that it hadn’t been too long ago that she had been questioning her own feelings about the airman. Guilt reddened her face.

Forgive me, my love. Forgive me for even thinking that way about him.

“No,” the angel woman firmly said, interrupting Annie’s silent prayer. “However, I am just one person.”

“So what am I supposed to do? Have an escort every time we talk? Send for a chaperone every time we want to go someplace?” Annie watched as Chloe got to her feet and placed her empty cup in the small cleansing booth.

“Annie, I cannot keep you from talking to Ian. In fact, I would not even suggest you stop conversing with him because I can see how much it means to you. It is almost a medicant in itself for the two of you to share memories of your home world. All I am saying is please be careful in the way you react to the man. After all, he is a stranger to our world, and he does not know our laws or our ways.”

“All right. Now you have me totally flummoxed. I’m a stranger here, too. How is him being here different from me being here?”

“There is a vast difference,” Chloe gently told her, brown eyes warm with caring. “You are here willingly. He is not. You want to be part of this world. He cannot wait to leave it.”

The last part surprised her. “Leave it?” Annie repeated.

That’s right! He came in a plane! He has the ability to fly out of here! And if he has the ability to come here and leave, then he can do it again!

“Ian Davenport plans to fix his plane and return to Earth,” Chloe said. Her warm expression hardened slightly. “Has he not told you this?”

“No. But it makes sense, doesn’t it?” She gave a little grunt. “Stupid me. Acting like a new neighbor had just moved in, and here I was pretending I was the welcome wagon.”

Chloe patted her on the shoulder. “We are releasing him today. Now is your chance to take him sightseeing.” She paused on her way out the door. “May I offer a piece of advice?”

“Always.”

“Continue to keep your meetings and conversations out in the open, because the moment you two go off to be alone, the rumors will fly, and we both know how destructive rumors can be.”

Annie managed a smile. “Sound advice as always. Look, are you heading over to the hospital to release him now? Or will you do your rounds first?”

“To give him his release,” the woman physician answered. “I will order a trap to take him over to Lord Loysan’s house. From there he is on his own.”

Nodding, Annie said, “Sounds like a plan. Let me get Kerr up and fed, and I’ll take him over to Joberia’s before heading for Lord Loysan’s place. Ian has been asking about his plane. I think our first stop will be to find out where it’s located.”

“Sounds like a plan.” Chloe giggled and gave Annie a little wave goodbye. The woman was gone before Annie reached the living area.

Well, the shoe is definitely on the other foot. Annie headed for the guest bedroom to awaken Kerr. After all the trouble we had with Anitra and my fits of jealousy, we seem to be back, right smack in the middle of the same sort of situation with Ian. Careful, Annabel. Trod carefully, because gossip can wreck a marriage as surely as if you really were having an affair with him!

Humming softly, she made plans for the day. *Step one, feed and dress Kerr, and take him over to Joberia. Step two, find out where Ian’s plane is stashed so he can begin work on it. And step three, have a nice, private, romantic interlude with my husband so he’ll never have to worry about Ian Davenport again.*

Step three was enough to make Annie smile.

Chapter 20

The Search

After wrapping Kerr in a blanket, she grabbed her heavy shawl and his nursery bag, and waited by the front doors. When the trap arrived, Annie gave the two carriers a request to be taken to Joberiah's home. Kerr was being precocious. He was also cutting a new tooth, meaning he was prone to mood swings from good-natured to grumpy, depending on how badly the pain was affecting him.

Upon their arrival, Annie asked the men to remain while she went inside. Minet, Joberiah's companion, was anxious to keep the baby, and greeted Annie with a smile.

"What are your plans for today?" the elderly woman angel inquired.

"Ian is being released from the hospital today. I thought we'd go looking for his plane. He wants to assess the damage done, and hopefully repair it so he can attempt to fly back to Earth." Handing over Kerr and his bag with formula and diapers, Annie missed the worried look that passed over the woman's face.

"He plans to go back?"

"He's going to try," Annie said.

"How do you feel about that?" Minet asked, placing Kerr on her hip. The baby continued to gnaw on piece of toast Annie had made for him right before they'd left. A thin line of drool started to make its way out of the corner of Kerr's mouth, and Annie wiped it away with the hem of his little tunic.

"Feel about what? About Ian leaving?" Annie smiled. "If he can make it back, that'll be great news!"

"It will? How?"

"Of course! There's a war going on over on my world. He and his plane are needed to help defend his country from invasion. Are you sure Kerr isn't going to be a problem? He's cutting a new tooth."

Annie felt it would be safer to switch topics as quickly as possible after seeing Minet's frown. There was no telling how widespread the rumors were about her and Ian. She would have to walk very carefully between now and the time when Ian left.

...when Ian left.

A tiny stab of...remorse...shoved itself into her heart. Would she miss him when he flew away?

Of course I would.

No, Annie. Would you really miss him?

Miss him? As in...miss him because I love him?

At the thought, a chill went through her. Annie shivered involuntarily.

"Oh, child, are you cold?" Minet immediately reached for her. Annie smiled and tried to shrug it off.

"I'm all right," she assured the older woman. "Just a little muscular reaction. My daddy used to say it was because someone walked over my grave."

Both women lightly laughed. Then Annie gave Kerr a kiss goodbye. "You be a good boy, and we'll be back to get you in a few hours. Minet, are you sure he's not a bother?"

"Annie, he makes Joberiah and I feel twenty master cycles younger. Now, go. We will be fine." The woman added a shooing motion with her free hand, and Annie left the house.

The two trap carriers were still waiting on the small landing platform. Although there was a small breeze, the temperature was dipping. Ian had said it was Christmas, and the weather on Parra paralleled that on Earth. Hugging herself for warmth, Annie ordered them to take her to Lord Loysan's home. She noticed how the two men looked at each other before one of them replied, "As you request, Lady Annie." At the time she paid no attention to the unusual reaction. She was too engrossed in her own self-discovery.

Do I love Ian Davenport? Have I fallen in love with a man I know nothing about, simply because he's from my world?

Granted, the man was very handsome, not to mention witty and intelligent. Plus, there was something definitely

intriguing about his English accent.

But...*love*?

Well, what's the verdict, Annie?

Her thoughts immediately went to Rion, and in her mind's eye she could see him standing before her like an ancient icon of aged gold. She remembered how she felt when she first found him, lying bloodied and almost at death's door in the middle of the forest. How it took him a while to warm up to her because he couldn't predict her. He couldn't guess from one moment to the next what she would do, or why. She was nothing like the women on his world. For one thing, she was totally unpretentious, and she refused to back down whenever he got gruff with her.

He had never frightened her. At no time did she feel intimidated or in fear for her well-being, even though he was such a big man. A big man with enormous wings.

How she knew she was in love with Rion, she couldn't remember. But after he had accosted her with the fact that she was already married, and then left after she turned down his offer of love, she knew then how much she cared about him. It was only a question of how much he loved her in return. Did he love her enough to stay on her world? Did he love her enough to sacrifice everything?

Yes, and yes. But life didn't turn out the way she'd hoped. Love didn't turn out the way she'd expected. After all, how could she have suspected their Happily Ever After was to take place on a different world?

A little lurch signaled the trap had reached its destination. Annie climbed out and waved off one angel's proffered hand. "Can you stay?" she asked instead.

"Yes, Lady Annie."

She smiled and thanked them, and walked up to knock on the big double doors. All homes and businesses had double doors. It was one of the first things she'd observed about this world. These people could not walk through the simple narrow single doors common on Earth because their wings wouldn't fit through them. Annie smiled to herself, remembering how Rion had been forced to duck and walk sideways through the log cabin's doorway.

A middle-aged woman answered the door. "May I help...Lady Annie?"

"Yes. Hello. I came to see if Mr. Davenport had arrived yet."

The woman frowned. "Yes, he has, but he left a short while ago."

"Did he say where he was going? Do you know if he was going to look for his airplane?"

The woman shook her head. "I do not know. He did not say." And it would be a major breach of etiquette for the woman to ask the airman about his plans, even though he was a guest.

"Thank you. When he returns, will you please let him know I came by?"

The woman glanced over Annie's shoulder before answering. "I will. Thank you for coming. My apologies again." She closed the doors, leaving Annie to crawl back into the trap.

"Where to, my lady?"

Where to? Well, since she had no idea where Ian's plane was being stored, there was no way she could join him. Not until she discovered its location. Fortunately, she knew who would know.

"To the way station," she ordered.

Chapter 21

The Fight

The trip to the outer buildings sitting at the furthest end of the city took several minutes. The way station was, in actuality, several large, interconnected buildings surrounding a cylindrical tower. The outer buildings consisted of four squatty buildings of varying heights whose roofs were landing platforms for the central tower.

Annie stared down at the signs of destruction. The broken glass and debris had been cleaned up, but the buildings looked like part of an abandoned ghost town. If it weren't for the signs of movement of people going about their jobs as usual, the way station would appear to be deserted.

She had never been to the way station. There had never been a reason for her to come here. She had always been busy with Kerr, or learning her way around the central part of the city. It surprised her to see how squat and unassuming the station appeared. Then again, the main take-off and landing areas for all the Lords of Thunder had been around since they first began to fly through the rifts to Earth. If she remembered correctly, Rion once told her the way station was the oldest structure on Parra still in use.

The pale, jar-shaped tower reminded Annie of the apartment buildings where Rion's great uncle Joberiah lived in one of the oldest parts of the city. Like other people she had heard make comment, she believed the tosis had been mostly ineffective against the stocky structures. Annie hoped the men responsible for rebuilding would take that into effect. This world could very well produce another tosis along the scale of the one that had nearly wiped out this city. She agreed that the tall, glassy towers were very beautiful, especially when the twin suns and moons reflected off of them. But this world could not continue to thrive if it chose appearance over safety.

Rion was right. His ancestors had been wiser.

The trap was lowered onto the roof of the building, which was also the landing platform to the tower's third story. Unlike the newer buildings where landing platforms were attached to the outer walls, the roofs of the older buildings acted as landing areas for the upper stories of neighboring towers, sometimes with short crosswalks or bridges spanning the short distance in between. Again, Annie could see the sense in the design. The tosis had ripped away nearly every attached landing platform on the more modern buildings—at least it had as far as she could tell from observing what buildings remained.

This time she accepted the proffered hand to help her out of the conveyance. "Would you like for us to remain?" the carrier asked.

"Yes, please."

The angel gave her a nod, and she turned to walk into the tower. The brisk, cold wind felt good, almost revitalizing. She tightened the shawl around her.

The interior was breathtaking. Slack-jawed, Annie stared at the immense, carved columns holding up the walls. The stone used was almost translucent, and varied in color with shades from nearly pure white to smoky greens and rose. Every now and then she spotted darker threads like veins weaving in and out of the rock.

The tower's ceiling was equally impressive, and reminded her of the rich artistry visible in the ceiling work inside the Council Cathedral. In addition, all sound was amplified like it was within the interior of the Cathedral, making footsteps chime like the tolling of gigantic bells as people trod across the crystalline floors.

The offices were built inside along the outer walls, leaving the interior core open. The carriers had brought her to the third floor, the uppermost story in the tower. Either they knew Rion would be found in this area, or this was the only place where they could safely land. Annie flagged down the first person she spotted.

"Begging your pardon, Lord..."

The dark-haired, dark-winged man paused. A second later, a huge smile split his face. "Lady Annie! How may I help you?"

"I'm looking for Rion. Could you point out his office for me, please?"

The man turned around and indicated back the way he'd come. "His office is on the other side, next to the south entrance." His grin widened. "Trust me. You will not miss it."

"Thank you. Is he there? Or do you know?"

"I just came from there. If he is gone when you arrive, you are welcome to wait. He should not be gone long."

"Thank you again, Lord..."

"Brond."

"Lord Brond." She gave him a grateful smile. The man nodded before continuing on his way.

Annie hurried toward the opposite end of the tower, aware of the *slap slap* of her sandals on the floor. Like the rest of the population, most of the time she went barefoot everywhere she went and rarely wore sandals. But with the weather turning colder, a little protection between the soles of the feet and the icy floors prevented the skin from adhering. Annie often wondered if these people ever wore fully enclosed footwear. Frankly speaking, she hadn't worn shoes since she left Earth.

As she approached the other side of the way station, she finally understood why the trap had landed on the opposite end. At the same time, she remembered Rion telling her that he and Callumed had been standing near the open area when they had been blown away by the tosis. The entrance at this location had been cleared and cleaned, but the shattered and empty windows and partitions were mute testimony to the storm's fury.

One office here was bigger than the others. The privacy screens were gone, and it was evident there was no one inside, but Annie knew she'd reached Rion's compartment.

The last thing she expected when she walked through the doorless doorway was to see the large hand-drawn picture hanging on the innermost wall. How long she stood there, staring at the portrait of her and Kerr, she had no idea. She was totally numb.

Whoever had drawn the picture had used some dark material like pencil or charcoal. She couldn't tell, and she didn't consider herself educated enough to know the correct answer. But the artist was skilled to the point where the work almost appeared lifelike, as if a camera had taken the shot.

It was a simple setting. There was no visible background on the large sheet. She was sitting down, and Kerr was propped up in her lap. Her hair was loose, framing her face in masses of waves as she smiled at the artist. The baby in the drawing was much younger than he was now. Only one tooth gleamed within his baby smile, and his wings were more like feathered tufts than actual appendages.

The picture was absolutely the most beautiful thing she had ever seen.

"Do you like it?"

Annie gave a little shriek of surprise and turned around. Rion chuckled when she slapped him on the chest in playful retaliation. "How dare you sneak up on me like that!"

"On the contrary. I made enough noise to awaken the dead," he told her, using one of Annie's favorite phrases. "What are you doing here?"

"I came to ask you something. But before I do..." She gestured toward the portrait. "Who drew that?"

"I did."

Annie's eyes widened. Rion never lied to her. If he said he had drawn the picture, he had. Plus it would explain why he himself was not in it. But...

"Why didn't you tell me you could draw?"

"I am not that good," her husband admitted. "I dabble only when I am inspired."

She whirled back around to stare again at the artwork. "I think you do wonderful work! When did you draw that?"

"I finished it not too many moon cycles ago. I have to do something to keep myself occupied during those nights when I have to wait for an incoming Lord."

Annie nodded. She recalled all the nights in the past when storms had blown through. Long nights when Rion had been obligated to stay at the way station to see if any Lords of Thunder due back made it through. It was part of his job, and the only thing about his work that Annie disliked. She had a hard time sleeping whenever he didn't come to bed.

"You're good. You're very good." And he did it all for memory.

Annie suddenly remembered that Rion had not come to bed until late last night. She turned back to face him. "Why did you leave so early this morning? Where did you go?"

He dropped his smile. "I had work to do."

It would be the truth, but she could tell he was holding something back.

"Where else did you go?"

"I went to the hospital."

Annie gasped, already knowing why. "What did you do, Rion?"

"I did nothing to him."

There. It was out. Sooner or later she knew Rion would accost Ian, but she fully trusted him not to physically harm the man. Ian would not have a chance going one-on-one with her powerful husband. Still, she let out a sigh of relief at his admission.

"Is that what you came here to ask me?"

"No. I came to ask you where his airplane is."

"Why?"

Annie paused to stare in surprise at her husband. "Why what?"

"What do you care where we took his plane?"

His tone made her hackles rise. Rion was deliberately being evasive, and although she knew why, Annie resented it.

"I want to see it."

"You also want to see Ian Davenport."

"Yes, I do."

She stood a foot away from him, waiting for his final word. The top of her head barely reached his collar bone. But if she had to, she could be every bit as obstinate and bullheaded as him, and she knew he knew it.

"I forbid it."

Righteous indignation rose up inside her with a vengeance. "You *what*?"

"I told Ian Davenport he could not see you anymore. I am requesting that you too heed my wish."

"Bullshit on that, Rion. *Heed your wish?*"

Rion's face had hardened. He was keeping everything bottled inside—his anger, his determination, his fear, and his worry. It was a tactic she had seen before.

"Who do you think you are, giving me an order to stay away from Ian?" she challenged him. "What right do you *think* you have to tell me what I can and cannot do?"

"I do not trust him. I think he is infatuated with you."

"What difference does that make?" she almost yelled back.

Suddenly, a look of loss flashed across his almost impenetrable countenance. It was so quick and filled with so much pain Annie's jaw dropped open in surprise. He hadn't meant to let it show, but Annie knew he had to be in emotional agony.

"Rion...Rion..." She lowered her voice and softened her plea. "You are my husband. You have nothing to worry about. All right, so Ian may be...what did you say? Infatuated? So what if he's infatuated with me? I...love...*you*." She punctuated the last three words with a poke to his chest. Grabbing him by the front of his tunic, she pulled hard on it until he was forced to lean forward. As soon as their lips met, she threw her arms around his neck and held on.

His mouth was cold and refused to move, but Annie persisted. She didn't have to wait long for Mount Rion to crumble.

His arms enfolded her, nearly crushing her to him, and his lips took total possession. There was no disguising how he felt. Rion would never be able to hide his true feelings from her. The man was almost desperate in his fear of losing her, which explained why he was trying to keep her and Ian apart.

"Annie. My Annie." His lips brushed across her mouth. His breath hitched in his chest, and she realized he was close to tears.

"You big goof," she barely managed to whisper before he kissed her again with dizzying intensity.

One hand reached into her hair, threading the strands through his fingers. Sliding down her arm, the warm, rough palm cupped one breast and gently squeezed it. At the same time, his fingers plucked her nipple, and desire filled her blood with heat.

Annie gasped. At the sound, she felt a familiar prodding between her thighs. She closed her eyes and let him explore as

all thoughts of Ian and the fight faded into nothingness.

Over the past few months their lovemaking had almost become nonexistent. Lately it always seemed that one of them was either too tired to fully participate, or their coupling was hurried and rushed. Annie missed the spontaneity of the little moments of passion in unexpected places, but those moments were mostly gone now with the loss of their home. Sharing Vadon and Chloe's house was also dampening their ardor and enthusiasm.

More than anything, she needed him to fill her. She needed his strength to surround her and shield her from her nightmares. She needed his warmth to chase away all the cold fears. Above all, she needed his love to make her forget the differences that divided them.

One hand cradled her face, cupping her cheek and jaw. The other kept her pressed tightly against him. When his mouth slid to her neck, a shiver of delight ran through her.

Rion moved with her further into his office. Opening her eyes, Annie saw he had taken them into a small alcove on the other side of the doorway. With his wings partially spread and his back to the outside, he shielded them from accidental eyes.

She started to tell him people would become suspicious if they saw her feet and bare legs wrapped around his waist. When his hands brushed aside her gown and lifted her buttocks, she no longer worried about it.

"My beautiful Annie." His voice was hoarse, throaty. It resonated in her blood, in her bones. His breath was steamy, leaving moisture where his tongue slowly trailed downward past her ear. She clenched her fingers into his hard shoulder muscles as Rion pressed her back against the wall.

"Love me," she gasped just before she lost all conscious thought.

"Forever," he whispered, and gradually began to push himself into her, spearing her. Hard, heavy, relentless, his erection continued to tunnel into her, never withdrawing, never pausing as he plowed his way inside.

Annie choked. She tried to rotate her hips, but his hands gripping her buttocks refused to let her budge. His fingers on the inside of her thighs kept her spread for him as he continued his advance an inch at a time, slowly, inexorably. Dragging over raw, dry nerve endings that were beginning to silently scream in protest.

There was a groan. She couldn't tell if it had come from herself or from him. All she was aware of was the rigid, unforgiving pole spearing her, sending her inner muscles into overdrive to provide lubrication to ease his invasion. She tried to speak, to beg for him to stop and ease out just a bit, just enough to get him wet, to give his erection easier access.

Rion grunted, and she felt it all the way to her womb. He'd stopped, buried all the way to his groin inside her. Annie felt his gentle kisses along her collarbone.

Breathing had become a sexual act. Every little movement made his hard-on twitch. Every minute quiver sent an ever-increasing earthquake rolling through her, until it nearly overwhelmed her. He had yet to start stroking, and she was already on the cusp.

"Annie."

That deep voice pulsing with sexual heat called to her, drawing her attention upward. She opened her eyes to find his Montana sky blue eyes looking down at her. His lids were partially closed, but they couldn't disguise the banked fires reflected in his pupils—embers waiting to burst into flame.

"Annie, watch me."

It was difficult for her to understand his slurred words. Somehow she managed to squeeze her inner channel, trying to expel him, manipulating him in the only manner left to her. Rion closed his eyes; his expression went slack. Lowering his face, he pressed his forehead into the curve of her neck as the warm breath of his low moan feathered over her exposed breasts.

"Annie..."

She squeezed him again. This time his hips involuntarily moved in response. It was only a fraction of an inch, but nature took over, and lust surged. Rion thrust hard, pressing her firmly against the wall, and making Annie cry out.

"Watch me," he whispered, pulling back to ram into her again. "Watch me."

Somehow Annie managed to open her eyes to look down at where he had shoved aside her gown and his tunic. Where the waistband of his pants was tucked underneath his scrotum. And the almost impossibly large pole sprouting from between his legs had nearly disappeared all the way between hers.

Her eyes widened. She had never watched him making love to her this way before. She had never observed the

rhythmic in and out of his thickly-veined penis. A penis the same golden hue as the rest of his skin. Skin, hair, wings. Her aged gold warrior. To say it was mesmerizing...

Hot. Glistening with her juices. Pulsing beneath the wonderfully soft, thin skin.

He withdrew almost to the bulbous head, then suddenly he began pumping her—long, firm, unrelenting strokes. Driving. Increasing steadily in speed.

Annie squeezed her eyes shut, unable to watch anymore. Unable to do anything but let him continue pounding into her as the musky scent of their union filled her head.

If someone were to come by now to speak with him, who would be embarrassed?

Was something this private allowed in such a public place?

What were the rules regarding having sex...

Her orgasm exploded without warning. She threw back her head, hitting the wall behind her. The sound of Rion's grunts told her he had reached his peak, as well, but her focus was gone. Enveloped in the exquisite storm spreading through her, Annie rode it as her husband continued to ride her. His movements gradually slowed and his fingers grew slack, but his mouth never left her shoulder.

His legs were quivering from the aftermath. Only his weight, and the angle at which they were leaning against the wall, kept them both upright.

Another minute passed before she felt his hands release her bottom, allowing her to lower her legs and stand again on her own. He withdrew, and she was aware of him straightening out her gown before adjusting his own pants and tunic.

She leaned forward to rest her forehead against his chest, where she could hear his heart still thudding rapidly, and feel his heavy breathing on the back of her neck.

"Annie."

"My Rion," she murmured, snaking her arms back around his neck.

"I love you." His voice was filled with tenderness. The strength of his raw emotion called to her heart.

"Forever," she whispered back just before she sought his lips.

Chapter 22

The Gladiator

“Well, old girl, for all the bungs you received bringing me over here, you didn’t end up in as sad a shape as I expected you to be in.”

Ian eyed the damage to the biplane, especially the tail section and rudder. There was some skin missing, and a serious crimp in several of the struts, but otherwise she looked to be in salvageable shape. The propeller appeared to be intact, as well as the landing gear. If he didn’t know better, he would swear someone had already started what repair efforts they could.

His worst fears, however, were for the engine. If there had been damage to the motor, there was no way he could fix it. He just didn’t have the tools, not to mention the parts, for that kind of job.

Ian gritted his teeth and climbed into the cockpit. Setting the throttle, he crossed his fingers and hit the ignition.

“Come on, love. Be a good girl. Blow it out your arse!”

The engine whined. The propeller cranked slightly. Otherwise the plane remained grounded. But it did look promising.

“Now all I need is to find some poor sod to help me wank it off,” he mumbled to himself.

Until he could find someone to help him gun it, Ian decided he could best spend his time patching up the plane. Step one, however, was going to be the most difficult—where to find some tools.

“Hello? Who is in here?”

Ian sat up and stared over the cockpit’s rim at the man standing in the doorway. The first thing that stood out was the sword in the man’s right hand. The second was the brassed-off expression on his face. As soon as Ian popped up, the angel stepped further into the storehouse where the plane was being kept.

“I am,” Ian answered. He started to give his name and rank, but held off as the angel took in Ian’s obvious lack of wings.

“You are the otherworlder who flew in this machine,” the man verified.

“That is correct. And you are?”

The dark-haired angel sheathed his sword, much to Ian’s relief. “Lord Brond. This is my shift to watch over the machine.”

Good gravy! Is everyone a lord around here?

Ian saluted the man with a nod. “My thanks to everyone who took care of my plane whilst I was incapacitated. You wouldn’t happen to know who was doing a few repairs on her, would you?”

“That would be Lord Mayhon. He is exceptional when it comes to machinery.” Brond glanced over his shoulder. “I believe he is hoping to return later today. He is anxious to meet you and discuss the intricacies of this machine.”

“And it’s your duty to watch over the plane?” Ian climbed down from the cockpit and walked around to front.

“To make sure it remains safe.”

“From what?” There were bits of grass and dirt still lodged in between the propeller blades and vents. He began to dig it out with his fingers. It took a moment or two before Ian realized the angel hadn’t answered his last question, and he paused to peek under the cowling at the man. Brond was gone. Nonplussed, Ian continued with removing the debris. It wasn’t long before Brond returned.

“Ian Davenport, I came to see if you needed any help with your machine. Other than the mechanical kind,” the angel quickly added.

“You chaps seem awful anxious to lend a hand. I don’t know whether to consider it a good neighbor gesture, or a prelude to something more paramount.”

Brond gave him a quizzical look. “Forgive me. I do not understand.”

Sighing loudly, Ian stopped, propped an arm against the engine, and stared at the angel. “Here I am, a complete

stranger to all of you, and for all you know I could be the enemy. You stitch me up and provide me with room and board, and yet you know nothing about me.” He patted the plane with grease-covered hands. “Someone brought my plane here, and for the most part has cleaned it up. I can even see some repairs were done on the port wing struts.”

“We want to help as best we can,” Brond answered.

“And I am grateful, mate. What I don’t understand is what the final bill of lading will be.”

“Bill for what?”

“What it’s going to cost me to get my plane back up in the air again.”

This time there was no mistaking the confusion on the angel’s face. “Your bills are already being taken care of,” Brond informed him.

Ian gaped in surprise. “They are? By whom?”

“Lord Rion.”

Ian’s first impulse was to tell the man he was mistaken, but Ian knew there was no reason for the angel to lie to him. On second thought, it made perfect sense. Of course, Lord Rion would foot his medical costs, plus whatever other expenses Ian wasn’t aware of. The angel did not want him anywhere near his wife. And the sooner Ian got his plane in working order and got himself back to Earth, the better.

Ian chuckled. “Why am I not surprised?”

“Pardon?”

“Nothing. Nothing.” He eyed Brond. “You really want to help?”

“If it is within my capabilities, yes. If you need something I am not capable of supplying, I am under orders—”

Ian threw up a hand. “Wait. No need. There’s no need to go on. I get the picture.” Gesturing the angel over to the plane, he pointed to the propeller. “I want you to crank it for me. I need to see if I can turn over the engine.”

Brond’s confused look made him smile.

“Like this.” Grabbing one of the blades, Ian gave it a strong tug downward. It barely went a full rotation before rocking to a halt. “Can you handle it?”

“I will try,” the angel said, taking Ian’s place.

Ian climbed back into the cockpit and set the throttle. “All right. When I say go, you crank it just like I did, and then step away from it. Don’t want you to lose a little skin.”

Brond nodded, waiting.

Quickly, Ian primed the engine. “Now, Brond. Now!”

The angel used his powerful arms to crank the propellers. At the same moment, Ian prayed the lines to the carburetor were intact, and opened the choke.

For less than ten seconds the engine spluttered and smoked as it tried to catch. Ian pulled back on the throttle, but the motor wouldn’t budge.

“Blast! Again, Brond!”

The angel man grabbed a blade, and this time Ian saw the man’s massive arms bulge as he shoved downward.

The engine coughed, hesitating. Ian cursed and reached for the ignition, prepared to shut it down, when the plane suddenly roared to life like a giant animal. Ian raised his arms over his head and cheered, and on the other side of the temporary hangar, the angel man stared wide-eyed at the mechanical beast.

But jubilation had to be short-lived. Cutting the motor, Ian quickly closed the throttle, shutting down the engine. While the high-pitched scream slowly faded, he watched the dials on the console.

He had just under a quarter of a tank of petrol. That meant from the time he left Oslo with a full tank, entered that storm cloud, and passed through the rift into this world, he had burned nearly two hundred liters of precious fuel.

“You seem perturbed,” the angel commented. The man had come up to the side of the plane. Ian glanced down at him. “Your machine appears to be in salvageable condition.”

“Oh, it is. There’s just one problem. Your world doesn’t have petrol, does it?”

“Petrol?”

“Fuel. Gasoline.”

“Does this machine need it to fly?”

“Yeah.”

"I am afraid not."

Ian grimaced. "I was afraid you would say that."

"Does this mean your machine cannot fly, even if it works?"

"Oh, it'll fly, but not very far," Ian admitted, glancing out the open doorway at the cloudy sky. "Not unless I can find an alternative fuel that'll work in a pinch."

At least the engine was intact. Thank the good Lord for that. There was a chance he could leave this world and return to Earth, but he had to be stingy with the petrol. From this moment on, every drop was more valuable than gold.

First things first, I have to get the plane airworthy. Tools. I need tools.

Leaning over the fuselage, he asked the angel, "You wouldn't happen to have a screwdriver or a monkey wrench you could loan me, would you, old chap? And perhaps a hammer?"

"A...mon...key...what?"

Ian rolled his eyes in exasperation.

Patience, old boy. Patience. And keep reminding yourself you're going to have a whale of a tale to tell your grandchildren when you get back.

Grandchildren. And if he was lucky, some of them might have thick, black hair and green eyes like their grandmother. If he was lucky. Very, very lucky. And yet, so far, his luck had not let him down.

Ian smiled at the possibility.

Chapter 23

The Offer

She could hear banging coming from the shelter where the plane was housed before the trap landed near the open doorway. Bemused, Annie thanked the carriers and told them she would be a while, they didn't need to wait for her. One carrier, a man named Tomares whom she personally knew, cast a wary eye at the shelter.

"Will you be safe here by yourself?"

"I'll be fine. Thank you. I'll call for another trap when I'm ready to leave."

The man nodded, and Annie watched the trap lift away before she headed for the shelter.

As she approached, she could see the plane faintly reflecting the sunlight. It looked like a giant silver mechanical bird with two pairs of wings. It also reminded her of the planes that did aerial stunts at the county fair back in Ohio. Although she had never been up close to one, she was eager for the chance. And for the chance to see Ian again.

Rion had not been happy when she told him she was going to meet Ian, but she knew Rion trusted her. He believed in her love, and that was enough when he grudgingly kissed her before she left.

She reached the open doorway in time to hear a yell of pain, followed by an expletive she hadn't heard in years. The sound of it was enough to make her laugh out loud.

A head started to rise from the middle of the airplane, but smacked against something. Ian let go with another choice derogatory phrase. This time Annie covered her mouth to smother the giggles. He peered down at her as he rubbed his crown.

"Ello, pretty lady!"

She waved back, still smiling. "Hello, yourself!"

"To what do I owe this honor?"

Annie giggled. "I came to see your airplane."

"Well, what do you think of her?"

Spreading her arms, Annie beamed. "She is *beautiful*! Oh, Ian, she is..." Pausing, Annie glanced back up at where he was beginning to crawl out of the cockpit. "She?"

"She is a Gloster SS37, better known as a Gloster Gladiator." He jumped down to the ground and turned to pat the fuselage. "Of course, she's pretty much an antique by now."

"How's that?"

"She's one of the few biplanes left in commission. The RAF switched over to the new monoplanes a couple of years ago, but my beauty has proven herself countless times in the past." He crooked a finger at Annie. "Come here. I want to show you something."

Annie followed him around to the far side of the plane. Ian pointed to several marks located on the fuselage, just underneath where he would sit. They looked like little airplanes with Xs over them.

"Take a gander at that, love. Sixteen confirmed kills."

Her eyes widened. "You keep score like that? By drawing pictures on the side?"

"Exactly." Ian smiled, obviously very proud of his accomplishment.

Annie stared at the markings, mentally counting them even though she already knew how many there were. Hesitantly, she reached out to touch the metal skin.

"It's cold."

"Would you like to sit in it?"

"Would I..." she gasped. "Oh, yes!"

He eyed her pants and top as he helped her remove her shawl and lay it on the wing. "All right. Here's what you do. Watch me."

Defly he grabbed part of the lower wing to hoist himself up, then hooked himself into the cockpit. "Think you can

manage it? I'd get you a ladder, but I don't have the foggiest idea where to get one."

"Not a problem. Give me a hand?"

Although she had never climbed into a plane before, it didn't look too difficult when he did it. Besides, she had climbed enough trees in her childhood. Carefully, Annie grabbed where he had, and stepped where he had placed his feet. Ian's hand was there, reaching for her when she got to the cockpit opening. Memories of other equally tomboyish actions when she had been growing up on the farm in Ohio came back to her. Annie shrieked with delight as she was lifted over the side and stepped down onto the seat.

"Hold on. It'll be tight, but we can both fit," Ian warned her. He scooted as far back as he could as Annie settled in front of him.

It was definitely a tight fit. Her back was pressed against his chest to the point where she could feel every breath he took. She was also aware of his erection beginning to prod her butt cheeks. Annie tried not to squirm, but the feeling of it was neither exciting nor titillating. She was beginning to think it had not been a wise idea to climb inside with him, when Ian reached up and closed the transparent overhead hatch.

"There now. How's that?"

Before she could answer, he grabbed her hands and placed them on the wheel. His arms slid along hers, making the tiny hairs in her skin crackle with static electricity. The cockpit was quickly growing stuffy, not to mention overly warm.

"Bet you've never been inside a war bird, have you?" he whispered at her neck.

"No."

"Imagine soaring through the blue skies, the wind whistling around you, the earth stretched out below looking like some grandmother's hand-stitched quilt."

Annie nervously giggled. "You forget I already do that." She felt him stiffen.

"My apologies, Annie."

"No. That's all right. I understand." She practiced turning the wheel as her eyes roamed over the panel of dials and switches. "I bet it gets noisy."

He chuckled. "It does."

"And you really think you can get it flying again?"

"I don't think, Annie. I know. I got the engine to start up yesterday. Once I get the rest of the repairs done, I should be able to fly out of here without any trouble."

"I think you're forgetting one very important fact, Ian."

"Oh? And what would that be?"

"You need a rift to fly through, and those don't happen unless there's a storm."

"Then I need to get cracking so I can be ready when the next one hits, don't you think?"

Annie reached out to touch the glass coverings over the dials. There were a couple of levers rising from the floorboard, reminding her of the stick shifts on the tractor she used to drive on her family farm. One of them had a red button on it that said "FYRE". Murmuring the word aloud, she started to grab it when Ian caught her wrist and pulled it back.

"Better not touch that, love. The systems are armed."

"Armed?" She tried to look back over her shoulder at him, but it was too tight a space.

"See that button on the panel?" He pointed out a little red cap in front of her. "When that lights up, it means there's a fire in the engine. That's when I press the button on that stick. It releases foam into the engine to put out the fire." Ian chuckled. "Press the button by accident, and I would have another bloody mess to clean up."

"Oh. Sorry." Looking through the windscreen at the sky visible outside the makeshift hangar, Annie could see the clouds gathering, blotting the suns as the weather turned colder. "Looks like there's another cold snap approaching. I'd better leave while I can still hire a trap. Besides, I'm keeping you from your work."

To her relief, Ian unlatched the roof and opened it. Cool air blew over them. Annie rose to her feet, prepared to climb out, when Ian tugged on her tunic.

"Annie, we need to talk."

She turned around to look down at him. "Don't you need to work on your—"

"If I...when I leave here, I want you to go with me."

Somehow she knew he was going to ask her. Deep down, she'd always known he had planned to. Her heart jumped at the offer, but...

"I'm sorry, Ian, but I can't."

His brows lowered. "Why not?"

"It's...complicated."

"I thought you missed Earth. I thought you were willing to do anything to go back."

"I do miss it, Ian. Oh, God, you don't know how much I wish I could see it again..." Her voice gave out of her as tears rose in her eyes. "But if I go back with you, how will I return?"

"That's easy, Annie. Your husband can fly you back, just like he did the first time."

"No, no. He can't." She shook her head as her hands gripped the top of the windshield. "When Rion got shot, it nearly killed him, but he could still fly. It took a long time for him to heal, and his back bothers him almost constantly, but he can't fly the rifts anymore. His wings can't tolerate the stress. And then, after the tosis..."

She wiped a tear from rolling down her cheek and sniffed loudly. She felt Ian gently touch the back of her leg.

"My apologies, my dearest Annie. Well, if your husband can no longer fly you back, how about another angel? Didn't you say there were others who continue to travel back and forth?"

"Yes."

"Then why not get one of those blokes to carry you?"

Annie stopped to think.

"Then why not get one of those blokes to carry you?" That made perfect sense.

How many nights had she stayed up, unable to sleep because Rion had been obligated to remain at the way station? And during those restless nights, how many times did she watch the moons glide across the sky and think of Earth? Wondering how that world was doing. Wondering what was happening on her home world as it faced the war and all.

Could she go back there? What if she could go back? How many different solutions had she dreamed of that would enable her to go back and return, if only for a few days?

Carrying her over was risky. Bringing her back was riskier.

But if Ian flew me back, that would be one less risk to deal with.

"Annie?"

"Let me think about it, Ian."

"It may be your only chance to see our world again," Ian pressed.

"I know. I know." She grabbed the upper wing and crawled out of the cockpit. Once she was back on the ground, Annie looked up at where Ian was watching her. It took effort to paste a smile on her face. "Thank you for the offer, Ian. Let me think on it, would you? Let me have a chance to talk to Rion and see what he says."

"Very well, Annie. I understand. But you also have to understand that I'm going to take the first storm that opens up a way out of here."

"I know," she repeated, backing away. "Look, I have some things I need to tend to. I just came by to see how you were doing. How the repairs were going."

"I'm glad you did."

"Can I come back tomorrow?" she asked, grabbing her shawl as she stepped away from the aircraft. "Would it be a problem?"

"You can come anytime, my dear. You're welcome anytime."

"Thank you. Goodbye, Ian. I'll see you tomorrow." She gave him a little wave, pulled her shawl tighter around her, and left the temporary hangar.

She would need to return to the way station in order to summon another trap. It was not a short walk, but it would seem that way.

There was a lot on her mind to keep her occupied.

Chapter 24

The Laws

Rion stared at the missive one more time and then tossed it onto the table. Dragging a hand through his hair, he stared up at the portrait he'd done of Annie and Kerr as he silently prayed.

Please do not go, Annie. Please. Do not leave me.

"Lord Rion?"

He turned to see Grimar standing in the open doorway. He nodded for the man to continue.

"I requested a trap. And Lady Annie is on her way up."

The last surprised him. Rion knew she had left to visit with Ian, as much as he didn't want her to. But he had expected her to be gone longer than this.

"Is she alone?"

The messenger nodded.

"Thank you, Grimar. Any word on Daralien or Jeffer?"

"No, my lord. However, the weather is beginning to get colder."

Rion frowned. "Do the predictions forecast another storm?"

"A small one, with rain and maybe some ice, but nothing major."

"Thank you. Let me know when the trap arrives."

Grimar nodded and left. Vadon immediately took his place.

"Rumor says you received an official summons from Lordess Siba. You did not tell me you had asked for legal help."

Rion watched as his brother walked in and took a seat nearby. "I did not wish to worry you."

"Worry me?" Vadon frowned. "Why? What did you ask her?"

"About Annie leaving. If I could stop her."

"Rion..."

Rion waved for silence before his brother could begin. "Never mind. You probably already know the answer."

"She is an outworlder. She is exempt from our laws. You cannot forbid her anything. I could have told you that."

Vadon rolled his eyes, adding, "Of course, you would not have believed *me*."

The remark got a smile out of Rion. "You know me too well."

"Do you really think she would go back to her world with the stranger?"

"I am conflicted, Vadon. Do I let her go, knowing I may never see her again? Or do I try to stop her, knowing her health may deteriorate because of my selfishness?"

Bending over on his stool, Vadon clasped his hands between his knees. "Can we look at this in a different light? What if the stranger does take her back? Let Annie spend some time over on her world. Can one of the Lords bring her back with him?"

"It sounds simple, Vadon, when the reality is anything but," Rion said. "For one thing, there would have to be another Lord already in her vicinity. For another, he would have to avoid detection and be in good health in order to bring back a second person. In addition, how can we be certain that Annie can physically withstand another passing through the rift? She is not like us. Her body may not be able to tolerate the stress again." He clenched his fists as his eyes drifted back to the missive. "How can we be sure the air machine can make it back through the rift? That Annie *can* go back?"

"Have you voiced your fears to her?"

Rion shook his head. "She already knows them. She knows I love her, and that I want everything that is good for her, even if it means...her leaving."

Indicating the official communique with a nod of his head, Vadon asked, "Any idea why the Lordess needs to see you?"

"No. But there's no urgency."

Another messenger named Ulut ran up to the doorway. "Your trap is here."

"Thank you. Have you seen Annie?" Rion asked.

"On her way up." Before Rion could thank him again, the messenger hurried away.

"How much longer do you think it will take the stranger to finish his repairs?" Vadon said.

"I have Lord Brond keeping a close eye on the man and his machine. He tells me the repairs are coming along quickly."

Vadon looked surprised. "How quickly?"

"He will inform me when the repairs are complete. But it would not be unreasonable to estimate another two or three cycles.

Vadon gave a low whistle. "Even if he does finish them, he will need to wait for another storm to give him access. And all of this is assuming the repairs are adequate to get the machine flying again."

"True. Brond told me the man was asking about something called 'petrol'. It is a liquid that the machine needs to fuel itself."

"We do not have any sort of liquid that could substitute, do we?" Vadon wondered aloud.

"Not that I am aware of," Rion said.

"There is something else I have been needing to ask you." Vadon stood, moved closer to Rion, and lowered his voice.

A movement from outside the doorway caught his attention. Rion could see Annie making her way over to the office, and he was sure Vadon's closeness meant his brother had seen her approaching and didn't want her to overhear.

"What if the otherworlder is not able to return to Earth? What if he has to remain here for the rest of his life? What then, Rion?"

"I do not understand."

"I meant...could you accept the man as a part of your life?"

Rion shot him a puzzled look.

"Surely, Rion, if the man becomes a permanent part of our world, do you expect Annie never to see him again, or never to have any sort of contact with him again?"

As the implication took root, Rion felt a chill crawl through his veins. Silently he watched Annie as she drew nearer, and a smile full of warmth and love surfaced on her beautiful face.

Could he accept the otherworlder as part of his life?

Could he share Annie with another man?

Outworlders are not bound by our laws.

Maybe not. But maybe it was time to change that restriction.

And the laws.

Chapter 25

The Possibility

“You’re brooding.”

Rion glanced over at his wife, who was keenly watching him. They were on their way over to Joberiah’s to pick up Kerr before heading home. Despite the semidarkness, he could see the smug grin on Annie’s face.

“I have the right to brood. Comes with the job.”

Annie snorted. “If you’re brooding about the job, I’d agree with you. But I know the difference between a job brood and a pouting brood. And you, sir, are pouting.” She gave him a hard nudge against his side, but he barely moved. The trap was tight for space when two people sat across from each other. But because Annie had opted to practically sprawl across Rion’s lap just so she could be beside him, there was hardly any room left to maneuver.

The heat box in the middle of the floor kept the trap warm enough to where they weren’t subjected to the outside cold or damp weather. Regardless of everything else, they were snug and comfortable. Unfortunately, Rion knew his wife was right. Had his frame of mind been different, he might have tried to put a few moves on his wife, just for fun.

“Ever do it in a trap?” Annie suddenly asked him.

Rion started. It wasn’t the first time she had said something along the same wave length as he was thinking. Regardless, it was surprising whenever it happened.

“Do what?” he questioned, feigning ignorance.

Annie’s smile widened. “You know. *It*.”

“You are trying to get my mind off my troubles,” he gently accused her.

She wagged her eyebrows at him and gave him another nudge. “You betcha. Is it working?”

He felt a hand sliding across his thigh as her warm palm slipped down between his legs. Short fingernails raked through the fabric of his pants, not enough to mark his flesh, but still managing to send a tingling through his nerve endings, all the way into his brain. She was teasing him, enticing him.

Yes, it was definitely working.

“There is barely enough room in here for the both of us to sit,” Rion softly growled. “How do you expect us to be able to make love in here?”

“Hey! You were the one who showed me how to make love while flying,” she reminded him.

“We were not sitting in a cramped trap at the time.”

“Oh, come on, Rion! Where’s your adventurous spirit? Where’s your imagination? Don’t tell me you can’t think of a way—”

He shut her up in the most effective way he knew. Pulling her into his lap, Rion took her lips with a force that caught her unaware. She squirmed slightly, and he released his grip enough to where she could make herself more comfortable. The last thing he expected was for her to work her hand underneath his tunic and inside the front of his pants, until she found his growing erection.

“What do you think you are doing?”

“Good Lord, Rion! Do I have to spell it out for you?” She giggled, giving him a squeeze. Burying his nose along her neck, Rion trembled.

“If you insist on doing that, my beloved...then you had best be prepared for me to retaliate,” he gasped.

Annie gave a little squeak of surprise when he lifted her with one arm. She released her hold on him as her head lightly bumped against the roof of the trap.

“Are you all right?”

“Yes, but what are you—”

With his other hand, Rion pulled her pants down to her knees, then rocked side to side as he did the same to himself. Annie eyed his full length slanted up toward her, and the look of desire he saw on her face was priceless. Gradually he

lowered her, giving her time to straddle him while he held his member at ready.

He slid easily into her, and a moan vibrated in her chest. Annie clamped her thighs on either side of his and started to pull her tunic over her head when he stopped her.

"No, no. Leave it on."

Rion helped her slide her arms out of the sleeves, pushing the garment over her shoulders to drape down her back like a cape. With her upper body bared, he lifted her full breasts to give him easy access to her luscious nipples. In his mouth, they became engorged—stiff and thick, the way he loved to feel them when he suckled. A quick glance into her eyes, and he smiled at the way her face had gone slack, her head tilted slightly back. She relished his mouth on her as much as he loved fondling her, perhaps more.

Gently teething the rigid tips, he felt her wetness increasing around him. Her silken inner muscles quivered around his erection, making him harder. Rion realized that what had started out as innocent love play was quickly escalating into a full-fledged inferno.

"Rion." Her hands rested lightly on his shoulders. Her lips brushed the top of his head. And then her inner walls clamped down on him like a vise of raw heat. Rion reacted, gasping as his hips jerked.

"You do not play fair," he accused her.

Her breasts were warm and firm. They filled his large hands to where he could bury his face against them, nuzzling, kissing, gently licking their swells with his tongue. There had been times he could almost bring her to climax by manipulating them.

Once more Annie clenched her inner muscles, and lightning shot from his erection, up his spine, and into his brain. Groaning, one nipple popped from between his lips with a soft smacking sound. Before he could ask her to do it again, Annie began to pump him, moving up and down over his thickness.

Rion released her breasts to hold her around the waist. Guiding her became easier. Annie grabbed his face and lifted it. Her mouth came down over his in a kiss that sent his passion soaring.

Her tongue pushed past his lips and teeth, acting like another penis. Her sweet muscle filled his mouth, preventing him from saying her name, preventing him from telling her how beautiful she was, and how much he loved her.

He could hear their flesh slapping with moist, sucking sounds. Their lovemaking grew more frantic, with Annie pumping his mouth almost maniacally. This give and take was unlike any other time they had made love. Rion found himself reaching for her both emotionally and physically. He could also sense Annie's gradual climb toward perfection with her fingers digging into the rock-hard muscles of his neck and shoulders.

His hands involuntarily slid up her back as he gave in to the sensations she brought to him. Annie was in charge, totally in control, and he was more than willing to let her guide him to their conclusion.

In the back of his mind, he was aware of his fingertips grazing across coarse ridges in her otherwise velvety skin. They were the scars left from her terrible beating back on her world. And although Chloe tried many times to talk Annie into letting her smooth out those scars, Annie had repeatedly turned the physician down. She called the visible reminders her personal badges of courage, and she bore the ugly keloid ridges with pride.

Annie continued to ram herself over him, dropping harder and heavier with every thrust. Her breath made little grunting noises with every impact—the music of sex. Rion's hands slid up her back, lost in the maelstrom churning through him. His own release was sizzling through his blood, heading upward from the soles of his feet to his groin.

Somewhere in the midst of the sexual fog enveloping his brain, Rion was aware of a dry, rough patch of skin in the vicinity of Annie's shoulder blades. Two of them, in fact. His fingertips circled them as he took subconscious note of their size and shape, and the curious texture. He started to pull away, just enough to question her about them when a subtle shifting of the trap warned him they were coming in to land. The carriers were turning the little conveyance sideways in order for the door to open onto the landing pad.

There was no time to complete their moment, and no time to ask her about the patches. Gripping her hips firmly, Rion forced his wife to cease, slowing her movements to the point where she was nearly all the way up to his bulbous head when she finally stopped.

Annie tore her mouth away from his. "What—"

"We are here," he managed to mutter. He was careening on the edge, a hairsbreadth away from exploding. It would take no more than the slightest pressure, and he would go over the edge.

But not here, and not now. And definitely not in front of others.

A shudder jolted him as Rion forced himself to calm, but it was like trying to douse a raging forest fire with spit.

"God, Rion, I'm so close! So close!" she whispered, near tears and trembling herself from being almost at the point of perfection.

"Later. We will resume this later, I promise."

"But—"

Quickly, he lifted her off and away from his erection that stubbornly refused to wilt. If she touched it now, or if he somehow manipulated it himself...

Annie lowered her feet to the floor of the trap and scooted backwards. Tears glistened on her cheeks, which she quickly wiped away before pulling her pants back on. Rion, likewise, redressed. Once he was finished, he snagged her arm and pulled her back into his embrace.

"Forgive me, my Annie, but we knew there was the chance—"

"Yes, yes, yes, I knew, but *damn it!*" She rolled her lovely green eyes up at him where he could see a sudden glint of mischievousness in their depths. "You do realize, kind sir, that you will have your work cut out for you tonight, don't you?"

"My work cut out?"

"You better believe it, buster. You owe me two orgasms. One for tonight, and one to make up for the one we almost had."

Her pretend indignation was infectious, and Rion caught himself chuckling. Wrapping his arms around her, he answered her with a warm kiss.

"Two orgasms? Do you have the stamina?" he challenged her.

"*Me* have the stamina?" She started to say something else, but the trap thumped to a halt, interrupting their conversation.

Rion got to his feet, adjusting his pants once more, and noticed with relief that he was at least presentable. Placing a hand to Annie's back, he started to guide her out the doorway when again he felt the unusual roughness on her back. Brushing aside the long ponytail Annie liked to wear her hair in, he was able to glance down the back of her tunic. It only took a split second, but it was enough for him to see the bloody-looking wounds.

A small warning bell went off in the back of his mind. Annie's skin had always been soft and supple. As far as he knew, she had never been plagued with unusually dry skin or sores.

But not this time. The redness was noticeable through her sheer tunic, and Rion's eyes widened as he recognized their location.

The warning bell was joined by a cold, numbing fear, and he swore that the moment after they returned home, he would have Chloe look at the sites.

Oh, sweetest heavens, please do not let it be what I think it is! He continued praying as he watched his wife cuddle their son in welcome.

Chapter 26

The Report

Rion wasted no time seeking out Chloe. Since she wasn't at the house when he and Annie arrived, that meant she was either on her way home, or still at the hospital. He silently cursed himself for letting the trap go after arriving.

Striding back outside, he grabbed a flare gun and a green signal ball from the box mounted on the wall, and sent the screaming light into the sky.

"What are you doing?"

He turned to see Annie standing at the doorway. The lamp's glow behind her gave her an almost ethereal halo around her shoulders and head.

"I need to go to the hospital for a moment. Do not worry. I promise not to be long."

Her face immediately revealed her concern. "Are you feeling all right? We didn't injure anything back in the trap, did we?"

Rion hurried over to cup her cheek with his free hand. "I am fine, but there is something I need to do before we call it a night."

"But it's getting late."

"Trust me. This is important or I would not be leaving," he told her as he replaced the flare gun in the wall mount. "Vadon and Chloe should be here soon."

"I'm not worried about being here alone, Rion. I worry when you go off on these last-minute tangents. You've got a bee in your bonnet, and you're not about to let it go until you find the answer you're seeking. I know you too well."

He started to reassure her when the sound of flapping wings approached the landing area. Moments later a courier angel touched down.

"I need a trap," Rion snapped.

The angel gave a single nod of acknowledgment and dove off the platform.

"Rion." From her tone of voice, he could tell she still questioned his decision to leave, especially this late in the day, and when most establishments were already closed. "You're going to the hospital, aren't you?"

"Yes."

"This is still about Ian, isn't it?"

He felt a sense of relief knowing he could answer her with truthfulness. "No. This is not about him."

"Then why—"

Rion held up his hand for silence, following it with a quick kiss. "What time is it now?" Together they glanced back into the living area where a timepiece sat on a long shelf above the couch. Rion answered his own question. "It is forty-two and sixteen past second sunset." He smiled at her when she turned around. "If I am not back by sixty and twenty-one, I will owe you *three* orgasms tonight."

Annie's eyes widened to the point where he could see lights reflected in them. "That's mighty big talk, mister." She added a grin. "All right. You're on. While you're over at the hospital, I'll get Kerr ready for bed and try to start supper."

Once again, the sound of flapping interrupted them. It would be the trap.

"Oh, one more thing, dear husband. You might want to think about picking up some vitamins while you're at the hospital. You never know, you might need them." Giving him a wink, Annie sauntered back into the living area with a saucy jiggle of her hips. Rion chuckled as the trap landed for him.

Time seemed to drag on the trip over to the hospital. Rion kept his eyes peeled, watching for a familiar streak of red to pass by, heading the other way, without any luck. As soon as he arrived at the hospital, he had a messenger send out an all-call for Chloe, and hoped he hadn't missed her. It wasn't long before she came rushing into the small chamber where the warrior angels went to have minor wounds tended, to find him sitting on an examination table.

"Rion! What is wrong?"

He got to his feet to show her he was not the emergency. "When was the last time you examined Annie?"

The woman angel stopped to think. From the look on his face, and the tone of his voice, he knew she had realized he was not there to talk about himself.

"It has been a couple of months, why?"

"Did you notice any abnormalities on her back?"

"Abnormalities? You mean the scars?"

Rion gave an angry shake of his head. "No, I mean the raw sores around her shoulder blades."

Chloe frowned. "I know nothing about raw sores, although I have frequently seen her scratching her back as of late. Do you want me to inspect them?"

"Yes. Please."

She gave a little nod to let him know she would. "Did you come all the way over here tonight simply to ask me to examine Annie when I got home?"

"Yes."

Her frown deepened, and Rion could see the first hint of panic on her face. "What is wrong, Rion?"

"I think..." He paused and bowed his head to stare at his hands lying in his lap. "I pray I am wrong, but when I touched them..."

She gave a little gasp of shock. "Are they weeping sores? Like blisters that have opened?"

"No. More like scabs. Very large, very rough scabs."

"When you touched them, did she react?"

"React?" He paused to think back. Did Annie shrink away when he touched them? It was difficult to say, considering how deep they were into having sex when he first encountered them. "I do not recall if she did."

"If they are scabbed over, they may not be causing her any pain at the moment. Although I know she has been complaining... No, I take that back. Annie never complains. But she did say a couple of times that she thought she was suffering from abnormally dry skin. And you did not encounter them before today?"

"No. Not until tonight."

Chloe grimaced. "I will examine her as soon as I get home. Do not worry."

"When it comes to my Annie, I cannot help but worry," Rion whispered.

Walking over to him, the physician laid a cool hand on his arm. "It may be nothing but a mild allergic reaction to something. I will let you know what I find. Oh! And speaking of find." She reached into the pocket of her gown and extracted a scroll to hand to him. "Lordess Siba dropped by to have a burn looked at. She told me she was on her way to deliver this to you. I told her I would do it for her."

Rion took the scroll, broke the seal, and unrolled it. After reading through the report once, he went back and reread it to make sure he didn't miss anything. Chloe walked up behind him to peer over his shoulder.

"This is a physician's report," she told him.

"How do you know?"

"There. Lower right. That is a copy of the physician's symbol signifying responsibility." She hesitated. "I do not recognize the name."

"I would not expect you to," Rion said. "This was written over six hundred master cycles ago. I mean, this is a copy of the original that was written that long ago."

"Is this scroll about one of the otherworlders who came here before Annie?"

"Yes. And this one is of great interest to me." He tapped the scroll. "This outworlder lived to bear three children, and died fifty years after she came over."

"The one Vadon said was from Callumed's House."

"Unfortunately, there is no one I can talk to from his House," Rion explained. "He was without a wife. No children. And there is no one left in his immediate family outside of a great-aunt from his mother's side."

Chloe leaned closer to read the report for herself. "This is a death certificate. She was seventy-four."

"This has to be a mistake," he commented, pointing to a specific paragraph. "It says she died of excoriation. What kind of medical damage would you call 'excoriation', Chloe?"

She shook her head, clearly confused. "There are several factors which could lead to it. It could be damage to the skin."

But maybe this remark in her past history might be a clue. Rion, look.”

“She was bit by a liorican? And survived?”

“She was given a total transfusion,” Chloe noted. “That is what saved her. The physicians managed to remove the toxin infused blood before the poison spread into her tissues. Rion... Annie had a total transfusion, too, you know.”

He stared at the woman as memories from the past year resurfaced.

Anitra.

Byric.

The trial.

Annie’s near death.

“What are you saying? Are you saying that Annie could live as long as this otherworlder did because she had a complete transfusion of blood?” Rion asked.

“It is very possible. Only time will tell. But you know as well as I do that our blood has done miraculous things to people on Earth who have been given it.”

“Our blood has also killed otherworlders.”

“True.” She nodded. “But Annie has been blessed. She is one of the few who are able to take our blood.”

“Like this woman here. She was blessed, and it was enough to let her live for another fifty plus years. But how could she die of excoriation? I thought that only occurred in us, not outworlders.”

“If her blood had been replaced, her body would have produced human blood, giving her a mixture of hers and ours. Or...” Chloe bit her lower lip as she mulled over the possibilities. “Or her body may have adjusted to produce a whole new strain of blood that combined the two separate strains. If that was the case, she could have contracted the disease which led to her death by excoriation.”

“Then it is very possible Annie could contract one of our diseases since she has our blood in her,” Rion theorized.

Behind him, Chloe sighed heavily. “It is very feasible.”

Rion tried to swallow as fear raised its dark and ugly head. Turning around to look directly into the woman’s face, he said, “Then it is also feasible that what Annie is suffering now is a result of her transfusion.”

The physician frowned. “Suffering? You mean the sores on her back?”

Before Rion could elaborate, a shudder ran through her, and Rion saw her face take on the same look of fear as he knew must be on his. Chloe raised a hand to her lips. “Oh, dearest sun in the heavens, *no!*”

“Before I brought her to our world, I told Annie she had no fear of contracting Perrin’s Disease. Please, Chloe. Please help me. I have never lied to her. Do not let me go back on my word. Not with something as horrible as Perrin’s Disease.”

The hand she placed on his arm sent positive warmth through his body. Relaxing, promising, and giving hope.

“I will examine her as soon as I get home. And if it is what you think it is, I will enlist every physician on our world if I must to fight it.” She barely managed a smile, but it was a definite smile. “You and she will have your fifty years together, and that is *my* promise.”

Chapter 27

The Encounter

“Is your husband comfortable with you being here?”

Annie’s laughter was enough to chase away the gloom of the dark gray clouds hanging overhead. Ian glanced up at the low ceiling and double-dared the weather to rain.

“Let’s just say he’s not happy I come by, but he understands why I do.”

“Why *do* you come?” Ian asked.

She made a rude noise. “Why do men have to ask such dumb questions?”

“Touché.”

The fact that she added a smile to her last comment raised the needle on his emotional dial. Ian realized he was gaining Annie’s trust, albeit slowly. For now he could accept her trust, knowing that her love would follow...eventually. If everything worked out the way he hoped, she would go with him back to their world. It was almost a constant prayer on his lips these days.

He had spent the last two days concentrating on repairing the plane. As long as he was left relatively alone, he could get a lot accomplished. The work was tedious but not necessarily difficult. In fact, the only real problem he encountered was finding or adapting the tools he needed from what the angels could offer. There was always one of the angels standing guard whom he could call on for help. Standing guard to protect. Or to watch. It didn’t matter. The point was he was never allowed to be by himself.

The only time he stopped was during Annie’s infrequent and too short visits. Yesterday she stayed nearly an hour. The day before, barely ten minutes. But every time she appeared, it was without warning or invitation, but always gratefully welcomed.

Speaking of guards...

Ian glanced around the hangar. Now that he thought about it, the only time the guards weren’t omnipotently present was when Annie came by. Which meant she either dismissed them, or they took advantage of her visit to take a quick break. It really didn’t matter. It was nice to have some alone time with her.

Ian turned back to see her eyeing the plane. “To what do I owe your visit today?”

She scrunched her nose up at him. “Huh?”

“I’m delighted you came by,” Ian told her. “Are you on an errand, and simply dropped by to say hello? Or can you stay a while?”

“I can’t stay long. Sorry. I promised Chloe I’d go by the hospital and have Lord Ebram examine the sores on my back.”

“Sores?”

She shrugged. “She thinks I’m having some sort of allergic reaction to something. She examined me last night, but she said she wasn’t quite sure.”

“This Lord Ebram must be a specialist,” Ian commented.

“I guess.”

“Are you in any pain? I mean, what kind of reaction are you having?”

Annie crossed her legs in front of her and pulled her shawl tighter about her. The wind was brisk where they were sitting not far from the improvised hangar, but there was no room to sit inside the interior of the makeshift building containing the aircraft. The floor was cluttered with airplane parts.

“No, there’s no pain. Just itching.” She snorted softly. “This morning I woke up to find blood on the sheets. Guess I must have scratched myself in my sleep.”

His first impulse was to ask to see the sores, but his request would have been wholly inappropriate. “Do you have any idea why you’re having this reaction?” he asked her.

“No.” She shook her head. “Rion thinks it might be caused by something I ate or drank, but why now?” Annie gave him

a puzzled look. "I've been here for almost two years. I think I've eaten and drunk pretty much everything this world offers. Why would I start having an allergic reaction now?"

Ian returned her shrug. "Maybe your body can't tolerate it anymore. Or maybe it's not an allergy. Have you thought about that? You could have caught a virus or something more serious."

"I'm not sick, Ian. I'm not running a fever. I haven't thrown up. Hell, I felt worse when I was pregnant." She started to say something more but stopped. Her reticence intrigued him, but Ian chose not to pursue it.

A sudden cold gust pushed against them, followed by a splattering of raindrops. Ian scrambled to his feet and held out a hand to help Annie up. She took his hand, rose, and together they hurried into the hangar. Unfortunately, the building was three-sided, and the one open wall was the side facing the incoming wind. More raindrops blew across their feet.

"I need to go," Annie whispered as she shivered.

Ian fought the need to wrap his arms around her to keep her warm. In fact, it was a struggle not to let go of her hand and pull her tightly against him. Standing this close to her, he could smell her own womanly fragrance. Natural and heady. He would bet the plane she didn't use any kind of cologne.

Quit your gawking and say something, you bloody fool. The longer they stood here this close together, the more awkward things would become. He needed to say something to get her mind off of her allergy problems. And to get his mind off the fact that his willie was starting to gravitate toward her like a magnet to iron.

Ian started to comment about how far along he was with the plane's repairs, when the skies parted with a crash of thunder. A wall of water gushed from the clouds, splashing them and soaking them to the skin. Annie gave a little shriek and turned to bury her face against his chest. Quickly, Ian drew her further back into the hangar where the rain couldn't touch them.

"Annie? Annie, dearest, what's wrong?"

She was shaking in his arms, trembling almost uncontrollably, and it was the sweetest, most wonderful sensation he had ever experienced. He hesitated to put his arms completely around her, but when she reached up to grasp two handfuls of his tunic, he felt he had no other choice. She was needing reassurance, and she was needing warmth.

The moment he pressed her tightly against him, Ian knew it had been a mistake. She was too perfect. Her body was ripe, with full, womanly curves. Her breasts were high. Her thick, fragrant hair tickled him under his cheek and chin. In every conceivable way, this wonderful woman was much too tempting.

His mind was gone; he could no longer think. Everything was rapidly spinning out of control. Like a plane, he was heading for the ground in a death spiral, nose down, building speed, until he reached the ground and exploded into a hundred thousand irretrievable pieces.

Another boom, loud as cannon fire, thundered overhead. On its heels, lightning crackled, nearly blinding them. Annie's entire body jerked. Ian felt her tears warming his skin where they soaked through his tunic. He could hear her whimpering like a frightened child, and then it dawned on him.

"Annie, my dearest..." Gradually, he managed to lift her face so he could look down at her. Her eyes were tightly shut, swollen, and red. "Annie, my love, there's nothing to be afraid of. It's a mere baby of a storm. Nothing worth fretting over. Shhh, listen to me. Open your eyes and look at me."

She started to obey him, her body shaking uncontrollably, when another unbelievably loud boom made the entire building around them act as if it was about to collapse around them. Ian impulsively reacted, jumping nearly out of his skin at the tempest's ferocity. He barely heard Annie's shriek of fear.

Her hands let go of Ian's tunic as she threw her arms around his waist and hugged him like a woman holding onto the only sane lifeline left to her. He reacted purely on instinct, with one arm around her waist and the other around her shoulders, and buried his face into her neck.

The deluge continued to pound into the ground, sending water rushing into the hangar. Vaguely, Ian knew he needed to retrieve the loose engine parts he'd left on the floor, but his arms were cemented to the woman in his embrace. There was no way in hell he was letting her go, and no way in the world he would forget this moment.

As suddenly as it started, the storm appeared to abate. There were no more deafening cannon shots, no more swords of lightning. Even the rain started to let up—gradually but noticeably.

Without removing his face from the perfect juncture at her neck, Ian murmured, "See there? I told you it would all be over soon. There was nothing to fear."

Carefully, Annie began to pull away from him, detaching her arms from their death grip around his waist, and she looked up at him. Her face was still wet; her eyelashes batted away the last of her tears. Despite her flushed face, her puffy eyes, and disheveled appearance, she had never looked more beautiful or vulnerable to him. Common sense flew out the door, along with his heart, and Ian bent down to kiss her.

His lips had barely touched hers when she reacted with a gasp and started to pull away. But his hold on her was absolute, preventing her from retreating. Voices in his head urged him on, goading him, cheering him, justifying his actions.

Kiss her! Make her see reason! Let her see how wrong she had been to come to this place! Make her regret her decision and show her that she needs to be with you! Give her a reason to love you, to fall in love with you as hard as you've fallen for her!

Kiss her, Ian! Kiss her, damn you!

She struggled again to free herself from his hold. Jerking her mouth away from his, she panted as she fought him.

"Ian, let me go. Please...Ian, let me go. Let me go!"

"Annie, my dearest..."

"Ian!"

"Ian Davenport!"

The hard voice was a sharp blade, slicing through the air and severing his arms from around Annie. Ian jerked back in surprise as the voice spoke again.

"You have overstepped your boundaries, and taken advantage of our help and our hospitality. Because of that, you are to be trusted no longer."

Although he was soaked to the skin, Rion seemed to fill the entire wall with his presence. With his dark yellow tunic and natural golden color, the angel reminded Ian of an immense bronze god slowly melting as drops of water fell off his wing tips and puddled around his feet.

Between them, Annie stared at her husband. She touched her lips with her fingertips and then shook her head. "Rion..."

The golden angel held out a hand. "Come. I will escort you to the hospital."

She shook her head again. "It's not...Rion, I..."

He gestured with his fingers for her to come to him. "We will discuss this on the way," he said in a gentler voice. "Come. The storm has abated. It is time we left."

Slowly, Annie walked out of the hangar but avoided taking Rion's hand. Instead, she passed him and continued going. The angel watched her leave then looked back at where Ian remained standing near his plane. The expression on the Lord of Thunder's face chilled Ian's blood.

"This is not over, otherworlder." Rion started to say more, but thought better of it.

Ian watched as the angel left the doorway to follow after his wife. Seconds later, an angel guard took the man's place at the entrance, but this time there was a noticeable difference in the guard's appearance:

The angel was armored and armed.

Chapter 28

The Confession

“Rion, I...” Annie clutched her arms, unable to stop the shivering. On the opposite side of the trap, Rion sat silently watching her. His face was unreadable. A bead of water rolled down the side of his face, but he didn’t make any attempt to wipe it away. The heater in the trap’s floor either wasn’t working, or it was working poorly, because she felt like she was freezing. “You need some dry clothes, or else you’ll catch your death,” she whispered.

“It will not be the first time,” he rumbled. His voice was barely discernable above the steady *whoosh whoosh* sound of the couriers’ wings outside. His eyes remained locked on her, but as they were hidden by the shadows, she couldn’t read him. Not his eyes or his posture. It was as if he was studying her. Or making a decision.

They had never kept anything from each other. Never played deceitful games. And after the incident with Anitra, she made a promise to herself they never would. They had to resolve everything now, or else it would sit and fester, and eventually tear them both apart.

“I didn’t kiss Ian. He kissed me.”

“Yet you had your arms around him,” Rion rebuked her softly.

“I was afraid, all right? You know how frightened I become. I heard the thunder and all, and I just...just grabbed him.” She slowly shook her head as the memory came back to her. Yes, she had been aware of Ian’s strong physique as he held onto her, but nevertheless his embrace had managed to keep her sane and whole during the brief storm. There was no way she could have predicted what he would do afterwards.

“I can’t help myself, Rion. I’m sorry, but I haven’t betrayed you.” She glanced back up at him as she silently prayed for his forgiveness. “I don’t know why he kissed me. I’ve never encouraged him. Please believe me. I’m not in love with Ian.”

Once she’d said it aloud, to her immense relief, she knew it was the truth. Wing Commander Ian Davenport was a wonderful poultice for her homesickness. He had been the tonic she had desperately needed when her will had begun to flag. He had become the balm to soothe her withering spirits. A bright light to chase away her gloom. Nothing more.

Which was why his kissing me had surprised me. I hadn’t wanted him to kiss me. All I had wanted was someone to protect me from the storm, and that’s all.

“Rion...” She glanced up at him again. Unfortunately her tears were beginning to cloud her vision. At least the heat spreading over her face was warming. Annie tried to speak again past the thickness in her throat. “Please, Rion.”

“Please what? Please do not be disappointed in you? Please do not be angry because I rushed down to the containment area in the middle of a lightning storm to make sure you were all right, only to find you in his arms?” He paused to take a shuddering breath, and she realized he was also fighting back tears. When he continued, his voice had dropped even lower. “How far would you have let him go, Annie?”

The impact of his question was like a physical blow.

“No, Rion! Don’t think that! Don’t even imagine it!” Righteous anger crept into her reply. “Do you think I’ll sleep with every man who gives me a little undivided attention? That all someone has to do is show me a pretty smile and treat me decently, and I’ll repay him with a roll in the hay?”

She caught a slight confused knitting of his eyebrows at her comment. It was a facial expression she often saw whenever she said something he didn’t quite understand.

“A roll in the hay—”

“I understand what you mean,” he cut her off. “And, no, I have never believed you would treat your vows to me with such disdain. But it does not excuse what I saw between you. Annie...” His voice shifted again, this time to plead, and he bowed his head. “Annie, I know there is nothing I can do to make you stop wishing to see your world again, but I did warn you when you first mentioned me bringing you here that you would not get to see your Earth again.”

“Yes, you did, but things have changed,” she said.

“True.” He nodded slightly. “Unfortunately, circumstances are still as difficult. Yes, Ian may be able to take you back

in his flying machine. The problem lies with bringing you back. How can I ask my men to risk themselves to bring you back, and it is a risk, Annie. It will always be a risk, no matter how strong a man may be.”

Rion straightened up and looked directly at her again. “Our laws are strict. You have seen that. But you are an outworlder, and for people such as yourself, our laws are less strict.”

Now she was confused. “What are you talking about?”

“I am talking about restrictions. I am talking about the laws that bind the two of us.”

Annie gasped. “Are you talking about a divorce?” Where she got the strength to say it, she had no idea. The word sat between them with all its ugliness and heartache. “R-Rion...are you wanting a div-divorce? From me?”

The tears were coming faster, sliding down her cheeks in silver rivulets. Her skin felt tight and cold. Plus her back was beginning to throb.

“Rion?”

“If you were to go back, Annie, we would first have to nullify our marriage. It is the only way our laws will accept Kerr as my heir.”

“But what if I do find a way back? What if...what if Ian or someone flies me back through another rift, the same way he got here in the first place? What then, Rion? Would I still be your wife?”

Rion clasped his hands and stared at them resting in his lap. “There are no remarriages after a mutual divorce, Annie.”

“But why would I have to divorce you simply to visit my world? Huh? Explain to me *why*?” Her voice sounded shrill, but she was unable to stop herself. The mere thought of divorcing Rion terrified her like nothing had before. “It’s a *trip*, Rion! A vacation! A holiday! It’s not meant to be permanent!”

“You do not know that!” he growled back at her. “How can you say you will not be away from here for any long length of time? Have you already forgotten that our time is different between our worlds? What may pass for a few weeks on Earth is merely several full daylight cycles on Parra! And what if you cannot find a way back? What then? Or...or what if you choose to st—” His voice caught. The word remained stuck in his throat, nearly choking him.

Annie burst into tears and threw herself at her husband. Wrapping her arms tightly around his neck, she hung on for dear life and love. His hands remained in his lap, trapped between his body and hers. Several seconds passed as she clung to him, silently begging as she pressed her lips to his thick neck.

Hold me, Rion. For God’s sake, please hold me. Please.

Slowly, she felt his arms lift until they reached her waist. As they encircled her, she planted kisses along his neck and shoulder, and clung tighter.

“I’m not going. I’m not going, damn it, do you hear me? I’m not leaving you. Ever! If it means never seeing my world again, I’ll accept it. I’ll find some way to accept it. But I’m not divorcing you, and I sure as hell won’t abandon Kerr. I can’t, Rion. I can’t lose you. I can’t.” She sobbed, clutching him. At her back she felt his fists unclenching. His large hands touched her, his fingers brushed across her ribs.

Suddenly, Rion crushed her to him. “If you change your mind, I cannot stop you,” he brokenly whispered near her ear.

Annie managed a small shake of her head. “I promise. I’m not changing my mind.”

“Annie...”

“Your people tried to separate us, and failed. Now my world is trying, but it won’t work.” Pulling back until she could see his face, into his eyes, she whispered, “I love you so much it hurts when you’re away, even to go to work. How the hell can I survive weeks without you?”

“Your melancholy...”

“To hell with that.” She leaned her face in until they touched foreheads. “It won’t kill me never to have ice cream again. But I will die without your love, and you know it’s the truth.”

Rion nodded, too overcome for words. Instead, he guided her face toward his, until he reached her lips. As his mouth enveloped her and she gave herself to him, Annie reached behind her to pull one of his hands away from where it cradled her, and brought it underneath her tunic. His warm palm cupped her breast almost like a drowning man finding a life preserver.

I love touching your breast. A long time ago, he had confessed his fascination for them. Whenever Rion began foreplay, he always reached first for her breasts. Touching them was always his initial move, his goal. His focus. Touching them,

playing with them, suckling them—he found his greatest contentment manipulating that part of her body. Just as he did now, giving her full globe a gentle squeeze before rolling her hardening nipple between his fingers.

He moaned softly in her mouth and pressed her tighter against him. *Too bad it would be another interrupted session in the trap.*

True, Annie smiled, but there would be tonight.

Tonight. And maybe all night.

Chapter 29

The Confrontation

He couldn't sleep.

Vadon lay in bed, gently caressing his wife's feathers as she lay asleep with her back toward him. He wished he could join her. Every muscle in his body ached, but it wasn't his bodily pain which kept him from sleep. It was the man who was insinuating himself between Rion and Annie.

The outworlder, Ian Davenport.

Carefully, he disengaged himself from Chloe and left the bed. Slipping on a pair of pants, he walked down the hallway, bypassed the bathroom, and stopped in front of the second bedroom.

Hearing no sound coming from the other side of the closed doors, Vadon gingerly opened them and peered inside. Had things been different, if there had been any reason not to look, he wouldn't have dared to spy on his brother and sister-in-laws. But ever since Ian Davenport fell into their world, drawing Annie to him as surely as if he had tied a rope to her, Vadon had been forced to stand on the sidelines and watch as Rion's world slowly deteriorated.

Ian Davenport was poison. He seeped between Annie and Rion, bringing a sour rot with him. The sooner the man got his flying machine fixed and left this world, the sooner life could resume the way it was meant to be.

There was no light within the room itself, but the moons shone through the open window. Rays the color of gold lay across the bed and highlighted the couple in it.

Annie slept on her stomach, snuggled against Rion's side. She was nude, and her luxurious wealth of black hair splayed across her shoulders. Vadon frowned to see the swath of bandages wrapped around her neck and crisscrossing under her arms to cover the ugly, weeping sores Chloe had told him about.

Rion slept on his back, his face turned in Annie's direction. Like his wife, he was nude. The covers had been either kicked or shoved onto the floor. Despite the cold weather outside, the room was comfortably warm.

By the calm expressions on their faces, and from the way their bodies remained in contact with each other even in sleep, Vadon could tell all was well between the couple. The faint scent of sex remained in the air, and the smell of it brought him a sense of happiness he had not felt in a very long time.

A small sound drew his attention to where Kerr slept on his improvised pallet on the floor next to Rion's side of the bed. The toddler rolled over, sighed softly then settled down. Smiling, Vadon closed the doors and went into the living room.

The chronometer on the shelf showed it was almost time. Vadon went back into the bedroom and grabbed a tunic. The lantern was hanging on its hook on the outer wall on the landing pad. Making sure the wick was set and the flame was low, he closed the clear glass shields and launched himself into the midnight sky.

This hour of the night the skies were empty. Every so often he could see a faint sparkle of light wavering in the distance—an angel on night duty or a guard on watch carrying their own signal lamp.

As he approached the containment area, he could see a single glow coming from the building. No matter what his personal feelings were about the outworlder, Vadon had to give the man credit for keeping his word.

He landed on the small pad in front of the building. Within the interior he could make out the flying machine sitting in the middle of the space. Vadon stared at the strange, winged object. Although he knew nothing about airplanes, he could tell a lot of repair work had been done on this one. Even to his untrained eye, he had a difficult time spotting any damage.

"Rion must hold a lot of clout with your people. If it had been anyone but him keeping a trap at my disposal, I don't think I would have been able to make good on my promise to meet you here at this ungodly hour."

The otherworlder came up from under the main body of the plane. He was wiping his hands on a clean rag.

"Before the tosis, many businesses remained open, or opened specifically during the night. Hopefully, they will soon resume their regular hours. With fresh crews arriving daily from the other cities, rebuilding is going quickly," Vadon commented.

"You still haven't answered my question," Ian said.

"You did not phrase it as a question."

The otherworlder snorted as he walked over to the wings and leaned against them. Vadon waited as the man looked him up and down, obviously comparing him to his brother.

"I see the resemblance, but you're not bulked up like he is."

"Rion is the designated Lord of Thunder. He is what he is because of the intensive training he had to undergo before he began to fly the rifts."

"And who designated him to be the Lord of Thunder?" Ian asked.

Vadon placed the lantern on the pad as he listened closely to the man's tone of voice and scrutinized his body language. The otherworlder was insolent and obviously used to getting his own way. No doubt the man was the same way when it came to his personal life.

"Tradition designated him. The firstborn of every House becomes the Lord or Lordess, depending on the skills needed."

"And all those poor sods born afterwards get the leftovers."

The simple comment irritated. The man was trying to get under his skin using verbal warfare. Vadon frowned. Ian Davenport cared nothing about this world or its people. He was treating being stranded like another assignment, or a temporary delay. It was evident the man couldn't wait to get away from here. The only bad part was that he planned to take Annie with him when he left.

"You are anxious to finish your repairs and leave us," Vadon said, using the same tone as Ian did. Like himself, the man did not rise to the bait.

"You bloody well better believe it."

"Good." He said it, he meant it, and it was time the man began to see how unwelcome he was fast becoming.

"Well, that's not a very nice thing to say," Ian admonished him.

"Trying to steal my brother's wife has soured my normally friendly disposition," Vadon replied. He wouldn't even pretend to be pleasant to the man. Not any longer.

"Ah." Ian nodded, a smile widening on his face. "I suspected that's why you called for this little rendezvous. Got the hots for her yourself, eh?"

Anger flared fast and bright inside him. Vadon clenched his fists and tried to control his temper. "Watch your tongue, otherworlder. We may appear to be angels of your lore, but we are human. You want to accuse me of being sexually attracted to Annie? How little you know about her. She has an inner goodness that places her far above otherworlders like yourself. She has proven herself worthy of our appreciation because of her devotion to her husband and family."

"Devotion?" Ian snickered. "You speak awfully highly of her, but, then again, you weren't here when she threw herself into my arms and kissed me."

"You lie."

"Watch who you call a liar, mate. Your own brother caught her in the act."

Vadon hesitated. Ian Davenport had to be telling the truth. Why else would he challenge Vadon to verify his claim? But at the same time, the vision of the couple spent from passion and asleep in their bed remained in his mind's eye. It allowed Vadon to retain a grip on his anger.

"Was there another reason why you called this meeting?" the otherworlder inquired without attempting to hide his impatience. "It's late, and we're both tired. What say we go home, get a few hours of sleep, and resume this conversation later when we're rested?"

"I came to ask a favor of you."

"A favor?" The otherworlder looked genuinely surprised. "What the bloody hell for? First you insult me, then you threaten me, and now you want me to grant you a favor?"

"Do not take Annie back with you to your world."

"I don't think you have any say in the matter, old chum."

"No, but she does."

Ian snorted again. "Her and her husband, you mean."

"No." Vadon shook his head. "Rion cannot stop her if she wishes to go."

"He can't? Why not?"

"She is an outworlder like you. Our laws prevent us from holding her against her will."

Standing up straight, Ian took a couple of steps toward him. "You mean your laws don't pertain to us?"

"Yes, they do," Vadon quickly corrected Ian. "You must follow our laws in the same manner which you follow your own world's laws. But because you are an outworlder, any laws that forbid you from participating in certain events, or from going to certain places, or any number of minor infractions that do not specif—" He stopped, knowing he wasn't explaining it properly.

"Let me start over. If you were to steal something, or hurt someone, yes, you would be punished according to our laws. But you are wingless, which means some of our rules do not pertain to you. And since you are from another world, we cannot dictate when you may come and go from there. Is that clearer?"

"Let me see if I understand," Ian said. "If Annie chooses to leave with me, your brother cannot stop her. Have I got that right?"

Vadon started to tell the man he was correct when a little voice warned him he may have said too much. He quickly closed his mouth without answering.

Ian stared at him, waiting, but quickly realized he wouldn't be getting a reply. The man shrugged. "Suit yourself, old chap. I think I understand. You wanted to meet with me to ask that I not take Annie back with me when I fly back to my world. Correction, to *our* world, seeing as she's from Earth like I am. Well, I hate to tell you this, but I've already asked her. All I'm waiting for is for her to give me her answer. And thanks to you, I know now that Rion cannot stop her from climbing into the cockpit with me if she so chooses." The man smiled, nodding. "Thank you for that bit of information, Vadon. I'll be sure to keep it stored securely up here," he added, tapping himself on the temple, "and I'll keep news of this little meeting just between us."

"Then your answer is no?"

"I'm not a fool, Vadon. Neither am I a coward. You're right about one thing. Annie is a sweet temptation. She's a rarity even among *my* people, and I would be a fool not to ask her, much less leave her here."

"Do you realize I am not the only person who does not wish for her to go?" Vadon warned him.

"I don't care if the Queen herself forbids it. Your people can't stop her. You just said so yourself. Now, if you'll excuse me." He disappeared behind his machine to retrieve his lantern, reappearing a moment later. "It's late, and daylight comes too damn early on this world. So if you don't mind, I'm cutting this fascinating conversation short, and I'll see you whenever." Giving Vadon a little salute, Ian began trudging back toward the way station tower where apparently his trap was waiting.

Vadon watched him go as a sick feeling began to uncurl inside his stomach. Initially he had hoped to convince the man to let Annie stay, but he had never been one to wage verbal warfare. Ian Davenport was shrewd and accustomed to dealing with deceit.

This time around, unfortunately, better intentions had not won out. Worse, Vadon began to worry if he had done more harm than good.

Chapter 30

The Diagnosis

Annie sat on the examination table and watched the three physicians—four, counting Chloe—standing in a circle on the other side of the room. They were deep in discussion about the open sores on Annie’s back, which were beginning to do more than just itch. They also bled. And they were starting to cause her pain. What had begun as a mere irritation had slowly become hard bumps. The pain didn’t come until the skin split open. Now, what were once fingernail-sized rashes had become as wide as her fist, and they appeared to still be growing.

The physicians were using what she thought of as “medical talk”. It was a language unique to the physicians, but which others not of those Houses would understand. The Lords of Thunder also had their own special communication. In fact, all the Houses of a particular or specialized skill spoke business to each other in words only others of that skill could understand.

Every so often, Annie noticed one of the physicians, usually Chloe, glancing in her direction. First they had examined every inch of her while jabbering away in their medical talk. After that, a physician named Kleffers checked her out by himself, for some reason that hadn’t been explained to her. The whole thing was becoming unnerving.

“Excuse me!”

The physicians ceased their conversation and turned to stare at her. Annie smiled and waved. “Hey, remember me? I’m the person with the bad back. You’re talking in gibberish, and where I come from, it’s very rude to talk about someone when they’re right in front of you.”

The doors to her far right opened before the physicians could answer. Rion strode into the examination room. From the impatient look on his face, Annie could tell he was at nerve’s end. He walked directly over to where she was sitting and gave her a questioning lift of his eyebrows. Annie shook her head, adding a shrug—which turned out to be a bad idea. Needles of pain lanced up her back, spreading down her arms, up her neck, and into her skull. Annie squeezed her eyes shut and hissed with pain.

Almost immediately a familiar warmth soothed over the worst of it, allowing her to relax. Annie opened her eyes to see Chloe’s caring brown gaze.

“Talk so I can understand you,” Annie begged softly. “It’s bad enough not knowing why this is happening to me without all of you keeping secrets from me, too.”

A heavily muscled arm snaked around her waist, and the heat emanating off Rion’s body was like a comforting fire. Annie never realized how cold she was until he embraced her. The thin examination gown she had been given to wear did nothing to keep away the chill.

“Worry is eating us alive,” Rion told his sister-in-vows. “Tell us what you know. Please.”

“That is the problem,” the red-robed physician named Kleffers admitted. The small group joined them around the examination table. “We have searched our records and cannot find any disease, rash, virus, nothing that matches or resembles what we see on Annie’s back.”

“Does this mean it is not Perrin’s Disease?” Rion asked. Annie felt his hand on her opposite hip, fingers gripping her protectively.

“No,” Chloe firmly stated with a shake of her head. “It is definitely not Perrin’s. There is no indication or sign of rot. Besides, Perrin’s Disease decimates. Whatever is happening to you, Annie, it is growing. Enlarging. Not decreasing.”

“The fact that Annie is an outworlder leads us to believe almost conclusively that this is a new disease,” another physician spoke up. “It may be unique only to her.”

“And not contagious,” Chloe added. “None of us have felt the stirrings of a contagion.”

“And there is more.” A tall, older physician finally spoke. Annie recognized him as the one who had joined the group late and examined her after the others had. Like all physicians, he wore the dark, blood-red robes of his House. But he also had a dark blue slash running from his left collar down to the hem. Annie figured it was either the sign of a higher order or

office, or a special designation.

The man stopped in front of Rion. "I am Grand Lord Geederus of the Houses of Healing. I am honored to meet you, Grand Lord Rion of the Houses of Thunder."

Annie watched in awe as the two men shook at the elbows. Chloe had mentioned the man who oversaw all of the Houses of Healing, which she belonged to. But this was the first time Annie had met him. According to Chloe, Geederus was said to possess a greater ability than all the other physicians, which was why he was designated Grand Lord. It made sense to Annie, as Rion was Grand Lord for all the Lords of Thunder for similar reasons.

Rion wasted no time on formalities. "What can you tell us about Annie's condition?"

"Other than what we have already told you? Very little else. Please forgive us."

Rion's fingers dug into her hip almost painfully. "What about a cure?"

Chloe sighed. "Rion, you know we cannot cure what we do not know. Yes, it *looks* like Perrin's Disease, but it does not smell like it. Nor does it react to us like Perrin's Disease when we work on it. If we were to try and cure her, believing she has Perrin's, our work would be useless. A waste of time and effort."

"At first we thought it might be a form unique only to outworlders. A mutated version," Kleffers said.

"But not a contagious kind, correct?" Rion repeated.

"If you have not had any symptoms, Rion, we can safely assume it is not contagious," Chloe assured him.

"Well, if you can't figure out *what* it is, do you have any idea what caused it?" Annie questioned them.

"That also perplexes us," Geederus admitted. "Had it been something in the air, your lungs would give us a clue. If was something you ate, traces would be in your blood. Same if it was being caused by something you drank."

"What we cannot fathom is why your back is the only place showing this outbreak," Chloe pointed out. "Nowhere else on your body do you show any other breaks, or sores, or discolorations in the skin."

"So what you are saying is it might be an outworlder form of Perrin's Disease," Rion said, trying to make sense of what they were trying to explain. "Yet you say that if you try to cure her of Perrin's, it will only be a waste of effort." He glared at them. "You *think* it will be a waste of effort, which means you will not try?" Rion turned to Chloe. "You will not *try* to see if your healing strengths will cure her?"

"We do not need to try, Rion," Geederus gently said. "I went inside your wife. The disease is emerging from her."

Annie heard the words, but they didn't make sense.

The disease is emerging from her.

What did that mean?

"What does that *mean*?" she cried out. "I've got something inside me crawling out?"

Chloe reached out to comfort her. "No, that is not quite—"

"Then cut it out!" Annie demanded.

"We cannot," Geederus said. "It is growing from your spinal column. It is part of your central nervous system."

Annie stared at him. "Is that bad?"

Rion squeezed her hip again. "It means if they attempt to cut it out, it might cause irreparable harm."

"What's worse than cutting out this thing that's growing out of me?"

"The inability to walk. To move. To feel anything." Chloe gave her arm a little pat, then turned and looked at Geederus. "Tell them all of it. What we discussed."

Rion looked from Chloe to the Grand Lord. "What else did you discuss? What happens if you cannot cure her?" Annie felt him suddenly stiffen. "Will she die?" he whispered. Without looking up into his face, she knew what she would see.

Geederus raised his hands, almost in supplication. "We cannot say. We cannot predict. Everything we do at this point on is a guess on our part." He stopped to take a deep breath, and Annie could see the man's entire visage change from disappointment to sternly professional. All business and no bullshit, as her father often called it, especially with regards to salesmen and bankers.

"However, we believe there might be a solution. One you will not be happy to hear, Lord Rion."

Rion gave her waist a squeeze. "You are talking about letting Annie go back to her world with the man in the flying machine."

Geederus bowed his head. "Again, we are discussing guesses. Annie's problems came after prolonged exposure to our world. It is possible, *possible*, mind you. Nothing is conclusive at this point. But it is possible that once she returns to her

world, after a few weeks or months, her condition could clear up on its own.”

“Or the physicians over there may have medicants that could cure her,” Chloe added.

Annie glanced over at the woman to notice that this whole ordeal was having as disastrous an effect on her as it was on them. Her impulse was to hop off the table, run over to the woman angel, and throw her arms around her.

“But you are not *sure*?” Rion pushed.

Rather than answer, Geederus shook his head.

It was then Kleffers stepped forward. “This must be said, so I am electing myself to say it. Rion, Annie’s whole body is reacting to whatever is happening to her. We do not know if this is something that will be fatal, and if it is, if her time here with us can be measured in cycles or master cycles. The same goes if she returns to her world. She may survive there, or she may die. The damage to her system may already be too advanced to react to any healing method. All that is left for us is to tell you what we know, what little there is, and you must make the decision about what to do next. You and Annie, that is.”

Annie heard her husband clear his throat and swallow hard before asking, “If Annie stays, there is nothing further you can do for her?”

“Nothing except to help assuage her pain,” Chloe told him.

“Yet there might be a chance for her if she goes back to her world?”

No! No! “No! No, Rion!”

Annie hopped off the table and whirled around to face her husband. Grabbing his tunic, she shook him as cold chills ran rampant through her body and tears welled in her eyes.

“You’re not sending me back, do you hear me? Damn it, Rion! I’m not going! If I’m going to die, I want to be with the people who love me, do you hear me?” She jerked hard on the cloth, nearly ripping it. Unable to say more, she threw her arms around his waist and buried her face in his chest. His arms wrapped around her possessively.

“Thank you, Grand Lord Geederus,” she heard Rion say. “Your expertise is greatly appreciated. Lord Kleffers. Lord Lyyunik. Chloe, we will see you at home. Annie and I need to discuss this alone. Annie...”

Sniffing, she pulled back enough to look up into his face. The angst she saw in his eyes had to be reflected in hers.

“We need to talk,” he murmured.

“I’m not leaving you.”

“Come,” he insisted, gently detaching her from him then turning for the door.

She allowed him to lead her out of the room. Rion didn’t say anything more until they reached the landing pad, where he hailed a trap. His next words surprised her as he gave the carrier angels their destination.

“To the grotto.”

Chapter 31

The Secret

Annie tried twice to get Rion to talk to her, but he remained quietly staring out the window. Letting out a long sigh, she gave up. When Rion was in one of his moods, he preferred to withdraw into his thoughts, and wouldn't emerge until he was ready.

His choice of destination more than surprised her. She hadn't been to the grotto since Rion had taken her there during the Honorum a year ago. Not once, but twice. The first time they had made love in the open air to affirm their devotion to each other. It had been quick but heady sex. The second time, they spent the entire night having hot, sweaty, make up sex until their muscles felt rubbery from exhaustion. They didn't leave for home until first sunrise.

A quick glance back at him didn't reveal any hint of what he was thinking, but she knew it had everything to do with her. Annie glanced out the same window to peek at what he was seeing.

The carriers were taking them around the outskirts of town, rather than over the central market area as they normally would. Annie assumed the heavily damaged area was off limits to regular traffic. She didn't mind, though. The outer fringes of the city were beautiful, lush with seemingly endless stretches of lowlands covered in flowers. Whenever Rion used to fly her around the city, he always made sure she took in the surreal beauty of that area. The flowers on this world were not like those on Earth. Even during the colder months, they continued to bloom. Most of them were tiny, delicate things. Her favorite was the perillion, a heart-shaped blossom that glowed a deep sea green. Rion often compared the blooms to the color of her eyes.

The trap circled around to approach the grotto from the least damaged side. The Green was the center, which had several walkways radiating away from it like spokes. Some of the spokes led directly to the market area. Some led to the older living quarters where the thicker, denser apartments were located. Other walkways ended up near the business section, including the hospital, the Hall of History, and the Council Cathedral. When the trap began its descent, Annie could tell they were landing near the walkways which led to the outer meadows.

Rion was on his feet before they felt the gentle bump of the trap landing. Exiting out the door, he turned and offered out his hand to her, which she took.

"You may go," he gruffly dismissed the carriers. The two angels gave a nod and wordlessly lifted away with the empty trap in tow. Annie started to watch them go when Rion took her hand and gave it a tug. "Annie?"

To her surprise, he didn't immediately head for the grotto itself. Instead he took one of the walkways leading away from the city. They strolled side-by-side for several minutes in silence, which didn't bother her. They had done this sort of thing back when they had been on Earth, taking long walks into the forest and up the mountainsides in the little valley where their cabin was located. Once they even walked the entire way to the Funderburkes' property line, then turned around and walked back. No flying. No aerial acrobatics. Very little conversation. Just companionship and the comfortable, silent language of lovers—little side glances, furtive smiles, and hand holding.

First sunset was not long off, but darkness wouldn't come until after the second sun had gone below the snow-covered mountaintops in the distance. Annie stared at them, suddenly aware of them for the first time in...

"Rion?"

Her soft question drew him out of his thoughts. "Hmm, what?"

"Those mountains, how far away are they?"

"Not far. Sixty clicks, maybe less. Why?"

"Are they...are they like Earth? You know what I mean."

"I do know, my Annie. Yes, they are a lot like your mountains, except the trees and vegetation are not the same."

Annie gave a little laugh. "I wouldn't think so."

He suddenly stopped in the middle of the walkway. Surprised, she turned to give him a curious look. "What?"

She was answered with a soft chuckle. "It does not matter anymore. I might as well tell you."

Annie stared harder at her husband. "What doesn't matter anymore? Tell me what?" She reached out to touch his chest. "Rion, I don't like the sound of that."

Taking her hand, he kissed the inside of her wrist. The touch of his lips sent delicious shivers through her whole body. Her inner wrist was an erotic touch point, and Rion knew it. She caught the twinkle in his eyes when he straightened to smile at her.

"Remember last year when I first took you flying in the harness?" he asked.

How could she forget? It was a memory she would cherish all her life. On their first anniversary, he had buckled her against his body with the new padded straps, and they had flown over the city, giving Annie an idea of what the world would look like if she had wings. Afterwards he had taken her to a jeweler where he had given her a ring, a wedding ring, since people on Parra didn't subscribe to the same traditions as people on Earth.

She nodded, waiting for him to continue.

"Do you remember I had planned to show you something else, but because the day was waning and we were tired, we decided to fetch Kerr and go home instead?"

Again, Annie silently nodded. She had forgotten about that. At the time she had just discovered she was pregnant with their second child, and all she could think about was how and when she would tell him.

Unconsciously, she placed a palm to her abdomen. She had lost the baby when Lord Byric tried to kill her. She would have died, too, if it had not been for the angels bleeding into her, replacing her blood with theirs, and allowing her body to heal in ways she would not have been able to if she had still been on Earth.

Maybe that's why I haven't gotten pregnant again. Maybe it's because their blood's in me.

A warm hand reached around to grasp hers. Rion released her hand and slipped his underneath to where his palm cupped her lower belly. When he moved up behind her, his body was a wall of heat at her back, radiating calmness and strength through his presence.

"Annie, I purchased a piece of property in the mountains. I wanted to take you there to show you what it was like. And let you see how much it reminded me of Dry Lick Valley." She half turned to stare up at him in surprise. Smiling, Rion gave her a little nod and continued. "I have contacted several builders, who assure me they can replicate the cabin where we first loved. Of course, at the time, I was thinking we could use the place as a getaway for us. Maybe use it as a hideaway. Or a lovers' sanctuary."

"Have you built the cabin?"

"No. Not yet. I wanted us to build it together. You can recall more details than I can."

She snuggled in his arms. "I wish you could fly me there now."

A gentle kiss touched the top of her head. "So do I, my Annie."

They held each other, sharing each other's touch. Because everyone in the city was currently focusing on the damaged areas, there was no traffic this far outside The Green. No angels to see them from overhead. No one to pass them on the walkways.

Rion's breath ruffled her hair. "I know how much you want another child. I have done my best to give you what you wish. Unfortunately..."

She giggled. "Daddy always told me that if at first you don't succeed, try, try again." She started to say more, when she was unexpectedly lifted off her feet by his powerful arms. Annie shrieked with delight and grabbed his neck. The look on her husband's face as he grinned down at her gave her goose pimples.

"That is what I was hoping you would say."

Pivoting around, he began walking with long, purposeful strides back toward The Green. Annie knew without question where they were heading.

She shivered with anticipation.

Chapter 32

The Grotto

The Grotto appeared to have been untouched by the tosis. Except for some downed branches from the trees, and a general overall appearance of being untended for some time, the garden hadn't changed much from a year ago. Rion told her people often left the walkway to take their own paths through the thick plant life. And many lovers found nooks and crannies where they could have intimate relations, virtually unseen by others who might pass by them a foot away.

The area where she and Rion had made love had been near a tiny stream. Unerringly, he took her there now, finding his way without having to backtrack or search for it. She wondered if he recalled its location from memory, or if he'd returned here lately to find it again.

Dipping underneath an arch of bowed limbs, he straightened and gently lowered her feet to the soft blue grass. At the same time, he reached up to her neckline and ripped the thin hospital gown from her body with one strong tug.

Before Annie could ask him to keep her warm, Rion's mouth came down over hers, and his enormous wings enfolded them both like a silken feather blanket.

She gasped. He shouldn't be using his wings in any way. The doctors had told him to keep them completely inert. Not even to stretch them. Vainly she struggled to pull back enough to fuss at him for what he was doing when Rion chuckled.

"I have kept my word," he whispered in a deep growl as his lips moved to her earlobe where he could nibble. "I have forced myself to be patient, if for no other reason than to be able to lift you back into the skies and make love to you up there the way I did back in Montana."

"But...but the physicians said..." It was hard to think with his mouth doing wonderful things down the side of her neck. One large hand pressed against her buttocks, making her very aware of his erection steadily growing against her lower abdomen. The other arm braced her behind her shoulders, locking her in place where she couldn't move even if she wanted to.

"I was told not to fly. I was told not to go onto the suspension rods. That is all," he murmured so softly she could barely hear him. His mouth reached her shoulder, but instead of traveling across, he went back to tease the sensitive skin behind her ear. "I have to stretch them on occasion to keep them from atrophying. Do not worry, my beautiful Annie. I did everything I was told to do, and not to do, under the strictest supervision. Ummm..."

She was vaguely aware of being lifted off her feet as he straightened. His wings tickled her legs where the feathers closed around them.

"Are you cold?" His breath was a warm mist on her cheek.

"No." How could she be cold when his hands were like fire? She attempted to raise her legs to wrap them around his waist, when he stopped her and pressed his lips to her cheek.

"No. I want to face my enemy."

Face my enemy? The questionable phrase floated inside her head as she numbly became aware of Rion taking them deeper into the Grotto and further away from the walkways. *What enemy? What kind of enemy would be here with them?*

They reached another small alcove amid the glowing blossoms. A veedrak sang its sweet mating call from the bower arching overhead. Annie waited to be lowered onto the grass when Rion spread his wings and flipped her over. Startled, Annie opened her eyes at the same time he lowered her face-down.

"The leaves are denser here," he murmured above her. "The wind will not touch us."

The grasses were incredibly soft, protected by the thick foliage surrounding the spot. As she laid her cheek against the ground, she was surprised to find it warm.

"It's warm."

"The spring is, too."

"Oh." An underground warm spring bubbled to the surface nearby. She knew about the thin stream that ran through the Grotto, but she hadn't realized it was heated.

Glancing over her shoulder, she saw her husband still on his feet but removing his clothing. He dropped his pants and kicked them to one side as his heavy erection ponderously swayed between his thighs. Smiling, Annie started to roll over to face him when he bent down to stop her.

"This time we will allow our memories to make love with us," Rion whispered. He deftly flipped her back onto her stomach. Her breasts brushed along the velvet grass, and Annie felt the rush of desire running wetly between her legs. Now she knew what he intended to do.

When he lifted her off the grass, she planted her arms out in front of her, doing the same for her knees. She got a sexy chuckle for her effort.

"My intoxicating Annie."

A hand reached between her legs. Gentle fingers touched her mound then slowly pulled back, following an invisible trail to her swollen inner lips. Fingertips brushed aside her dark, curling pubic hair before cupping her, warming her flesh, readying her. When he spread her, Annie trembled as his thumb stroked gently over her nub. Flicked it. Played with it.

She trembled. "Oh, God..."

He teased it again, forcing the minuscule bit of skin and muscle to harden. She could tell his hand was being bathed in her juices when he carefully ground his knuckles into the entrance between her folds. Squeezing her clit between his fingers, Rion continued to masturbate her, not quite entering her as his fingers worked their magic.

Annie forgot where she was as her body and her mind concentrated on the delicious feelings shooting through her. Before he could ask her or do so himself, she spread her thighs as far apart as she could and still keep her balance.

One thick finger slid into her channel. The pressure on her nub continued, driving her slowly insane. Somewhere above her, Rion murmured, "Remember...back in Montana...that day I was chopping firewood? You were bringing tree limbs from the woods for me to cut."

A second finger entered her, making her gasp. The sensations running rampant over her body were slowly driving her mad. In the back of her mind, Annie knew this was only the beginning.

As his words sunk in, she realized she did remember that day. *That unusually hot autumn day. He was bare-chested, sweat glistening in the sun as he swung the ax. Large, strong, powerful—the sight of him glowing like old gold had made her weak in the knees. And when he had turned to look at her with his wings rising majestically behind him...*

The hot head of his erection nudged her entrance. One hand cupped a breast then tweaked a rock-hard nipple. Annie gasped, shifted her weight onto one arm, and reached up to touch his hand. Slowly his hand trailed over to her other breast, taking her hand along with it. Together they stroked her, batting the overly sensitive nipple with light, playful strokes. Annie started to giggle when he pressed his length into her. The giggle became a long, low moan.

"My Annie."

He continued to push, stretching her inner walls, sliding steadily over nerves that felt like they were being seared in flames. Her body tried to expel him, but Rion grunted and pressed with more force until he buried all of himself. He swayed slightly, spreading his own knees for better balance, and his sac bumped against her inner lips.

"How does this feel?"

Annie could only nod, too overcome by the steady throbbing that vibrated within her. She gave her hips an impatient wriggle.

Rion pulled out halfway, teasing her, and then shoved firmly back in. At the same time he released her breast and slowly began to dip a finger into her anus.

She gasped. He had never played with her that way before. Other than that one moment recently in the trap, he had never spent any time or attention to that part of her body. But there was no way she would ask him to stop. Not when the fire he was stroking was becoming flames too hot and too intense to withstand. As his finger squeezed further past the tight ring, he grabbed her hip and rammed himself hard inside her again. And again. And again.

Annie exploded from this new invasion. Every nerve flared, spitting and burning as he continued to fill her.

She couldn't breathe. It was as if every pounding stroke into her was pushing all the air out of her lungs.

She couldn't think. Every inch of her body was focused on their coupling.

She couldn't do anything except lift her buttocks to make his entry more accessible. To rock on her knees, urging him to take her harder.

Her head was bowed, lips compressed, eyes squeezed tightly shut. Everything in her continued to burn as her body

dipped into the valley of semi-satiation, paused, and started another ascent toward another orgasm.

"This is my enemy."

His free hand left where they were joined to touch the bandages at her back. She felt him pluck the fasteners, releasing the wide swathes, and letting them slide onto the grass. When her open sores met the air, Rion increased his nearly frenzied assault.

Her second orgasm blasted through her without warning and without buildup. She cried out, her fingers digging into the soil. And still Rion continued to pound inside her, keeping her riding the rim of the chasm, keeping her at the edge of total exhaustion.

Annie threw her head back, but Rion brushed away her hair. Then, to her utter amazement, he jammed himself to the hilt, deep, penetrating...and stopped. She gasped for air. Behind her she could hear him likewise fighting for breath. His thick rod quivered, on the cusp of release, but the hand that touched her shoulder blades was infinitely gentle.

"This is my enemy," he repeated. She could hear how near he was to his own orgasm. Without realizing it, she clenched her muscles, constricting him...tight...tighter...

Rion cried out, pulled out, and plunged once more as far as he could. Annie could feel him coming inside her, filling her womb, and she prayed as she had done countless times in the past year that this time, *this* time, a child would be conceived.

Spent and covered in sweat, her husband dropped over her, bracing himself with his arms as his body literally caged hers. The air felt suffocating, but she didn't care. He was still firmly entrenched inside her channel, and to Annie it was one of the best feelings in the world.

Long moments passed. The air gradually became fresher, and the suns resumed their rotation in the sky.

Annie knew at some point he would roll off of her and drag her along with him, until they lay on their sides, spooned buttocks to groin. Again, Rion surprised her, lifting up and sitting back before pulling her backwards to perch in his lap. And, amazingly, he managed to do it without slipping out of her.

With an arm around her waist, he brushed her hair away again and kissed her exposed neck. "Listen to me, my Annie. What I am about to say will not be to your liking. But I have thought long and hard, and unfortunately I can find no other answer."

Instinctively, she stiffened, but waited to hear him out. She hated it when he came to his own conclusions because usually it meant his mind was made up, and she knew by now that there was very little chance in heaven that she could change it.

A gentle hand touched one of the sores. Gentle enough not to cause her any discomfort or pain.

"If you stay here, these will only get worse, and you will die."

Oh, God, no!

"But if you go back to your world—"

"Damn it, *no!* No, Rion!" She struggled in his arms until she could look at him over her shoulder. "You're not sending me back," she said through clenched teeth.

"There is a chance these will go away," he argued, face set in stone. He would fight her like the warrior he was, positive that what he was doing was the right thing, the only thing, to do.

"And then what? Let me live alone without you? No, Rion! I'm not going! And that's that!"

"I will not let you stay here to die an agonizing death."

She was too upset and too angry to cry. Jerking her hips, she finally felt him slide out of her. She managed to turn slightly sideways where she could look at him without straining her neck. "But if I survive this, you'll be condemning me to live for years and years *without you!* Don't you get it, Rion? What kind of life would I have without you? Without Kerr?"

In his eyes she could see he *had* thought about it.

"You know...your feelings count, too," she continued in a more loving voice. "What would hurt you more? Having me die early, but here with you? Or knowing I live, but you would never get to see me again?"

She saw the crack appear in the wall he had thought he had erected between them. Hardly visible, more like a hairline fracture, but it was there. Taking one of his hands, she pressed it to her breast. "And how can you be sure I would die? The physicians said it wasn't Perrin's Disease," she argued.

"They said it was not a form they recognized. It could be a version unlike any other. A new strain, perhaps. After all,

no otherworlder has ever contracted any of our diseases. At least, none that we know of.”

“True.”

“And there is no cure for Perrin’s,” Rion whispered. The crack was starting to heal itself. Annie stood her ground.

“No, there isn’t. But like you said, this is an unusual case. Are you already giving up hope that your physicians will be able to cure me? I mean, look at what miracles they’ve already managed to pull off.”

He opened his mouth to answer her. Instead he paused. Annie knew what he might be thinking. Although Perrin’s Disease was not contagious, he may be wondering if Kerr could get it, since their son had Annie’s blood in his veins. She took advantage of his hesitation.

“Do you want our son to grow up without a mother the same way you had to?”

The crack became a fissure. Rion pulled her into his embrace and held her tightly, his face buried in her hair. “Dirty pool,” he reminded her in a muffled voice.

“Yeah, yeah, I know. It’s why you married me.”

Rion lifted his face to give her a puzzled look. “I married you because I fell in love with you,” he corrected her, totally missing the point.

Smiling, Annie managed to turn around a little more until she was almost facing him. “Yeah, and if I remember correctly, my wedding vows said for better or for worse until death do us part. Well, I’m not dead, and I’m not going to die as long as there’s a chance your doctors can find a cure for me. So until they say they give up, I’m staying, bub. You got me? I’m stay-ying put.” She emphasized her last words with gentle taps to his lips with her forefinger.

His arms tightened around her. “I got you...until death parts us,” he promised.

“That’s a good boy. Now, didn’t you tell me you would owe me three orgasms if I—”

He made his move. She never had the chance to finish the question.

Chapter 33

The Slip

Ian eased the cowl back over the engine, letting the metal mantle drop the last half-inch into place with a slight clang. He was done. The repairs were finished as best as he could make them. Personally Ian believed he was due a commendation or two simply for overcoming what most would consider to be insurmountable odds. Jury-rigged tools. Substandard replacement parts. No one to help him, much less anyone who understood the mechanical aspects of the aircraft.

Ian paused from wiping his hands on a grease towel. Maybe that was a good thing.

He glanced at the closed plating underneath the wing. None of the angel people dared to approach the Gladiator. Therefore none of them knew what the plane contained, much less had any inkling of what the aircraft could do.

He patted the fuselage as he smiled. "There's my girl. Almost spanking new, give or take a bobble. But you'll get me home, won't you? You'll get me home..."

...with Annie.

It had become evident that Annie and Rion were seesawing back and forth with the issue of her returning to Earth. After listening to the other angels, he was certain they were just as divided over the decision, too.

Ian got the impression there was something else going on that he wasn't clear on. And that extra something was the real reason why Annie ran hot then cold, whenever he pressed her for a definite answer.

It wasn't until Chloe let slip a little bit of information that Ian came up with a plan.

* * * *

"Well, Ian Davenport. I pronounce you completely healed." She smiled as she stepped away from the examination table and crossed her arms over her chest. "You are hereby released from my care."

He laughed. "If only you could heal my poor plane that easily."

"I can understand. How are the repairs going? Vadon told me he saw the plane when he went to visit with you the other day. He said he noticed very little damage to it. Of course," she laughed softly, "what he knows about flying machines you could fit on a preenia seed."

Ian smiled back as he drew his tunic over his head. He had to admit he had been more severely injured than his plane since he was ejected just before the crash. The parachute, as well as his uniform, were a total loss, but that was the least of his worries.

"Once I get her back up and running, do you think I'll have any problems leaving here?"

The woman angel gave him a puzzled look. "Why would you have problems? You are not one of us. We cannot stop you from leaving if you so desire."

That was the same sort of thing he had been hearing over and over, especially with regards to Annie. If she chose to leave this world, her husband would not be able to stop her. Not in any legal way, anyway.

"Don't I need to fill out papers to get permission to leave? I know my world differs from yours, but I don't want to inadvertently step on any toes when I prepare to fly out of here."

"Step on..." Her confusion deepened. Suddenly it cleared, and she gave a little laugh. "What do you think we would do?"

"Oh, I don't know. Maybe challenge me to a duel. Winner gets to keep my plane."

The comment made Chloe laugh harder. "You have duels on your world as well?"

The remark surprised him. "Yes, we do. Don't tell me your society follows the Queen's rules?"

The physician shook her head. "I do not know what the Queen's rules are. Nor do I understand the reasons why your world would challenge someone to a duel. Here, our laws regarding a challenge are strictly enforced. Neither is a challenge lightly given." She became suddenly serious, yet her curiosity remained. "Why would you want to challenge another person?"

"Mostly to protect one's honor. If another man steals from you, you challenge him. If another man threatens your family, you challenge him." Ian shrugged. "Of course, where I come from, dueling fell out of favor many decades ago. But every now and then you'll hear mention of it. How about you?"

"What about me?"

"I mean, why would someone issue a challenge here?"

"For similar reasons. Or for gain."

"Gain?" Ian forced himself not to appear too interested.

"Nothing inconsequential, mind you," the woman angel said. "But let us assume you had fifty thousand marks, and I believed I was entitled to half. Yet you said you would not share. And without that money my family would greatly suffer."

"Let me guess. You could challenge me for your half?"

"If it was judged that I had the right to challenge you, yes."

"Whoa. Wait just a minute. You have to state your case to someone, who determines whether or not you can challenge someone to a duel?"

A dark cloud seemed to fall over the woman's face, as if she was trying to control her temper. "As I said earlier, challenges are not lightly given because of the outcome."

"What outcome? You challenge, you duel, and the best bloke comes out the winner."

"Not quite, Ian Davenport. On our world, you challenge, you duel, and the survivor comes out the winner."

* * * *

He had balked at those words. *The survivor comes out the winner.* Back in Great Britain, duels had been fought for ages with swords, then with guns. As the method and the weaponry evolved, warriors became more civilized. The need to kill each other was replaced with the drawing of first blood. In the end, the winner was the man who wounded his antagonist first.

The survivor comes out the winner.

Obviously civilization had not quite reached this world.

Climbing back into the cockpit, Ian reached for his controls and double-checked his board. He itched to hit the ignition, if only to see that the propellers were properly balanced. A full attempt at flight would have to wait until the next big storm hit. A storm powerful enough to knock another hole in the wall dividing this world and Earth. When that storm came, he would hit the throttle. Until then, he hoped he had enough fuel to make the trip back through.

And, with a little luck, Annie would be joining him in the cockpit, sitting prettily between his legs like she had the other day.

Ian groaned. He remembered how she felt and smelled, and how he grew as hard as wood and prayed she wouldn't be aware of it. He couldn't leave without her, although he had tried to talk himself out of it. She was a married woman, and her husband was the sort who would not take kindly to having her taken away.

But maybe with a little extra coaxing...

Bloody fuck! The simple thought of her already had him burrowing a hole in his pants. Ian reached down to adjust himself, stroking his hard-on without success. A little self-serving was no longer good enough. He needed to bury himself inside her hot little pussy, and let her take him down a notch or two. Ian grinned. Or three. "What I wouldn't give to shove my cock up her randy little hole," he murmured softly. Christ, she *had* to go back with him!

The only thing he needed to do before she could join him was to lighten the plane's weight enough to compensate for hers. Which shouldn't be too much, he hoped. For the third time, Ian mentally calculated how much those .303s weighed. If he dropped the ones inside the fuselage, would it be sufficient? The less payload he carried, the further he could go on the teensy bit of petrol left in the tanks. *But if I shed the wing guns, too...*

No. Not those, too. Not all of them. He couldn't afford to jettison all four of his guns. What if they got over, only to be accosted by enemy planes? How would he defend himself?

No. The wing guns were the lightest. They would stay, and the heavier weapons could go. That way the difference in weight would be to his advantage, since Annie weighed less than those guns.

Checking the dials once more, he frowned. The oil gauge was registering low. "Bugger that, mate. I checked your wick not two days ago, and you were nearly topped out," he fussed at the machine, and whacked the glass cover hard with the side of his fist. When the needle refused to budge, Ian hit it again with more force.

Slowly, the indicator began to slide in the opposite direction. To his amazement and shock, the fuel gauge beside it also began to change.

"Bite me! What the..."

Slowly, inexorably, the needle continued to climb until it reached a smidgeon past the halfway mark.

Half a tank of fuel.

Ian raised his fists over his head and whooped for joy. He'd had no way to check how much fuel the plane still contained, other than to trust the meter. This discovery lifted the proverbial last straw off the camel's back. He no longer had to worry about weight and consumption. If the Gladiator was airworthy, he had no worries at all...

...except how to win Annie's heart and take her back to Earth with him.

He smiled to himself as he caressed the bright red firing pin. Maybe he had a way now to get around that small deterrent, thanks to that woman angel.

The survivor comes out the winner.

"Well, old chap. Sorry about that, but you know what they say," Ian grinned. "'All's fair in love and war'. And this, Rion, is war."

Chapter 34

The Challenge

“Lord Rion?”

Rion glanced up from the maps of Earth he was studying and turned to the courier standing in the doorway. “Yes?”

The young woman tentatively looked around the massive room, giving Rion the impression she had never been sent to the way station before, much less delivered a message to a Lord of Thunder.

When she glanced back at Rion, he gave the nervous woman a smile. “Come in. Do you have something for me?”

Nodding, she smartly handed over the scroll she’d been ordered to bring him. “No reply is necessary,” she informed him.

“I understand. You may go.”

The courier smiled and left, but Rion noticed how she gave the war room another long look before hurrying away.

The scroll bore the seal of Councilman Duvatt. It was official business, since casual communiques were tied, not sealed. Rion took a few moments to search his memory for any instances where he had crossed the Councilman or the Council. A tiny grin crossed his lips. Since his marriage to Annie, the old rabble-rousing Rion had almost disappeared, to be replaced with a Grand Lord who actually stopped to think twice about his actions. He accepted and understood how his decisions no longer affected just himself, but could have more far-reaching and potentially negative effects on Annie and Kerr, not to mention Kerr’s future.

As Annie would say, I have been a good boy these past months. He broke the seal and unrolled the missive.

He quickly scanned the document as a sense of disbelief came over him. Leaning back against the wide, low table, Rion forced himself to read the summons again. This time he went more slowly, reading it aloud, to make certain he did not make a mistake.

“A challenge has been issued to you from Ian Ufton Davenport.”

How did the outworlder become knowledgeable of their laws? Who put him up to it? When did the man file this challenge?

Gritting his teeth, Rion racked his brain, searching for a name or face of someone who might have reason to plot with the otherworlder against him.

“The Council has considered Ian Ufton Davenport’s request, and they have deemed it a viable challenge.”

Viable? So they agreed the man’s request was legally and logically acceptable? Since when was this kind of challenge ever considered “acceptable”?

“The focus of the challenge is the woman Annabel Lee Prichard Mayall, also known as Grand Lady Annie of the first House of Thunder.”

My wife. The bastard wants my wife!

Rage rose into his face like a hot, blistering tide, and burned his eyes with tears. Rion fought the urge to crush the scroll in his hands. The next instant a little voice derided him.

You have only yourself to blame. Remember, not long ago you were trying to send her back.

“Yes. To protect her. So she could live,” he argued.

Yes, you did. But if you had not tried to send her back with the man from her world, would this challenge have come about?

It was a thought-provoking question. Had Ian Davenport somehow been made aware of the fact that Annie was suffering from what could be a fatal disease, and Rion had seriously considered sending her back in the hopes she could be cured on Earth?

“You are hereby ordered to present yourself and Lady Annie at Challengers Field at sixteen and three past second sunrise on forty-one Careeban.”

Sixteen and three past second sunrise on forty-one Careeban was tomorrow morning. The time and date was determined by the Council. Before then, he had to tell Annie. Tell her what to expect.

And let her know the full implication of what could happen if he lost.

Someone cleared his throat. Rion glanced up to see Mandran standing in the doorway.

"Paterak is requesting to see you in his office regarding assigning numbers to the pathways." The man's eyes dropped, and Rion looked down to see that he had inadvertently crushed the scroll in his hands anyway. Mandran gave Rion a worried stare. "Is everything all right, Rion?"

"Tell Paterak I am incapacitated until tomorrow afternoon. I am leaving immediately for home. If anyone inquires about me, tell them..." Rion paused. There was no need to keep the challenge secret. The heavens knew word would get out before tomorrow morning. In fact, if Challengers Field was not crowded with onlookers by the time the challenge was to begin, Rion would be surprised.

"Tell them I have been sent a challenge."

Mandran reacted as if he had been slapped. "Who would challenge you?"

"The outworlder, Ian Davenport."

"*Why*, Rion? What would he gain..." The messenger angel caught himself, and his shocked expression turned to disbelief. "By all that is holy. Does he want Annie?"

The otherworlder's intent was obvious even to those who had never met the man. Because he was from Earth, the only reasonable or possible explanation for the man to challenge Rion had to be to gain Annie for himself. Annie, who was the only other person on Parra originally from Earth.

"Go order me a trap. Then find Vadon and tell him I am heading for home," Rion ordered. Mandran nodded and hurried away.

Looking down at the crumpled scroll, Rion carefully straightened it then rerolled it. Tucking it under his tunic belt, he strode out of the map room to search for Councilman Dimarkus.

If anyone knew of a way to cancel a challenge, the Council Elder would know. But if there was no way to prevent Ian Davenport from following through with his threat, and if Rion was not the victor, then Dimarkus needed to be prepared to name a successor.

Chapter 35

The Plea

Challengers Field lay directly behind the Council Cathedral. By the time they arrived, it had been cleared of debris. Either the Council sent someone to clear it in preparation, or word of mouth had given people impetus to make it ready.

The suns were casting their peachy-orange glows against the clouds. Annie drew Rion's cloak tighter around her and ignored the noisy crowd that continued to grow. She was standing alone on the small dais at one end of the field. The trophy on display. From this vantage point she could see the entire field and all the way around the periphery.

A brisk wind was kicking up. If the weather had been left alone, the chilly day would have been tolerable. With the addition of the gusts, the cold cut straight to the bone.

However, it wasn't the cold that caused her to shiver. She was still numb from the night before when Rion informed her about the challenge. She had fought the urge to scream, but the urge to rip and shred Ian Davenport continued to crawl under her skin. Her anger was the only thing keeping her warm. And from falling apart. The need to protect the man she loved was her primary focus now. Ian would not win. Not today. Not ever.

* * * *

"What will the weapons be?" she whispered.

Rion pulled her legs tighter around his waist. They were lying on their sides, spent and sated, but too wound up to fall asleep like they normally would.

"That decision is mine," he murmured back. "As the one challenged, I get to name the weapon of choice."

"Which will be..."

She got a heavy sigh in answer. "Although I get to choose, I am forced to take into account what weapons we both are adept with. I cannot choose the sword if he is not familiar with it."

"What are you going to do?"

"I must ask him. If I cannot make the decision, I have to let him know what weapons I am proficient in, and he chooses."

She had yet to wrap her herself in bandages for the night. His fingers were carefully tracing around the open sores on her back. It was a ticklish sensation, but in an odd way it felt good. With the help of the powders Chloe had her take twice a day, the pain caused by the weeping pustules no longer bothered her, except when she inadvertently bumped into something, or someone touched them.

"And there is no way you cannot accept the challenge, or call it off?"

"None. If the Council has deemed the reason behind the challenge as fair and reasonable, I cannot arbitrarily dismiss it."

"You've dismissed Council orders before," she reminded him, remembering how Rion had created a name for himself in the past for such stunts.

"I cannot this time, my Annie. Not when my decision could mean you being taken away from me. There is always a price to be paid for ignoring the Council's edicts. In the past, before there was you and Kerr, I had no reason to care. I took my punishment and carried on. Not this time, though. Not this time."

"What about Ian? Can he call it off, since he's the one who initiated the challenge in the first place?"

"Yes, he can, but why would he? I think I have known from the moment he first met you that he meant to claim you for himself." Rion's hands formed into fists for a moment then relaxed to resume touching her.

"So...if you can't find a weapon he knows how to use, then Ian is supposed to choose the weapon, right? What if he can't find one, either? What happens if neither of you are familiar with the same weapon?"

His hand stopped stroking her. "Then Lord Duvatt chooses a weapon neither of us are familiar with, which puts us both on equal ground."

* * * *

A weapon neither of us are familiar with. Annie snorted and brushed a few stray hairs away from her face. Rion was a Lord of Thunder. There wasn't a weapon on this world he hadn't been trained to use. Neither was there anything he couldn't improvise with as a weapon.

Because flying through the rifts between worlds with anything made of metal was too dangerous, all Lords of Thunder were trained to make use of whatever they could get their hands on. But here on Parra, their training and exercises were never ending and often brutal. Annie had lost count of the number of times Rion had come home with portions of his body sporting the bright pink flesh of a newly healed wound. After their first year together, she'd stopped noticing.

The crowd shifted, turning its attention in her direction. At the same time she felt the vibration of many feet climbing the short steps up to where she stood. Annie turned to see her husband and several other men draped in their official robes step onto the platform. A rush of déjà vu swept over her—the scene reminded her so much of the trial that had taken place nearly a year ago.

Rion was dressed in his ceremonial uniform, with its black pants and shirt. The heavier, sleeveless tunic was similar to a vest, and was emblazoned with the golden lightning bolt insignia running diagonally across the chest. The only thing missing was his chaster, the official signet representing his House and his status.

He walked up to stand beside her. Like she had been doing, his eyes scoured the field for sign of the otherworlder.

"Any word?" she asked him.

"He is on his way. Annie, he is bringing his air machine with him."

She turned to look at him in surprise. "Why?"

Rion gave a little shake of his head. "I guess we will find out when he gets here."

She glanced past him at the men gathered at the other end of the dais. "Where is Lord Duvatt?"

"Below, waiting for the otherworlder. And me. I must go, Annie."

He looked down at her with those Montana sky blue eyes that never ceased to steal her breath away. This was their goodbye. The real one. Their last one. From this moment, the next time she saw her husband, he would either be the victor...or dead.

Regardless of the thousands of pairs of eyes watching them, Rion gently pulled her into his embrace and kissed her. Annie threw her arms around his neck, clinging to him, her anger and terror at war within her as she tried not to cry.

Too soon the kiss ended. Rion slowly pulled away, but at the last second Annie clutched his arm.

"Wait. One more thing."

She reached inside the pocket of her own tunic and pulled out the battered chaster. She had meant to give it back to him earlier, but with everything happening at a feverish pace these past few days, the chance had gotten away from her. So this morning while she waited for him to get ready, she managed to clean and polish the necklace.

Rion flushed to see the chaster in her hands. Annie gave him a tremulous smile. "I found it when I was searching through the remains of our house. I was wanting to surprise you with it."

He bowed to her, allowing Annie to slip the chain over his head.

"It has a few dings in it I couldn't polish out of it," she softly apologized, giving the crescent moon-shaped medallion a pat where it lay over his collarbone. "Maybe...later...you c-could have a...a jeweler..." Her breath hiccuped. She could feel her tears rising. Annie closed her eyes and tried to get a grip on her emotions. She didn't want to break down in front of him. Not now. And especially not in front of all these people. Silently, she derided herself for her weakness, when a warm hand covered hers.

"My Annie."

Pressing her lips together, Annie sniffed and opened her eyes to find Rion's face filled with love.

"I am not entering into this with the thought of failure. I am going in with the belief that I can win. That I *will* win, because what we have together is as pure and beautiful as any love can be," he whispered so only she could hear. "You have given me more joy and hope than I can count, and infinitely more than I can ever repay. And with this..." He tapped his chaster with his free hand. "Returning this to me means more than I can explain. Now I feel as though I have the spirit of my father with me, protecting me, watching my back for me. I love you, Annie. My Annie. My Annabel Lee." Lifting her chin, he added, "*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/Of the beautiful Annabel Lee.*"

He bent to give her one more kiss, then pivoted and strode determinedly away, off the dais and down the steps. Behind her Annie could not hear a single sound coming from the crowd.

Another frigid gust of wind whipped around her, forcing her to shiver in spite of the heavy cloak Rion had draped

around her that morning.

There was a sudden swelling of sound. Annie turned to see the crowd parting at the opposite end of the field. It was Ian, along with five other messenger angels. They were pulling on ropes, dragging the plane behind them. They seemed to be struggling through the thick grass. As they entered the staging area, the crowd closed ranks around the perimeter.

Ian continued to draw the big air machine another hundred or so yards toward the center before he called a halt. He stood and glanced around, then pointed to Annie's right. The others quickly helped to turn the plane until its nose pointed in that direction. When he was satisfied, he gave an order, and the ropes were untied from the aircraft and taken away by the messengers.

Rion and Lord Duvatt were already on the field. Annie watched as the two men approached Ian. This would be the decision as to the choice of weapon, as Rion had explained to her.

A weapon neither of us are familiar with.

Her eyes went back to the airplane shining in the morning sunlight. A thought niggled in the back of her mind like a persistent mosquito bite that wouldn't stop itching. Why did he bring the airplane? Why would he need the plane?

To fly? To...

"No. No. He can't be thinking..."

Annie suddenly turned and pushed her way past the Council members with a mumbled apology. Hurrying down the steps, she raced for the small avenue Rion and Duvatt had taken to get through the crowd.

As she burst through the ring of people and onto the field, she noticed the knot of physicians standing nearby. They stood out with their bright crimson robes of office, but this time she noticed how every one of them was wearing a white banner across their chests. Chloe stood with the group. Annie caught her surprised expression as she ran past them.

The noise from the crowd rose as it spotted her heading directly for the men in the field. She didn't care. She couldn't stop to think about her actions. Not when Rion's life was at stake.

The crowd grew noisier. Annie had no idea why. Her whole focus was on the man standing next to the big airplane.

Ian spotted her running full tilt toward him. He started to smile broadly until he saw the expression on her face. The smile morphed into a thin-lipped look of determination.

She passed her husband and the Lord Council until she reached the pilot. She didn't stop until she almost plowed into the man.

"Stop the challenge!" she gasped, swatting him on the chest. "Stop the challenge, Ian!"

He grabbed her arm and shoved her away. "It's too late for that."

"No! No, it's not too late!"

"I made my mind up long ago, Annie my dear."

"To do what? Steal me away from Rion? How stupid can you be?" Vaguely she was aware that the crowd had quieted again, apparently trying to catch what was being said. "You know if you win I won't go with you," she hissed.

"You have no choice." Ian smiled smugly. "These blokes are very adamant about following the letter of their own laws. You may not want to go, but you won't have that choice, duckie."

Somehow, deep down, she knew he was right. The people of this world strictly adhered to their code of ethics and laws. She knew how by-the-book they were, having been on the receiving end of their judgments in the past.

"I'm not your duckie *or* your dearest. You better understand something right here and now. If Rion loses, and you take his life away from me, I may be forced to go back over to Earth with you, but I'll never belong to you. Do I make myself clear? I will never love you, and I will never belong to you!"

"Oh, yes, you will belong to me," he corrected, still smiling. "I will have won you fair and square, as these good gentlemen will attest to it." Ian started to walk away to join the other two waiting nearby, but paused to get one last word in. "One more thing, Annie. Sometimes it's not *what* you win that's the important thing. Sometimes it's simply the pleasure of coming out on top as the winner that makes the whole thing worthwhile."

Chapter 36

The Duel

Annie watched with her mouth hanging open as Ian casually sauntered up to the two men waiting for him. Rion kept glancing at her, wondering what she had said to make the man appear smug, wondering what Ian had said to leave her looking aghast.

She caught sight of Vadon approaching the cluster. He was carrying an armload of weapons. Annie gasped. She recognized maybe two or three of them. The others were strange and barbaric-looking objects. In her mind, her fertile imagination slathered their shiny surfaces with blood. Rion's blood. Dark, red, and steaming in the cold.

Unaware of what she was doing, Annie bolted for the group. As she neared the men, Lord Duvatt paused to look up at her. All three remained silent when she halted just behind her husband.

"Lady Annie," Lord Duvatt began. "My apologies, but your presence is not allowed—"

"Is there a rule preventing the *prize* from being present?" she countered. She couldn't help the desperate plea in her voice. To make up for it, she bowed her head to the man in deference to let them know she would remain silent from this point on. She kept her head bowed, waiting for the Councilman's verdict, when she heard him chuckle. Annie glanced up to see the smile on the man's face.

"Trust you to find what may be the only loophole in our laws, Lady Annie. No. As far as I know, there is no restriction against the *prize* being present during the presentation of the weaponry." Clearing his throat, Duvatt continued his instructions.

"Ian Davenport, as you have been previously informed, since you initiated the challenge, Lord Rion has the right to name the choice of weapons. However, our laws demand that both warriors have an equal and just chance, which means he cannot choose a weapon that you are unfamiliar with. Because you are an outworlder, you present an unusually difficult problem." Duvatt pointed to the load in Vadon's arms. "Lord Rion is unaware of which weapon you are comfortable using. Therefore he has chosen not to exercise his right of choice, and that leaves me to make the final decision. Ian Davenport, are you skilled in any of the weapons you see here?"

Annie stared at the man as he glanced over the nearly two dozen pieces. He nudged a sword with one finger as a look of disgust passed quickly over his features. "Sorry, old chap, but I've never learned to use any of these. You wouldn't happen to have a rifle or gun of any kind, would you?"

Annie was surprised to see the Councilman motion toward the crowd. Immediately, another messenger detached himself from the sidelines and flew away.

"We do not have guns on our world," Duvatt told the man. "At least not the kind you may be familiar with. For one thing, we do not have the machinery which produces the kind of weapon you prefer. However, we have something similar. I have ordered one of our equivalents to be brought forth."

"Rather backwards of you, isn't it, not to have the same kind of weapons we more modernized chaps do on Earth?"

Annie noticed how Duvatt, as well as Rion and Vadon, kept their tempers in check at Ian's crude insults. It surprised her that the pilot would be so crass as to address them in such an insulting tone and manner. Or maybe he meant to. Maybe it was some form of psychological warfare. Annie remembered several times Rion discussing the mental strategies involved in facing his enemy. He had explained how he used his enemy's anger against him. Maybe that was Ian's strategy. Make Rion angry enough to where he'll make a critical mistake.

Annie looked up at her husband, but his face was unreadable.

"We may appear backwards to you," Duvatt said. "I assure you we have no need for such weapons. We have managed to defend ourselves from our enemies without having to resort to your more modern weaponry."

They were interrupted by the second messenger arriving. He carried a box in his arms, which he held out to the Councilman. Duvatt opened the lid and drew out a flare gun and a red ball flare. Ian laughed as the man presented them to him.

"Are you off your bloody rocker? You call that a gun?"

"It is as close to a gun as we have," Duvatt calmly told him.

"Well, bugger that." Ian laughed again. "What do you suggest now?"

For the first time, Annie saw a perplexed look come over Lord Duvatt's face. "According to our laws, we must come to a compromise. Do you have anything to suggest?"

"Damn right I do." Ian gave Rion a once over. "You've noticed I've brought my plane with me. You have wings, now I have wings. I'd call that even."

Annie immediately tried to protest, but Rion gave her a stern warning look.

"What do you propose?" her husband asked.

Ian grinned. "I have sixteen confirmed kills using my plane. Here's what I propose, Rion. You pick your weapon. Any weapon. I don't care. I'll meet you in the air. That's where we'll meet, head to head. May the best man win."

Before Rion could answer him, Ian turned his back on them and walked back to the plane. Instead of watching the man leave, Annie turned her attention to her husband, who was eyeing her.

"Return to the dais, my Annie."

"Do you think you actually have a chance against that plane?"

"I have no choice. He does have a point. If I can fly, and he can fly, it makes things more even."

"Yeah, and if you stay on the ground, and he stays on the ground, you're still even! Are you healed enough?"

Rion started to reply, but stopped and gave a loud sigh. Annie remained on the field until he chose a long lance with an exceptionally wicked looking blade from the armload of weapons Vadon held out to him. No word passed between the two men as Rion stepped back. One final look passed between her and her husband as Rion walked toward the center of the field to wait.

A hand took her by the elbow. The touch startled her.

"My apologies, Lady Annie, but it would be wiser if you were up on the dais," Lord Duvatt said, guiding her back to the edge of the field. Before they reached the platform, they heard the plane start up. The noise reminded her of the angry roar of an animal, coughing, spluttering, then growling. All eyes were locked on the aircraft as it slowly started across the grass. It gradually gathered speed as it rushed away from them, growing smaller in the distance. Before they were aware of it, the nose lifted, the wings tilted, and the plane lifted into the air. Ian swung the machine around and buzzed over them. He was ready and waiting.

Annie felt her heart leap into her throat as Rion slowly spread his wings. Lifting them, stretching them, he stood with his arms outstretched, the long lance planted beside him like an extremely long sword. The huge golden wings beat once, pulled upward, and flapped again. Annie said a silent prayer as she watched him leap into the air.

There was a moment when she saw him jerk. She couldn't imagine the pain that must be going through him. Yet he quickly recovered and continued to gain altitude.

It was easy to keep track of where the plane was. The sound of its engine was louder than the angry buzz of a monster insect drowning out all other sound. Rion flew straight upward, keeping the lance parallel to his body.

Ian aimed the plane straight at him. Almost level with the ground, the aircraft headed directly at Rion. As the machine grew closer, Rion kept himself steady and readied the lance, its multibarbed tip facing outward.

The distance closed between the two. To all intents and purposes, it looked as though Ian planned to ram Rion with the propeller and cut him into pieces. Like those around her, Annie held her breath. Unlike the others, she said a quick prayer and crossed her fingers.

At the last second, Ian flipped the airplane sideways. Rion ducked, dropped several feet, and jabbed at the machine passing mere feet over his head. Annie would swear the plane's wings grazed Rion's. Both men missed their target. It was clear to all when the warriors parted that both combatants were determined not to miss a second time.

"Have any of your warriors taken to the air like this?" she asked, never taking her eyes away from the battle overhead.

"A few. Not many," Lord Duvatt replied.

"May I ask what were they fighting for?"

When he didn't answer, she tore her gaze away to look at him. She could see the answer on his face.

"In almost every case, the challenge was over a woman."

The plane suddenly sputtered again. Cutting out, as Annie thought of it, remembering how the old tractor on the farm

back in Ohio used to behave. Ian banked, turned around, and started a second pass. Annie was reminded of stories she'd read where knights went barreling headfirst at each other with their weapons down. Jousting. Yeah, that's what it was called. Jousting.

Rion flew higher, putting more distance between himself and the ground. She knew he had to be in intense pain. To remain almost unmoving, he had to beat his wings at a faster pace than if he was soaring overhead, or using the thermals. Even at this distance, she observed how he traded the long spearlike weapon between hands.

"I can't believe the Council approved this," she angrily said. "I can't believe they would allow that man the chance to tear apart my family."

To her surprise, Duvatt laid a hand on her arm. "As long as you are among us, Annie, there will always be those who will resent you being here. Not you, personally, but because you are an outworlder. They do not believe you belong here among us, so several Council members saw this as a chance to have you returned to your own kind."

"At the expense of my husband's life?"

"Rion has his share of enemies, too."

The plane grew closer. Annie wondered if Ian would try that sideways flipping trick again.

The distance between plane and man grew shorter. The machine bore straight at Rion, never wavering from its target.

Suddenly Rion dropped again, but Ian must have been prepared for it. The plane dipped just as Rion jabbed with the lance. There was a horrendous cracking sound. Rion was jerked sideways by the powerful force, and the plane careened in the opposite direction.

Annie screamed, along with the crowd, when Rion plummeted to the ground. She started to run for him when one of the guards grabbed her by the arm and held onto her with an iron grip.

No one moved as they watched the still figure lying on the grass. Another minute ticked by. Overhead the plane continued to cough and choke, and limped around to head back to the field.

The golden figure of her husband moved. He was alive. *Thank you, God!* Slowly, Rion managed to get to his knees, and finally to his feet. The lance was gone. Before Annie could call out to him, she spotted Vadon running toward him with the armload of weapons. A few words exchanged between them as Rion drew a fresh weapon, and Vadon returned to the sidelines.

This time Rion had chosen his sword. Although it was nowhere as long as the lance, it could inflict major damage. More importantly, it was Rion's weapon of expertise.

When he launched himself back into the air, it was clear he was suffering. His wing strokes were choppy, and it was obvious he was favoring his right side. Annie searched the crowd for Vadon, to see if he would give her some kind of sign or signal to tell her how Rion was doing, but it was impossible to spot him. He could be right below the dais and she wouldn't be able to find him amid the sea of wings.

Instead of remaining in place and waiting for the plane to reach him, Rion started circling overhead. He remained on the defensive, but Annie knew the steady beats would put less stress on his wings, as well as make it harder for Ian to try and ram him again.

The plane dropped a bit, coasting. Its engine sounded like it was on the verge of dying with its incessant on-off buzz. Rion kept his sword raised above his head, prepared for a downstroke.

For the third time, man and machine closed the gap between them. Barely a hundred feet separated them, when all heard the telltale miniature explosions coming from the plane.

Every drop of blood fled her body. Annie stared in horror as the plane let go with its guns and tried to strafe her husband.

"No!"

The crowd screamed, drowning her out. Annie tried to run from the dais, but the guard continued to hold onto her. Angrily, she bent over and sank her teeth into the man's heavily muscled arm. The guard yelled, but his grip loosened, and Annie jerked away from him. Instead of trying to leave the platform, she raced over to the Councilman, who was staring in open-mouthed shock at what was happening.

"*Stop the challenge!*" she screamed. Grabbing his arm and shoulder, she shook the older man. "*Make him stop! Stop the challenge!*"

Duvatt turned to give her a stunned look. "I cannot stop it."

"He's using guns to kill Rion! He's using a weapon that has no equal here!" she protested. Glancing up, she could see Rion appeared to have dodged the first hail of bullets. She wondered what was going through his mind at the moment as the plane banked over the Cathedral to turn around for another pass.

"You have to stop him, Lord Duvatt!" she pleaded. "It's not right! Ian is cheating! Rion doesn't have a chance!"

The plane was heading back toward them now, coming in at a downward angle. This time Ian didn't wait until he was close enough to his target before opening fire again.

People screamed and several fell as wayward bullets mowed them down. The crowd began to disperse in a wild, terrified frenzy. Fleeing for their lives, many of the onlookers took to the air to try and escape the bullets. Bodies fell to the ground.

The field became the scene of a bloodbath. Either Ian had no idea of the destruction he was causing, or he didn't care. He was determined to win at all cost. At any cost.

Sometimes it's not what you win that's the important thing. Sometimes it's simply the pleasure of coming out on top as the winner that makes the whole thing worthwhile.

The bastard would not stop until he had won. Everyone and everything else was of no importance.

Annie tried to find her husband, but she had lost sight of him amid the chaos. The aircraft continued to spit fire and bullets. She screamed her frustration and fear. The armed men stationed around the periphery of the field had left the area, leaving the crowd to fend for themselves, but she could understand why.

No one would help Rion because no one could. The airplane with its weapons of war was too powerful for any of them to take on. Had the plane not had its guns, the challenge would have been more fair, more equal. Ian had taken the odds and shifted them wholly in his favor.

She couldn't let him win. If there was any way on this world she could find to stop him, Annie knew she had to try. The man wasn't just destroying her marriage he was destroying her whole life and her future.

The guards had also fled the dais, along with Duvatt. Annie scurried down the steps, ducked into the narrow archway leading onto the field, and kept running, shoving aside those who continued to run for cover, too frightened to take to the air for fear of being shot down.

In the distance the plane soared like a graceful, beautiful bird. The sunlight sparkled across its body and wings, giving it a bright, golden, almost ethereal shine.

A beautiful bird of prey with the blood of innocents dripping from its claws, coming in for the kill.

Annie kept searching the sky for any sign of Rion. Over and over she continued to pray aloud that he was still alive and still fighting somewhere up there, even though she couldn't see him.

Her toe suddenly hit something hard and unyielding, sending bright pain up her leg. Annie gasped and pitched forward onto the grass. The fall knocked the air out of her, but she struggled to get back onto her feet. Glancing back to see what she'd tripped over, she recognized the box the second messenger had brought out to the field. The box containing the flare gun and flares. The man must have abandoned it to flee.

The plane sputtered loudly, and a small puff of smoke suddenly appeared to be trailing from the engine as it drew nearer. Faintly, Annie thought she heard her name being called out. She peered in the opposite direction to see Rion waving down at her, waving for her to get out of harm's way. Instead, she reached for the box.

It was almost instinctual for her to open the lid and extract the flare gun. Grabbing one of the ball-shaped flares, she hurriedly loaded the pistol and aimed directly at the oncoming aircraft.

She waited as she struggled to keep both hands steady. There was no doubt in her mind that one shot would be all she would get. One chance, one shot. She sighted down her arms the way her daddy had taught her, and prayed.

"Come on, you son of a bitch," she whispered, arms outstretched in front of her. "Come on! *Come on!*"

The plane was almost on top of her when Ian pressed the trigger. Simultaneously, Annie fired the flare, knowing that this was her only hope.

The bright green light spiraled almost straight upward. The plane dove directly into it, and the ball of fiery chemicals lodged itself in the portside gun turret.

Ian hit the trigger again.

The Gloster Gladiator exploded in a sheet of white and green flames. As the immense aircraft was enveloped in the fireball, it suddenly angled downward toward the ground. A second later, a second explosion ripped the machine to pieces,

sending debris and burning streams of airplane fuel cascading for hundreds of yards.

Annie dropped to the grass and curled into a tiny ball to try and make herself as small a target as possible. Unable to see where the plane made its final descent, she still managed to hear it when it crashed somewhere in the distance.

After that, the world grew unbelievably silent.

Chapter 37

The Ruling

Annie heard the sound of feet running toward her. Lifting her head, she saw Rion coming toward her, and she burst into tears.

He literally picked her up from where she had been cowering in the grass, and pressed her tightly against him as neither of them said a word. Enveloped in his arms, Annie allowed the fear to shudder out of her, replaced by the rapid pounding of his heart in her ear.

She squeezed her arms about his waist, as if she could melt through the wet uniform and into his skin. After several more moments she felt him kissing the top of her head. Eagerly she lifted her face, her eyes still closed, and waited for the passion of his mouth.

He was crying. They both were. The tears running down his cheeks mixed with hers, but it didn't stop them from sharing a dozen hard, passionate kisses.

Annie sniffed, and for the first time she smelled the fumes of burning airplane fuel. Sharp and acidic, they felt like they were singeing her airways, all the way into her lungs. She pulled back to look at her husband, who kept one hand buried in her dark hair.

His face was covered in soot. And blood. In fact, the entire right side of his face was matted in red.

"Rion! You're hurt!"

"I survived," he said with a voice raspy from smoke inhalation. "I survived, and I still have you. That is all that matters, my Annie."

He kissed her again, nearly making her dizzy with its intensity. Pulling away once more, he stared down at her, taking in her whole body. "Did you get hit? Are you injured?"

"No. I didn't get hit. I'm not injured. Oh, God, Rion!" Throwing her arms around his neck, Annie let the terror and worry out in huge, unchecked sobs. Rion continued to cradle her as she wept. Occasionally he stroked her hair and back to soothe her. Vaguely she was aware that he was allowing himself this moment to release the emotions he'd kept pent up inside. His warm tears soaked through her tunic and a few rolled down the side of her neck.

A cold gust of air carried the stench of burned flesh to them. She shivered involuntarily. Rion tried to keep her warm, since she'd dropped her cloak during the confusion.

They heard the sound of someone running toward them. Reluctantly, they started to draw apart when Vadon threw himself at his brother.

"Rion! Thank the heavens!" Vadon grabbed Rion and hugged him. Brother held brother in a tight grip. In the next instant, Vadon pulled back to look him over. "You are covered in blood! Where are you hurt?"

"My injuries are minor," Rion assured him. Looking at Annie, he said, "I survived, thanks to you, my beautiful Annie."

Several more angels arrived. Chloe landed among them and hurried over to where they stood. Silently she embraced Rion then held him at arm's length to study him. She started to say something, paused, and pulled the white banner over her head, tossing it to the ground.

"With the challenge over, I am no longer bound not to heal. Rion, we need to get you to the hospital as soon as possible so you can be examined." The woman physician turned to Annie. "You, too."

"I'm not hurt. I didn't get hit with anything."

"Are you certain?" Laying a hand to Annie's back, Chloe lifted it for her to see it was smeared with blood. "Go quickly. I will tend to you myself. The other physicians are taking care of the wounded."

Vadon lifted Annie in his arms. "Can you manage on your own?" he asked Rion.

"I will be right behind you," Chloe promised. "In case you falter."

Nodding, Rion took a running start to launch himself skyward. The rest followed close behind.

Vadon lifted the two of them. They were several feet above the ground when he adjusted her in his arms. "Have you

been losing weight?"

"Not that I know of. Why?"

"Huh. You feel lighter." He said no more, allowing Annie to observe where they were going.

From the air she saw the full extent of the destruction Ian had caused with his airplane, his machine of war. The field and outlying area was dotted with red-robed figures—physicians tending those who had been struck down by the hail of bullets or burned by the flaming wreckage. A short distance away, the remains of the airplane continued to billow with flames and black, nauseous smoke.

The trip to the hospital was short. They all landed on the third-story platform, and Chloe immediately hustled them into the nearest empty examining room. Taking a seat on the first padded table, Annie watched as the physician angel helped her husband remove his blood-soaked tunic and peel away the black shirt.

With only immediate family in the room, all protocol was suspended. Rion allowed himself to relax.

"Tell me everything," Chloe curtly ordered him as she began to closely examine him.

Rion kept his eyes on Annie. "My wings are the worst. Every movement is...unbearable."

"Were you shot?" Annie asked softly.

"No. However, when I managed to shove the lance into the path of the plane's rotating motor—"

"The propeller," Annie gently corrected him. She got a smile in return.

"The propeller. The lance shattered. I was struck by several slivers."

"I have located numerous cuts and gashes, plus three puncture wounds so far. Lie down, Rion. I will remove the fragments."

He stretched across the second table on his side. His eyes never left his wife. "Did you know his air machine had guns on it?"

Annie vehemently shook her head. "No. I never saw them. Wait a minute. I did see them...I think...but I didn't know they were guns. Jesus, Rion, I've never been that close to an airplane before. When I used to live on Earth, I saw airplanes dusting the crops out in the fields. I saw airplanes way up in the sky doing cartwheels at the county fair. But I've never been close enough to see if any of them had any guns." She glanced down at her hands that were covered with dried blood. "I'm sorry."

"You have nothing to be sorry about," Vadon said. "In fact, if you had not stopped him, Rion could be dead now."

"Along with hundreds more innocent bystanders," Chloe angrily commented. She held out a hand, and a piece of something bloody fell to the floor. "Vadon, over in the cabinet right behind you are several bandages. Please bring me all of them."

Vadon found the sterile patches and handed them over. "Any idea how many people were injured at the field?"

"I cannot say for sure until the reports are filed, but I would not be surprised if there are dozens. Sit up, Rion. You are going to be very sore for the next few weeks, but I have good news." Chloe walked around to face him. "Because you abstained from forcing your wings to fly, the pain you are feeling is from the stiffening of your muscles and joints. Not from your injuries."

Rion managed a hopeful smile. "Then I will once again be able to fly when this is over?"

"You should," Chloe nodded. "After a few more weeks of rest, you should."

He glanced over at Annie. "And will I be able to carry Annie and Kerr with me?"

"Given time, yes."

He let out a heavy, relieved sigh, and clasped her hand. "Thank you."

Giving him a pat on the shoulder, Chloe turned her attention to Annie. "Now you. Take off the tunic."

Annie looked to Vadon. "What about you? Are you all right?"

"I have already checked him," Chloe said, reaching for the hem.

Annie started to protest when Chloe slipped the tunic over her head, but the woman physician draped the top across Annie's crossed arms, allowing her to keep her breasts covered.

All kept silent while Chloe examined the sores on her back. Before she was finished, they were interrupted with the arrival of Lord Duvatt, who entered the room. Immediately, the atmosphere changed in the room. Annie looked to Rion, whose face had suddenly gone white.

It was Chloe who broke the silence. "I can see by the bandage and sling that you were injured," she commented

matter-of-factly. As a physician, she had to answer directly only to her superior of the House of Healing, so the dictates of the Council rarely affected her. Neither did the appearance of any Council Members intimidate her.

The Councilman glanced down at his arm. "Some burning oil struck me. It set my robes on fire and burned my arm, but I was lucky. I should be healed within a few weeks." He directed his attention to Rion. "I am here on official business, Lord Rion."

"I am listening. Is this pertaining to your official ruling?"

"It is."

"Annie."

Annie turned to see her husband gesturing toward her.

"Please come be with me."

She felt a sickening, sinking feeling in her stomach, but she remained silent and went to sit next to him on the table. Chloe took a stance beside them.

Duvatt eyed the physician, then Vadon. "Because you are related to Lord Rion, the ruling of the Council directly affects you. You may stay." Stepping further into the room, he closed the wide door behind him. "I am not your enemy, Rion."

"I know that."

"I also want you to know that I was among those who fought for the challenge."

Rion looked puzzled. "May I ask why?"

"Because I, as well as many others, was afraid of a repeat visitation."

"What does that mean?" Annie asked.

"We feared that if he could fly his machine through the rift back to Earth, he could come back. Again. And next time maybe bring others with him. We argued this possibility, which was why the vote was in favor of allowing the man his challenge. We hoped you would defeat him and prevent this sort of scenario from happening." The man straightened. "It was not so much a matter of who wanted you to fail, but rather a fervent wish for your success."

"What was Ian Davenport's argument?" Rion asked.

"Mainly? That Annie was one of his kind, from his world. The second was her general health and welfare. There was no way we could discredit either of his claims."

"You came here to give us the Council's final verdict. Well, let us have it," Vadon said.

"I will not lie to you, Lord Rion. You did not defeat Ian Davenport, but neither did he defeat you."

"But he is dead. By the rules of the challenge, one opponent is dead," Rion insisted. "Technically, the challenge is over."

"True," Lord Duvatt acknowledged. "But not by your hand."

"Ian cheated!" Annie slipped off the table to stand. "He brought out a weapon he'd kept secret. And it was a weapon more powerful than anything you people had! That broke the equality thing, didn't it? He started killing at random! He attacked innocent people! He didn't care anymore! He wasn't just going after Rion, he—"

Lord Duvatt raised his free hand to stop her. Annie pressed her lips together to hold back what she wanted to add. She felt Rion tug at the waistband of her pants, and she obliged, moving closer to him.

"The Council met just now in an emergency session to rule on the outcome. There is a problem, I admit, but it did not start with you." The Councilman took a deep breath. "The moment Ian Davenport began attacking innocents he violated the parameters of the challenge. When he began firing on noncombatants, the challenge was negated."

Annie felt Rion's hand on the back of her thigh. "So your ruling is..." Rion asked.

"The challenge was negated by the actions of the challenger. Therefore, no action will be forthcoming to send Lady Annie back to Earth."

"What about Annie's actions?" Vadon spoke out.

Duvatt gave them a weary smile. "They were the natural reactions of someone defending herself from an aggressor determined to take her life. Although I must say, Lady Annie, that your proficiency with a flare gun is quickly becoming the subject of legend."

"So no charges will be brought?" Rion asked to be certain.

"No. None whatsoever." Duvatt's smile widened. "After all, nowhere in the laws does it state any punishment if the

prize takes up a signaling device to protect itself.”

Chapter 38

The Wings

Annie felt her husband reach for her and pull her against him. Laying her cheek on his bare chest, she allowed herself to succumb to Chloe's warmth.

As Lord Duvatt wished them well and excused himself, Vadon hurried over to give his brother a congratulatory hug.

Chloe kissed both Rion and Annie then said, "I need to finish tending to Annie's back. Vadon, there should be a roll of bandages in same cabinet where you found Rion's patches. Annie, would you please get back on the table?"

Annie hopped up as Rion went looking in one of the cabinets on the other side of the room. Before she could ask him what he was doing, he pulled out a set of hospital clothing. She watched as he shed the last of his bloody clothing, and redressed in the clean tunic and pants. She also noticed how he carefully tucked the chaster out of sight, under the tunic's neckline.

"Annie?"

"What?"

"Does that hurt?"

"No." She turned her head to glance over her shoulder at the woman physician. "No. You know it doesn't hurt when you work on me."

"Normally, no," Chloe admitted. "It should not pain you *if* I was sending you my healing strength."

Rion stood up. "What are you doing?"

"I am pressing my fingers directly on the sores, and Annie does not feel the pressure."

"Is that a bad thing?" Annie nervously asked.

Chloe made a face. "It is odd. Vadon, can you fetch Lord Baull?"

"Lord Baull? Why him?"

"Vadon."

Her husband shrugged and hurried out of the room. Rion gave Chloe a confused look, which confounded Annie. "Who is Lord Baull?"

"He primarily heals infants. He specializes in healing those in the womb."

"Oh! A baby doctor!" Annie grinned.

"Why would a physician who specializes in infants—" Rion suddenly stopped, and his grew eyes wider. "Chloe...is Annie with child?"

Annie's heart leaped into her throat, preventing her from adding her own question. But in the next instant, her hopes sank.

"No. Oh, no, forgive me. But I think...no. I will wait for Lord Baull to examine her, and we will see if my diagnosis is valid."

The woman physician refused to say more, but fortunately they didn't have long to wait. Vadon was soon back with the older physician in tow. The gray-haired man with the close-cropped gray beard was quickly introduced around then Chloe shared her observations with him.

"The sores have gotten larger, you said?" he asked as he stared at Annie's back.

"Yes. They started small, about the size of a fingertip. At that size, they itched."

"But when they enlarged, the itch became painful? Lady Annie?"

"Yes," Annie nodded.

"When did they begin to bleed?"

"Three days ago," Chloe answered.

"Have they always been this symmetrical?"

"Yes."

"Will you be able to tell us if it might Perrin's Disease?" Rion inquired.

Lord Baull shook his head as he continued to examine and probe Annie's back. "This is not Perrin's, I assure you. Perrin's is degenerative. This is..."

"Growing," Chloe supplied.

"Bigger?" Annie turned to stare at her.

Baull made a face. It eerily resembled the same expression Chloe had made earlier.

"Chloe, come here."

Chloe joined the physician. Rion also bent over the examination table to watch. Annie sighed with exasperation. "I feel like charging for the privilege." Rion chuckled and patted her knee.

"Feel this," Baull instructed.

Chloe reached over, and Annie could sense them prodding again.

"Does this hurt?" Chloe asked her.

"No. But maybe it's because the tissue has lost the ability to feel pain," Annie suggested.

Vadon detached himself from the far side of the room and joined the others. Annie gave him a wry smile. "Go ahead, Vadon. Make it a family affair."

"Lord Baull, it..."

"Yes?"

Chloe gave a breathy little laugh. "It feels like her bones have developed a calcium spur."

"Yes, it does," the man agreed. "Keep feeling."

Annie frowned. "Keep feeling? Bones? What are you doing? Sticking your finger in me?"

"Not quite. She is pressing directly on and around the wounds," Rion whispered, frowning. "And you feel no pain?"

"No."

"You know something?" Vadon spoke up. "From back here, it looks like the sores are in the same place...umm..."

Chloe gasped. "My heavens!"

Annie could make out Lord Baull nodding behind her.

"What?" Rion asked.

"Pinions!" Chloe exclaimed. "Intermediary pinions!"

"More specifically, prenatal pinions," Lord Baull clarified.

"What?" Annie turned around to look at the surprise on their faces. "Pinions? What are you talking about? *Feathers*?"

"Are you telling us the sores on Annie's back are from..." Rion paused, but he was thinking the same thing she was. The same thing they all were.

Lord Baull nodded again. "Lady Annie is developing wings."

"*How*?" Annie gasped.

"The how I cannot begin to explain," Lord Baull said. "But you, Lady Annie, are growing wings. At this stage, however, they are more prenatal than actuary."

Rion looked as puzzled as she felt. "What does that mean? I thought prenatal pinions developed while the fetus was still in the womb."

"They do," said Lord Baull, turning to Chloe. "That is probably why you had difficulty diagnosing her condition. In us, the development of the wings follows a specific pattern during the in vitro stage. You were trained only to notice abnormalities in their development."

"How were you able to figure it out?" Annie asked. She got a chuckle in reply.

"I work almost exclusively with prenatal and newborns, Lady Annie. I know their bone and wing structures. But I also know wings at your stage of development do not belong on a grown woman."

"Lord Baull, Lady Annie feels like she has lost weight," Vadon mentioned.

"That does not surprise me," the physician said. "Lady Annie, have you been in dubious health for a few lunar cycles?" Annie nodded.

"Most likely because your body has been adjusting and adapting. Your bone structure has been changing. Your bones are becoming more porous, less dense, which would explain your weight loss even though you may not physically appear to have lost any." Crossing his arms over his chest, the physician scratched his beard. "There is one final piece of the puzzle I

cannot figure out. What could have instigated the change?"

"That is not difficult to answer," Rion said. He reached around to find Annie's hands, and clasped them. She smiled into eyes that promised her the skies and more.

"She has the blood of angels in her veins."

Epilogue The Cabin

“Mama? Fofu dere.”

“What, Kerr?” Annie put down the hammer and went over to where her son was sitting in a patch of bright yellow abin. The toddler was happily pulling every blossom within reach and dropping them onto a small pile beside him.

“Mama.”

She sat down next to him. “What do you have, Kerr? Flower? Are you picking the flowers?”

“Fofu dere.” He grinned happily at her.

“Yes.” She giggled. “There are your flowers.” Taking a fistful of the glowing buds, she dumped them on the child’s head, laughing as he tried to bat them away.

“Hey! No languishing on the job!”

Annie looked back where Rion was rounding the side of the cabin. A log was balanced across both of his wide, muscular shoulders.

“Sorry!” She got to her feet and went to retrieve the hammer. “Actually, I’ll have you know I wasn’t languishing. I got that frame nailed together like you wanted. Then I went to play a bit with Kerr while I waited for you to tell me what you needed me to do next.”

Rion dropped the log and brushed off his hands. He examined the framework lying across the summer grass with a critical eye. “You did a good job, Annie.”

“Thank you! Look, if we’re going to eat, I need to start dinner. Can you watch Kerr? Or do you want me to take him inside with me?”

“I will watch him. I need to get more kindling anyway. Kerr can help me gather, right, son?”

Annie watched as Rion held out his hand. Kerr got to his feet and wrapped his fingers around two of Rion’s. Father and son proceeded to head off toward the thick wood at the edge of the meadow. Kerr’s little wings were flapping steadily now, and sometimes he could manage enough momentum to lift him off the ground as Rion provided a steady, guiding hand.

Climbing the small flight of steps to the porch, Annie paused in the doorway and turned around to stare at the distant landscape. It was hard to believe it had been four months since the tosis had nearly destroyed the city. Four months.

It was harder to believe how much had changed since then.

The city looked nothing like it had when she’d first come to this world. All the tall, exquisitely sculpted towers and buildings were gone. The apartments and businesses being built to replace them were shorter and stouter, not thin and graceful like their predecessors. The engineers and architects were finding ways to incorporate more of the glorious color and sculpture that had been so widely used in the past. Plus the experts were discovering that a lot of the ancient, carved stonework the elders had originally incorporated didn’t just give the halls and chambers their own unique beauty, but were actually fundamentally important in providing better support to the arched roofs and walls.

From the porch Annie could see the city in the distance, as hazy as the mountains looked when she had viewed them from her old home. After another glance around, she went into the cabin, but left the door propped open to catch the breeze.

Two days after the challenge, Rion flew her here to this spot of land he had purchased more than a year ago. As he had promised, the narrow valley between the snow-topped ridges was a great deal like Dry Lick Valley back in Montana on her Earth. Even though the trees and brush were uniquely different, as was the dark blue grass and glowing flowers, there were enough similarities to have her crying in Rion’s arms.

He had immediately contacted several people who owed him favors, and construction began on the cabin the next day. Plans were drawn up, and Annie picked out the exact location where she wanted it built.

Smiling, Annie opened the cold box that was concealed to look like part of the log wall. Pulling out what she needed,

she set the foodstuffs on the rock slab counter and started preparing lunch. Like the cold box, the baker and hot plates were incorporated into the basic design of the kitchen, hidden from view to keep the fantasy intact that the cabin was no more than a simple rustic structure.

A sudden shifting from the burning logs made her pause. Annie glanced at the fireplace to make certain she'd remembered to put up the screen. Like the cabin she'd left on Earth, a woven rag rug lay in front of the hearth. However, there were a few other crucial differences.

Viewed from the front, the cabin looked exactly like the one in Montana. Inside, the differences were more noticeable. For one, the real bedroom, as well as the bath, was at the rear of the front room, which they used as a combination kitchen and living area. Without the bed near the fireplace, as it had been on her world, there was enough room for a circular sofa.

Annie smiled. Sofa, bed—there were days when one sufficed as well as the other.

Quickly, she worked at getting their meal ready. It wasn't long before she heard the two returning. It was easy to catch Kerr's childlike laughter, as well as Rion's throatier bass chuckle.

Her two menfolk entered the house, each bearing an armload of small branches, although Kerr's armload consisted more of three small twigs. She kept one eye on them while she set the table then sliced the last of the loaf of fallala bread she'd made the day before.

"There you go, Kerr. Put your load in the fireplace like this," Rion instructed their son. "Very good! I am sure these pieces are going to make an excellent fire."

"Fah!" the toddler exclaimed, oohing at the sudden burst of flames.

"Do not touch, Kerr. The fire will hurt you if you get too close." To protect the child, he placed the screen back up, and led Kerr over to the table where he placed their son in his booster chair. "Here, have some bread."

Annie snickered. "Between the two of you, I'm going to have to start baking twice a week just to keep up." She turned to the deep sink to wash her hands, and was again amazed by the hot water gushing out of the tap. Like the homes in the city, the cabin was built with glazed panels which provided them with power from the two suns. The only exception was that the water coming to the cabin was routed straight from a nearby stream. A real stream that bubbled to the surface with the coldest, purest water Annie had ever tasted. Rion later admitted the stream was the biggest reason why he had chosen this parcel of land.

A pair of strong but sweaty arms wrapped around her waist, and Rion dropped a kiss to her neck where her hair was tied back.

"Would you agree that we are making good progress with Kerr's bedroom?"

She nodded. "Rapid progress. But, Rion, I can't believe you dismissed the builders this soon just so you could do the rest of the work yourself."

"It feels good to do something with my own two hands other than wield a sword," he admitted.

"How much longer do you think it'll take you to finish it?" She slapped an errant hand that was trying to surreptitiously snag a beelo pod from the bowl sitting on the counter next to them. "Stop nibbling or I won't have enough for this salad."

Rion laughed and gave her a little squeeze. "I think I can have the room enclosed within a couple of weeks. Annie, once Kerr's bedroom is finished enough for him to sleep in it instead of with us, how would you feel about moving here permanently? Maybe by the end of the lunar cycle?"

Grinning up at him, Annie continued to wash the innoc to tear for the salad. "Are you sure it's not too far to travel every day? I mean, it was one thing to go back and forth to the way station when we were living in the tower. You were no more than a five-minute flight away."

He nibbled her neck for a moment before giving it another kiss. "So the five-minute flight will be a bit longer. I do not care. This place, this cabin...I cannot explain why or how, my Annie, but I feel more at ease when I am here. Less stressed. Sometimes I feel as if we are back in Montana, like it was in the beginning. Isolated, with just the two of us—"

"Oh-oh."

They turned around to see that Kerr had accidentally dropped his bread on the wooden floor. Nonplussed, the child quickly forgot about the loss and began playing with his spoon, banging it on the table with relish.

Annie slanted her eyes up to her husband. "You were saying?" she reminded him with a sardonic grin.

Rion chuckled. "You know what I was trying to say."

"Yes, I do. And I will be forever grateful for your sacrifice to move us out here."

"Is that a yes?"

"Oh, yeah. It's a yes."

Leaning back against him, Annie lifted her mouth for his kiss. Maybe it was the location, maybe it was their isolation, or maybe it was because of a hundred other little things like the changes occurring in her body. But the first time, and every time afterward, when they made love here in the cabin, it felt as though she was awakening from a long, drugged sleep. Every sound, every touch, and every sensation now sent her senses into overdrive.

Her homesickness was gone, cured perhaps by the mountains and the cabin. She'd heard that what little was left of Ian Davenport's plane was now on display in the Hall of History, and his presence on Parra was no more than another chapter in a scroll.

Yes, there may come a time when another plane might find its way through the rift to land on their world. But they couldn't spend the rest of their lives waiting for something that may never happen.

Rion pulled away from the kiss first as a chuckle rumbled in his chest. Leaning back slightly, he swatted playfully at the ebony colored tufts of feathers protruding from her shoulder blades. Annie laughed and tried to squirm out of his embrace.

"Rion! Stop that! You know how it tickles!"

He stopped, but continued to examine them. "No more than they tickle me. Are they still itching?"

"God, yes. There are times I wish I could go out in the yard, and lay down on the grass, and wriggle until the itching stops. Are they always going to itch like this?"

"You know as much as I do," he told her. "Did Chloe give you a time line as to how much longer it will take before they are fully grown?"

"At their current rate, she estimates maybe a full master cycle. Maybe a little more. Maybe a little less." Annie gave a slight shrug. "Nobody can say for sure. I'm kind of a unique phenomena, you know?"

"Well, tonight when you are ready to take your shower, let me know and I will come in to scrub them for you. Maybe help relieve some of that itching for you."

"Yeah, yeah. And maybe help me scrub some other parts, too, while you're at it?" she teased.

Laughing, Rion gave her another squeeze, and a look of serene peace came over him. "Do you know what pleases me more than anything about bringing you here, my Annie?"

"Do tell."

"The fact that your health has improved."

"Oh?" After a quick toss of the salad, Annie turned around and raised an eyebrow at him. "How can you tell my health has improved? Have you all of a sudden become a physician as well as a warrior?"

Rion patted her hips. "You have added a little weight."

Annie paused then gave him a wink. "A few pounds, maybe. I was wondering when you'd notice."

"Oh? Why?"

"'Cause I'm going to be getting a lot heavier in the next six lunar cycles. Big as an ox, actually. A real cow." She held her arms out in front of her and puffed her cheeks.

It took Rion several seconds before the implication hit him. When it did, it was like watching her husband being struck by lightning.

"Annie! No!"

"Yes!" she shrieked as he picked her up and whirled her around in dizzying circles in the middle of the room. "Rion! Stop! Stop! You're going to make me throw up if you don't stop!"

He stopped twirling her and set her back down on her feet. Holding her tightly against him, he kissed her with a passion that made her toes tingle.

In many ways, their lives had come full circle. They were back where they had begun, and facing a future that brimmed with promise and possibilities.

Deep down Annie knew she would never again think of returning to Earth. Neither would she have the desire to go back. Never again. Never ever again.

She had finally found where she truly belonged. Where her heart would always belong.

She had finally found her *home*.

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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