



Kidnapped by rebels...or rescued by love?

*The Guild Chronicles, Book 1*

As a prized psychic, Eva's lived her entire life inside the Guild Compound. While sex isn't exactly forbidden, she's rarely indulged—such encounters could swamp her sensitive gift.

A chance encounter with Aidan, a sexy Guild Security Officer, rocks her to the core when she sees herself entangled in his arms. She fights the unfamiliar surge of lust and tries to focus on the job at hand, the interrogation of the subversive Rafael. Yet she discovers that he's no terrorist. In fact, his capture is a ploy, a way for him and Aidan to infiltrate the Guild with one goal in mind: Eva.

At first Eva fights her captors, but once outside the Guild's sheltered walls, she realizes she is free. Free to live and love as she pleases. And her two rebels please her indeed, introducing her to erotic pleasures she never imagined. They break down the barriers imposed on her mind and body, making her question everything she's ever known.

Even as Eva dares to dream of a future with her lovers, she fears for their lives. The Guild wants her back. And that's not all they want...

Warning: Contains two irresistible rebels working "undercover" to win the woman of their dreams, an evil corporation, rough sex, tender sex, sex with mild bondage, sex intensified by psychic connections and an oh-so-passionate ménage à trois.

**eBooks are *not* transferable.**  
**They cannot be sold, shared or given away as it is an infringement on the copyright of this work.**

This book is a work of fiction. The names, characters, places, and incidents are products of the writer's imagination or have been used fictitiously and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to persons, living or dead, actual events, locale or organizations is entirely coincidental.

Samhain Publishing, Ltd.  
577 Mulberry Street, Suite 1520  
Macon GA 31201

With a Touch  
Copyright © 2010 by Rhiannon Leith  
ISBN: 978-1-60504-967-0  
Edited by Deborah Nemeth  
Cover by Kanaxa

All Rights Are Reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews.

First Samhain Publishing, Ltd. electronic publication: March 2010  
[www.samhainpublishing.com](http://www.samhainpublishing.com)

# With a Touch

*Rhiannon Leith*

## Dedication

Thanks to my Divas, Rowan Larke, Elaina Huntley, Jennifer Leeland, Mima and Crystal Jordan.  
And of course, to “himself”.

# Chapter One

Eva pulled on the soft kid gloves and flexed her fingers. The material caressed her skin, as familiar as breathing. The leather gave that soft creak she had known for years, and the interior moulded against her hands. Protection. Something she needed as much as her clothing, her badge, or the light dusting of makeup. A shield. A way of hiding herself as completely as a uniform. The neat business suit in charcoal grey acted as part of the statement. The silk cream blouse beneath it looked the part too. Professional. Clinical. That defined her. Guild-trained and Guild-sworn.

The material brushed her skin, pressed intimately against her breasts and gave her the lie. The sensual contact first thing in the morning made her shiver deep inside, but she forced the feelings away. They had no place in her life. The Guild and its members served order and logic, not this sort of self-indulgence. And without the Guild, civilisation would have crumbled to pollution, plague and human decadence.

She took a deep breath and fixed a smile on her face to complete the disguise. She was Guild. That was that. All Guild psychics had tricks to see themselves through it, to survive, but a trick would only get you so far. She sucked in another breath and put all her secret thoughts into a secret place. Then she closed the lid and locked them away. The smile, and the emptiness she poured into her eyes, were all that remained to her.

She took the 'rail downtown to Guild headquarters, ticking off items from her mental to-do list. The Ferguson brief still had to be looked over. She wasn't meeting him until ten so there was still loads of time. Hopefully she could avoid her repellent boss, Burgess, too. Her eyes snagged on the billboard as the carriage passed by. *Building Your World*. The Guild was everywhere, in everything. In truth, nothing in her life extended beyond the Guild.

All the office buildings looked the same in her district, in every district. New, shining, bland. Economic collapse had caused so many buildings to fall into disuse, that it was easier for the Guild to bulldoze whole areas and rebuild from scratch. But it all looked so empty, soulless.

As Eva swiped her badge for entry, she caught a glimpse of her face in the glass and chrome, as empty and soulless as the buildings. The door chimed as it swung back to admit her and she smiled politely at the security guard on the far side. He didn't return the expression. Never did. But that didn't stop her trying.

The elevator ride passed in silence, even though five colleagues joined her. No one spoke or made eye contact. That might have opened a connection, and they'd all learned quickly that brushing mental

awareness with someone you had to see on a daily basis was, at best, mortifying. Some had been known to use what they found in another's conscious mind against them. It wasn't unheard of. Eva suspected it was more common than anyone would admit.

She stepped out of the elevator on floor three and collided with a man. The impact sent her reeling back against the wall. Winded, she would have gone down had he not caught her. Strong arms, a firm grip, right on the skin of her forearms where her sleeves had ridden up. She gasped, her gaze flying up to his face.

And she saw him. Blue eyes bright as cornflowers, as wide in surprise as hers must have been.

*His touch on her skin, his skin pressed to hers, his mouth parting in a groan of need fulfilled. Her body arching to take him inside her, feeling him fill her, stretch her, the sweat glistening between them. Her body began to unfold from its prison of denial. His mouth descended, plundering hers, the taste of coffee and brandy on his tongue. The murmur on her lips: "Aidan!" and his reply, incoherent but for her name.*

Eva jerked free of him, tearing herself from his grip.

He stared at her, mouth open, his jaw working as he tried to form words. He was a guard, a Guild Security officer. What he was doing on this floor was a wonder, though the thought passed only briefly over her consciousness as she tried to press back against the wall, out of reach, and gather her panicked thoughts and shattered self-control. Security officers belonged on the sub-levels. Everyone knew that.

"Oh, shit," he muttered. "Shit, I'm sorry. I'm so sorry." He straightened and stepped back, giving her room. At full height, he dwarfed her petite frame. He was broad-shouldered, slim-hipped, and so tall she had to tilt back her head if she wanted to look him in the face. The neon light in the ceiling behind him made his dark gold hair gleam like the corona of a solar eclipse. He stiffened as he caught sight of her badge more clearly and lurched to attention. "I apologise, ma'am. I...I have no excuse."

Eva drew in a breath. He couldn't know what she had seen and felt. But he might wonder. He was just Security, not psychic. The thought of her, of them making love, probably had not even been a conscious one. So many were not. She knew that, used it to her advantage. As an interrogator, she needed to be aware which was which.

"Accidents happen, Officer..." *Aidan*, her mind filled in for her, revelling in the sound of his name, the lyrical tones of it, the way her mouth had formed the word in his fantasies.

"Valetti, ma'am," he told her stiffly, his eyes now fixed on the wall above her shoulder. "Officer Aidan Valetti."

"Officer Valetti," she repeated, in a tone which told him she would remember it. His skin paled and she felt a small rush of regret. She dealt with fear and control so often it was hard to set it aside. She gentled her voice deliberately, hoping to see him relax, perhaps even smile. "No harm done. I should have been looking where I was going."

"Ma'am." A non-committal answer. Safe and diplomatic. The answer of a soldier to a superior.

“You may go.” She sighed, wishing the barriers had not been so firmly fixed so quickly. He moved away, his gait fluid and unhurried but a determined march nonetheless. The feeling of his hands on her skin flickered back into the forefront of her mind. His touch had been smooth, cool, strong and completely unexpected. Gentle, nothing like Tony’s used to be. A touch, physical contact, after so long...

And the vision that had followed...

Sex was something more or less denied to her. Her own decision, one she accepted wholeheartedly. Celibacy wasn’t enforced on Guild psychics, but what else was open to them? To reveal that much of herself to another through such intimate physical contact was too much. It would swamp her senses, and when the end came, as it inevitably would, that would leave her devastated. Guild strictures on her body and mind tangled around her, closed her off from a normal life anyway. There was no real alternative. Everyone experimented, usually no more than once or twice. Tony had been enough for her.

Especially when he used all the information he’d garnered during their brief affair to take a couple of corporate steps up the ladder ahead of her.

Jesus, Tony. She hadn’t thought of him in years. He’d never touched her like that, said her name in that way. He’d never made her feel so complete.

Even though it had just been in a vision, the sound of her name on Aidan’s lips made her ache deep inside, made her body heat all over and her breath stop in her throat.

“Aidan,” she murmured, testing his name, wishing she could call him back.

“Ms. Lee.” Her supervisor’s voice made her jump, and Burgess bore down on her. “You’re late and you have an interview to attend.”

The Ferguson case. But she still had time. It wasn’t nine thirty yet.

Eva straightened her suit and plastered that fake smile on once more, along with a contrite widening of the eyes. “I’m so sorry, Mr. Burgess. But my first appointment isn’t until ten.”

Burgess smiled, a thin and measly expression that did nothing for his rat-like face. “That’s been transferred to another agent. You’re needed by Security. And you’re late.” He checked his watch with a quick flick of his wrist and tutted. “Very late.”

Shock chilled her through. She’d been on the Ferguson case for months and to be taken off it so suddenly...

Security? They’d never asked for her before and for that she was supremely grateful. A trickle of cold fear ran down her spine. Her reputation for business matters and education aside, she’d never had any reason to become involved with Security and that was just fine.

“Surely someone more experienced, Mr. Burgess...”

“There’s no one available today, not between vacations and medical leave. That makes *you* the most experienced of my psychics. So it’s *you*. And you are getting later by the minute. Sub-level three. Ten minutes ago. You might want to move.”



Eva steeled her mental walls before allowing herself to think what a bastard he truly was. Burgess might be her boss and a psychic, but he wasn't as strong as she was and she had no problem keeping him out of her thoughts. Which he hated. Consequently he usually gave her the drudge work or, failing that—like this time—tried to ensure she would screw up something really important. Or maybe he had found out how chilling she found the containment areas on the sub-levels. For a moment she stared at him, wondering if this was some ploy, another trick or perhaps even a really bad joke. But Burgess didn't make jokes.

Eva longed to rebel, to refuse, but she couldn't. The idea was there, but when it came to action, even so small an action as telling him what she really thought of him, the will to do so slid away.

"Then please excuse me, sir," she replied formally and turned away. She tried not to run but walked in a brisk and businesslike manner back to the elevator. She passed the door to the ladies room, wishing she could run in there and hide.

This was just a job, like any other. She had done nothing wrong. If Security was interested in her, they wouldn't send a desk-man like Burgess to summon her. They'd come themselves. In black uniforms, with stony faces, with eyes that told her nothing.

*"It's for the best, Mrs. Lee," the voice had said. A voice coated in saccharine gentleness, but the core of which was steel. "She'll be educated, cared for, her abilities nourished. The Guild needs people like Eva. And the rewards are great."*

The darkness of the uniformed arms that cradled her, the sobs of her mother, and the chimes as the credits were transferred into her family's account were the last things she remembered of home. Of the smiling woman whose face had crumpled when they came to take away her baby girl. The woman who had to feed and protect her other children. The normal ones.

Shaking away the bitter memory, she stepped into the elevator. She checked that her gloves were in place and straightened her suit before she swiped her card and typed in the code for Sub-level three. The doors began to slide shut, but—

"Hold it, please!" A black-clad arm swung into the gap and the doors retracted. A guard stepped in and she took a step back to the corner, trying not to shrink from him. Another guard! Was it her day for bad luck? What had she done to deserve—

He turned and smiled his relief. "Thanks. I—" His features froze and then reddened with embarrassment.

It was the guard from the corridor. Aidan Valetti.

Eva's own face heated as she remembered the images from his head, the way he had pictured her, and the way it had felt. She had been adored. That was a complete unknown.

"It's no problem," she replied, her voice coldly clinical. "Which level?"

"Sub-level three." He pulled out his swipe, but then read the monitor already displaying their destination. "You too?"

Eva nodded but said nothing more.

"I'm Aidan." He thrust out his hand.

Eva stared at it as if it might bite. Did he think she'd touch him again? Even with the gloves on, which meant there was technically nothing to stop her, she hesitated. The inadvertent intimacy had shaken her more than she cared to admit, let alone show. And yet part of her wanted to feel that again. To feel his touch, his lips, to feel him inside her and to hear him call out her name, breathless with longing. Even if it never actually happened. She wanted the fantasy. And that was one dangerous thought too many. She swallowed hard and balled her hands into fists at her side.

The moment went on too long. Valetti let his hand drop back to his side and they stood in awkward silence.

"I am truly sorry," he said at last.

Eva snuck a look at him out of the corner of her eye. Handsome. Ridiculously so for a guard. He looked more like a media star of some kind, an actor or a musician. He tightened his jaw, aware of her scrutiny and she wondered what it would feel like to touch him there, to run her fingertips across the clean-shaven skin and down his throat where his Adam's apple bobbed nervously.

"No need," she said, finding her voice. It came out breathier than she would have liked. Every part of her body was intent on betraying her today. "It was an accident."

Lovers were a bad idea, she reminded herself firmly. The Guild code of conduct made that crystal clear. It wasn't a rule, but a suggestion she couldn't afford to ignore. And she knew why. Even now, standing in such close proximity to a man she found attractive, she could feel his thoughts seeping around the walls she built in her mind, as if he wasn't even trying to stop them, as if he was accustomed to sharing every thought with someone like her. It would only take the smallest moment of relaxation to have his mind flood into hers, to read his thoughts, watch his fantasies. Physical contact made it even stronger. If he had been psychic himself, he'd be able to pick thoughts out of her head just as easily.

For years now the Guild had used psychics for business deals, espionage, and interrogation. It was state-sanctioned and encouraged. Those not strong enough to act individually could be assigned to a group or cell, working together to serve the Guild as surely as she did, through precognition and random mind scans. Drugs could help them, power them up, improve their telepathy until they acted like a hive mind. Everyone in the Guild had a purpose, especially the psychics whose higher abilities required of them a deeper duty. She knew that, even if it did make her feel somewhat defiled. But this was her duty, the thing she had been raised to do from the moment they had bought her from her mother.

Aidan sighed and it felt as if a hand caressed the back of her neck, unravelling the knots of tension inside her. He wanted her to relax. Wanted her to smile, she realised. And just wanted her.

The elevator stopped and the door slid open soundlessly. Eva strode out of the confining space and away from Valetti as quickly as possible. But he followed her.

The desk clerk looked up suspiciously as they approached. He was uniformed too and his sidearm was clearly visible through the reinforced glass desk.

“Names and duties,” he snapped.

“Eva Lee.” She avoided meeting his cold eyes for fear of what else she might see there. This one had the air of a killer. Many of them down here did. “Guild psychic. Reporting as ordered.”

“Thank you, Ma’am.” He checked off something on the screen and looked past her.

“Officer Aidan Valetti, Security duty. Returning.”

“You’re late, Valetti,” the clerk replied snidely, but his voice grew less aggressive when he turned to her. Beneath it, though, she sensed loathing, thick as tar. “Go through. Ms. Lee, you’ll be briefed in the anteroom.”

How did Valetti do that job and still maintain the warmth she sensed in him? The passion? His colleague was a cold and heartless bastard, no two ways about it. Aware of his eyes raking over her body, Eva hurried past him, only to find herself pulling at a door which refused to budge. Frustrated, mortified, she pulled harder.

Valetti’s hand closed on her shoulder, a gentle squeeze of reassurance which rocked her to the core. Then he reached past her and pushed.

Oh God, she’d been pulling when the door opened the other way. Her face flamed scarlet and her stomach dropped. What sort of idiot must she look like to them? Her first Security detail and she couldn’t even open the bloody door.

The clerk was smirking, she knew that without having to look. Valetti held the door for her and she rushed through, almost tripping up the steps on the far side. That would be the perfect ending, wouldn’t it? Falling flat on her face. Inside the anteroom three more Security—all built like Valetti, all heavily armed—stared at her like she’d just walked in naked.

Jesus, was she transmitting sexual frustration today?

*I outrank them, she told herself. And I am not afraid of them.*

“Officers,” she said in her most businesslike voice. “I’ve been assigned to this case. I believe you have details for me.”

The nearest one glared at her and snapped his fingers. A junior officer handed him a film-sheet file which he offered to her.

“His name is Rafael Dante.” His steely eyes raked over her, dismissing her. “The leader of a terrorist cell. We want the information he can offer. The details are in his file.” The pips on his collar accounted for the arrogance. A commander.

She took the file, holding the flexible film steady while the data scrolled across it, but she didn’t need to. Rafael Dante, genius, terrorist and...oh, yes, Hedonist. Everyone knew his name, although the face was elusive. Many thought he was the leader of the Hedonist movement, those who sought to undo the calm

order the Guild had imposed on their world. Anarchists, really. Those who lived outside the safety of Guild compounds and their rules. Rafael Dante lived beyond any rules at all.

They'd caught him.

And now they expected her to delve into his mind.

Steeling herself, she finished reading the file and regarded the commander impassively. "Very well. You want locations, names and contacts?" She didn't know his name. Should she? Was it rude to ask? Shit, this was hellish. "Commander?"

His gaze didn't waver. If anything it became colder. Chills crawled across her spine but she couldn't let him see her unsettled. Damn it, Burgess had done this on purpose. He knew this was exactly the kind of cold bastard who set her most on edge. He couldn't have picked anyone better than this commander to make her uncomfortable, to frighten and repulse her. How bloody funny!

"Kaine. You have never been assigned to us before, Ms. Lee."

She lifted her chin, a small gesture of pride and defiance and knew at once she had annoyed him. Good. They didn't have to like each other in order to do this. They both knew where they stood. She didn't have to tell him that he and all his kind disgusted her. And she knew for certain that Commander Kaine hated psychics, necessary though they were to him. No, not when they could do something he could not. The curl of his lip said it all. Loathing seeped out of his entire body.

"No, sir. I have not." Nor had she wanted to be. Ever. But clearly fate and Mr. Burgess had other ideas. "Shall we move on?"

## Chapter Two

Commander Kaine and two guards followed Eva into the adjoining room, Aidan Valetti among them. They dwarfed her and, to tell the truth, they frightened her. In the centre of the room a man sat at the table, his hands and feet manacled to the arms and legs of the chair. He wore an orange jumpsuit which might have been prison garb from any modern era. In no way did it detract from the man himself.

Quiet strength simmered beneath his unmoving exterior. His black hair fell over equally black eyes. The sensations hit her in rapid succession, knowledge of what had happened here, of what had happened to him. *Dante*, she reminded herself. His name was Rafael Dante. He looked halfway between martyr and demon, a near-broken man, but he had not broken yet. All this she knew, just by standing near. They'd beaten him, and more—waterboarding, drugs, electroshock...

Eva exhaled shakily. *When torture fails, they call on us*, she thought bitterly. *Only as a last resort. That's how much they hate us. That's how much they hate him. Hate him for his freedom, for his decision to be free.*

She pushed those potentially dangerous thoughts to the back of her mind. Seemed to be her day for having them.

Two guards took their position on either side of the door. Eva had to resist the temptation to glance back to see on which side Valetti stood. She pushed him from her thoughts as well. Had to. He was a distraction she didn't need right now, one which irritated her. The commander stopped by another chair, bolted to the ground like the one holding their prisoner.

Eva sat down without glancing at the Security officers. She fixed her whole attention on Dante.

When he looked up and their eyes met she almost wished she hadn't.

"Rafael Dante," she began the formal warning, "I am a Guild psychic and I have been summoned here to interrogate you this day, the third of—"

"This is not being recorded," Kaine said. "There will be no official hearing. Get on with it."

Eva stiffened again, angry at his interruption, and at what he was saying. He was asking her to violate Dante's human rights. He was asking her to pillage through the prisoner's mind to get what he needed. All this was unspoken, but she could feel it. And if she didn't cooperate...

Her eyes locked on Dante's once more and she saw understanding there. Pain, suffering, and rage, but understanding. Was she just as trapped in this as he was?

“Very well.” She focused her mind on Dante’s, narrowing her consciousness until he was all that existed, all that mattered. Walls rose before her, pushing her back and she blinked, surprised. “He’s psychic too,” she said, to no one in particular. “And strong. Very strong.”

The corners of Dante’s lips quirked up, but he kept his face otherwise impassive. She could not break through to him with her mind alone. Not unless he wanted to let her in, to show her what he’d endured as he had when first she entered.

Eva’s stomach folded in on itself. She was going to have to touch him, to make this far more intimate than she ever wanted it to be. Bile rose in her throat, and she got to her feet.

“What are you doing?”

She passed Kaine without looking at him, circling the table and Dante until she stood behind him. “What you asked.” She pulled off her gloves and tucked them into the pockets of her jacket. Her hands tingled in the dry air of the cell, or perhaps it was Dante’s proximity.

A movement by the door caught her eye. Valetti flinched and stiffened, returning to his statue-like position as a guard. But he had started forward, hadn’t he? To what? Stop her? Defend her?

Eva exhaled a ragged breath. She didn’t want to do this. Everything in her screamed that she should not, that it was wrong to violate someone this way. But at the same time Guild training dictated that she obey a command and trust those in authority over her.

It was her job.

She didn’t have to like it, just do it.

Her hands came to rest on Dante’s shoulders. His muscles tightened with her touch but otherwise nothing happened. She needed closer contact and there was only one way to do that. Skin to skin contact.

Skin to skin, with another psychic, one possibly as strong as she was. Eva had never attempted such a thing. And he knew it. The thought rippled through her body like warm caramel and her heart sped up. Beneath her grip, Dante moved, shifting in his seat expectantly. He knew what she planned. And he was ready for her. That scared her.

Before she could allow her doubts to stop her, she slid her fingers to either side of his neck.

She met a moment of resistance, like the dent in the side of a bubble, the moment before it burst. Eva pushed harder and then Rafael Dante wilted before her.

A wave of pleasure swept over her, quickly followed by one of pain. Her mind cried out, and his joined hers, a duet of mental sound that reverberated to her core. A series of images flared before her mind, blinding her with their intensity. Rafael and a woman, laughing, happy together; Rafael holding the same woman, limp and lifeless in his arms; Rafael armed and angry, debating with several other people; Rafael bent over a computer sheet, examining data...

Images flicked before, like thumbing rapidly through the pages of a book. They’d cornered him, a dead end at the bottom of a series of alleyways. The stunner had taken his feet from under him but he’d

kept consciousness, struggling still to escape, to fight. So they'd beat him. And beat him. The flash of a hypodermic, the sting in his skin and darkness billowed around him, like ink in a jar of water. The world went dark and slid away.

Eva pressed deeper, trying to see before his capture, but the darkness surrounded her. She licked her lips, the sensation of her own tongue on her lips startlingly vivid in the recesses of his mind.

"Come on," she willed him. *"Before they get ideas about drugging you again. Or worse, turn you over to a cell to wipe you. Let me help you. Please, Rafael. Let me help."*

His life unfolded, or the part of it he would share. His lost wife, the joy he'd known with her. Those thoughts snapped off as she reached them. No. He wasn't sharing that. Rafael Dante was an activist, a leader, an organiser, a man who lived his life to the full, indulging himself in every pleasure... All the things they said he was, but not a terrorist. Not a killer.

So why did they hate him so?

She wavered, her head swimming as if she was in an airless room, too hot or too tired. Was he playing with her? Drawing her further in just to—

*Music surrounded her, a rising series of notes like a spirit taking flight. He stood before her, not the beaten, broken man in the cell, but free, whole, strong and breathtaking. Eva found herself naked before him. Shock seized her first, then shame. She wrapped her hands around her body, backing away from him.*

*He reached out, catching her wrists in his impossibly strong grip and he unfurled her arms, revealing her like a flower in sunshine. With his eyes upon her skin, her breath quickened and her head swam again. But he didn't touch her, other than to hold her wrists, lifting her arms higher and higher. He held her with but one hand now, the other reaching for something overhead.*

*For a moment she wondered if she had been drugged, or if he was somehow deadening her mind with his, or making her body betray her. And it did. Desire uncoiled within her, melting away her fears and resistance, to reveal a single, desperate ache. Unable to stop herself she pushed her hips towards him in a mute plea. All Rafael did was smile.*

*With a deft movement he tied her arms above her head, leaving her helpless as he studied her. Her body burned for him, but at the same time she was afraid. So desperately afraid of what he would do. Of what she would do.*

"Don't fight it," he murmured, and his voice rang through her mind and all around her. "Let us help you, Eva. That's why we're here, after all."

We're here...

*Another footstep sounded behind her and she tried to twist around, tried to see.*

*"Don't be afraid," said Aidan.*

*Their hands met on her skin, brushing away her fears and doubts. Their mouths met before her and they kissed with a passion that threatened to consume her. And when they turned their attention back to her, it did.*

*Aidan dropped to his knees, opening her legs with determined hands. Rafael kissed her, his hands roaming over her breasts, lingering on the taut nipples, pinching them, rolling them. She cried out, her voice lost in his kiss, while below her hips bucked against Aidan's wickedly dexterous mouth. His tongue caressed her labia, her clit, drank down everything she had to give him. Her body tightened, clenching and unclenching, as if it tried to draw him into her and hold him there forever. Her mind grasped for help, for support and found...Rafael...*

*This wasn't Rafael's memory, she realised. This was something else. Someone else...*

Dante. She ripped her mind free from his touch. He was playing with her, manipulating her. She hadn't broken through his barriers. He'd allowed her in so he could toy with her mind and sound out her strengths. And her weaknesses.

Rafael Dante was no killer, no matter what they said. Dark, tortured, deeply wounded—oh, so deeply wounded—but not a terrorist.

But that didn't make him harmless. She realised that now.

Eva opened her eyes to look for Aidan, seeking comfort in his blue gaze, but instead saw Kaine glaring at her. The warm connection of fingertips to Dante's skin kept her calm, held her fears in check. She could feel his pulse, strong and certain. It stirred her heart. He didn't seem so helpless anymore.

"Well?" The commander folded his arms across his chest.

"This is not the man you're looking for."

"Nonsense, of course he is. Rafael Dante is a wanted man."

"Yes, but not a terrorist, not a killer. What do you really want to know?"

Kaine's face turned white with rage. "He's wanted for the murder of his wife, for a series of bombings, for a thousand different things. I want the names of his associates, Lee. Now!" He spat out the final word and Eva jerked back, terrified in spite of her determination.

*"I didn't kill her."* Rafael's voice echoed through her mind, even though she wasn't touching him anymore. *"I would never have hurt her, just as I would never hurt you. You know that already. He's lying, but you know that too. It's all right, Eva."*

Frozen there, longing to reach out and touch him again, Eva didn't know what to do. She couldn't force the information out of him, didn't want to hand it over to a sadist like the commander. But what else could she do?

"Eva," he whispered into the depths of her consciousness. *"Touch me."*



It was the plea of a lover, of a man who knew pleasure in all its connotations. But to her? To a woman as cold and frozen inside as she was on the exterior? Her shaking hands moved back to his neck and she felt him reach for her again. She glanced up, turning her head to look for—

*“Don’t move, sweetheart. Don’t give him away.”*

Aidan. He was talking about Aidan, about the man she’d seen as her lover, as *his* lover. *“I don’t...I don’t understand.”*

*“We’re here for you. To save you.”* Before her mind could process that, his lashed out, sending two words out into the world like the crack of a whip. *“Now, Aidan.”*

Aidan’s hand moved in a blur, snatching his sidearm from the holster and firing on the guard to his left. He slumped to the wall and slid down, stunned by the weapon. Aidan turned and fired on Kaine. His weapon half drawn, the commander dropped like a stone. Aidan didn’t pause, fluid as a lion in action. He surged across the room, pulling a hypodermic from somewhere. He grabbed Rafael’s arm and plunged the needle in.

Then he dropped to his knees, staring into Rafael’s face. “It’s okay. Tell me it’s okay. Rafe? Can you hear me?”

Rafael lifted his head, the drugged vagueness draining from his eyes to be replaced with a frightening intensity. “Of course I can hear you, Aidan. You’re shouting. Get me out of this thing.”

Eva backed away. She should sound an alarm, get help. There were armed guards outside the door, weren’t there? If she could just make it...

She sprinted for the far side of the room, throwing herself towards the door, but before her hands could touch the handle, Aidan seized her, overpowering her and pinning her against the hard planes of his body.

A body she could recall knowing more intimately than her own.

She wriggled, trying to free herself, a sob bursting from her lips when he tightened his grip, immobilising her.

“Gently, Aidan,” Rafael warned. “Eva, we’re here to help you.” He had already retrieved the commander’s weapon and stood just behind them. With his mind and body cleared of the drugs by whatever Aidan had given him, he looked even more formidable.

“I don’t know either of you!”

“But we know you. Or at least we knew your father. Eva, we’re here to get you out of the Guild’s clutches. Just as he wanted. Do you understand me?”

Her father? Ice lanced down her limbs and she stopped struggling to stare at Rafael. She had no memories of her father. All she knew was that her mother had been alone and so desperate she’d sold her own daughter.

With a single, decisive movement, Eva brought her heel down full-force on Aidan's shin. He gave a startled cry and she slipped his grip, throwing open the door.

Burgess stood there, weapon in hand. The other guards slumped on the floor around him and her boss—her miserable, narrow-faced, hardass boss—shot her.

Eva's legs turned to rubber, and grey fog, dense as cotton wool, rose up around her. A stunner, she thought with some relief, as strong arms caught her and lifted her before she could fall. Rafael, she realised. He held her now as gently as a baby.

And then the darkness took her.

The world swayed and Eva clung to the darkness where she was safe, where nothing could touch her. But it was like grasping at smoke. The shadows slipped away to grey and then to white. Light. Non-artificial. Daylight streamed through a window above her. But it was their voices which reached out to her and pulled her into consciousness.

"Doesn't act like Harmon's daughter." Aidan sounded doubtful. Only when he spoke did she realize the soft cushion beneath her head was his lap.

"She took you out pretty quickly." Rafael laughed softly. "Sounds like Harmon's daughter to me."

"What are we going to do with her, Rafe? We were going to talk to her, not knock her out and grab her."

"I know." A hand stroked her hair, wrapped a curl between his fingers as if testing the softness, so tender an intimacy that her breath shook despite her determination to keep it calm, to keep her consciousness a secret. "But sometimes you have to improvise."

"Do you think she'll understand?"

"Why not ask her?" Rafael chuckled and pressed his palm to her cheek, his fingers curving around her jaw. "You're as good an actress as you mother ever was, Eva."

That jerked her upright, out of their arms, outraged. "What the hell do you know about my mother?"

Rafael's face remained perfectly calm. "What your father told me."

"My father is dead."

He lifted his head slightly, as if the words gave him pain, looked down his long nose at her and then slowly nodded. "He is. Now. But only six months ago. He found out where you were and tried to reach you himself. He—he failed."

She shuddered, hardly daring to believe them, unable to deny the knowledge that this was true. She knew. She just knew. She'd trained all her life to detect falsehood and she could discern not a trace of it in either man.

The news that her father was dead probably should have shaken her, but she'd gone all her life thinking that. There was no pain, no grief. There was nothing. She took her time looking around, trying to formulate some kind of reply. They were travelling in a civilian transport, comfortable enough in the rear and, though not to the standards of Guild transports, definitely a step up from Security's or the 'rail. "So you came instead. To—to what? Save me from my life?"

They stared at her—Rafael's ragged features, Aidan's chiselled good looks. Prisoner and Security officer, albeit both fakes. Chalk and cheese, day and night, both of them willing her to understand, wanting her to believe them.

Anger burst over her in a great wave. "How dare you!" She balled her fists, fought against the tears stinging her eyes with the acid of self-recrimination. "It might be a shitty life, but it's my life. How dare you, both of you! You've kidnapped me, do you understand that? A Guild psychic. They'll hunt you both down. They'll crucify you." She rounded on Rafael. "Didn't they do enough to you already?"

He smiled at her, actually smiled, although the expression was so very far from joyful it made her heart ache for him, even if she wanted to be angry. "Perhaps."

"I saw what they did, felt it. I saw..."

The full enormity of all she had seen and felt returned to her. Heat flushed through her body, and the ache of need wrung out her heart. She reached out her hand and touched Rafael's neck, her fingertips resting where they had in the cell. Electricity tingled along the length of her arm, but she saw no images this time. He was controlling it, dampening his thoughts or her abilities.

"I saw us. The three of us. Together."

"I know," Rafael rumbled and she looked at Aidan.

"And myself with you, when you bumped into me in the corridor."

"It's the future," he assured her and her confusion must have shown on her face. He smiled too, his smile much brighter than Rafael's self-deprecating one. His was like the sun coming out.

"I read people's minds," she whispered hesitantly. "I don't see the future."

"But I do," Rafael cut in. "I told him. Showed him."

"You're...you're lovers?"

Aidan's hand closed on her hand, the one not touching Rafael. She couldn't have torn that one away from him had he been on fire. But her free hand belonged to Aidan. He lifted it to his lips and pressed a kiss into the centre of her palm. "I've dreamed about you for so long, Eva. Rafael helped me find you."

His breath on her skin undid her. Her own breath quickened and just as she was about to turn her head towards him, Rafael caught her free hand in his strong grip and kissed it, mimicking Aidan. His lips brushed the tender skin, his teeth grazing a moment later. Aidan worked his way back to her wrist, where he did the same thing.

Her heart hammered beneath her breast. Her nipples tightened painfully. The images returned to her mind, of the three of them together, of their skin, their bodies, pressed to hers. So much pleasure.

Her mind rebelled. It was dangerous, so dangerous. If she lost control, she might...

"Stop," she gasped. "Please."

It was too much. Such contact and so many sensations after so many years of sterile and clinical living. The Guild frowned upon physical contact. It was barbaric, antiquated, *animal*. She knew all this. But she'd never felt such an urge seize her before today. She wanted these two men. But how? Why? She'd been trained to be above such urges and base instincts.

The transport jerked to a halt.

"Afraid?" Rafael asked.

She nodded, breathless, but he waited. "Yes," she managed at last.

"There's nothing to be afraid of, Eva." Aidan lifted her hand to his mouth again but a hiss from Rafael stopped him. "Well, there isn't."

"And how would she know that? As she said, we've kidnapped her. But perhaps she likes that. Do you, Eva? Do you have a fantasy of being carried off?"

The mocking tone in Rafael's voice sent iron into her spine. *How dare he?* "I suppose you've done it before then," she snapped. It was a cheap shot, but, oh, it felt good to see anger darken those eyes even further.

He let her go, using his hand to rake through his hair, scratching at his scalp. "This is neither the time nor the place. Let's get inside. I need some rest. Then, Ms. Lee—" he grinned at her wolfishly, "—you'll have your own interrogation. You've already had a preview. It's only fair you get the full show."

## Chapter Three

Between them they bundled Eva out of the vehicle. Not roughly, but firmly, as if it was more a joke than anything else. She looked up at the sky, high overhead, so clear a blue. The buildings here were low, a warren of single and double stories only, rather than the vast towers of the Guild compound, her home. One central building rose in front of a cobbled courtyard. The façade looked like some kind of old three-story house from before the crash. Its affluence had fallen into shabbiness, but it was well cared for in a basic, utilitarian way. Low buildings surrounded it, some stone-built and as old as the house, some of the type of squat prefabs which had doubled as medical units during the pandemics of the past.

In surroundings unlike anything she had ever seen, she felt exposed and off-kilter. To her left, a group of workers knelt in a patch of earth where green and growing things spilled out of the ground. They grew their food here, she realised. They didn't have to rely on processed, factory-produced irradiated food packages. Theirs was a luxury Guild members only dreamed of and paid through the nose to obtain. And here they were, the reviled Hedonists, drawing forth such treasures from the earth.

"What is it?" Aidan frowned.

Eva almost tripped over her feet but he caught her. The brush of his hand on her skin, pushing back her sleeve, made her shudder and she sucked in a breath.

*Aidan knelt at her feet, his wicked blue eyes twinkling up at her. Seated on the edge of a bed, Eva could do nothing to withdraw or protect herself. Moving slowly, as if afraid he would spook her, Aidan parted her knees, pushing them wide, and bowed his head to her vagina. His tongue flicked out, opening her to him, making her cry out beyond her ability to control.*

"Oh God! Please!" She tore herself away from him. "Stop touching me!"

"You've got to be more careful, Aidan." Rafael chuckled. The sound rippled through her, coiling deep in the pit of her stomach and then unfurling with a steady, maddening beat. "She can't help but pick up your thoughts. She's more than a little sensitive, remember? Now that, Eva, was his fantasy."

Remembering the images of them both making love to her, she couldn't help but shudder. Was it anticipation? Or fear? She'd never been that intimate with one man, let alone two. She pulled herself away from them both, forcing herself to calm, to put her mind and body back under her control. It took more of her iron will than she had ever needed before.

"Take her to her room," Rafael said. "Maybe show her around a little, let her see that she's in no danger here, okay?"

She narrowed her eyes suspiciously, focusing on him and letting her disbelief strike his mental shields.

Rafael's smile twitched the corners of his mouth and he sent something back, regret, comfort, remorse. "It was never the plan to kidnap you, sweetheart. We came to help you."

"So you said. But you still shot me." *Well, Burgess did.* She flinched as she remembered the shock of seeing his face there, of the weapon trained on her, of the flare of light as he fired and she fell back, helpless.

"It wasn't meant to go down that way." Aidan's hand closed gently on her arm, pressing the material of her sleeve against her skin, the soft coolness of the cream silk, the smooth weave of her jacket and the warmth of his skin. Then he released her. "I swear to you. We'd never do anything to hurt you, Eva. You must be hungry at least? What about some food?"

The thought of the fresh fruit and vegetables grown here gave her a different thrill of excitement and Rafael grinned again, seeing through her at once.

*Maddening man. Maddening, appealing, terrifying man.*

Rafael and Aidan exchanged a glance which she could not interpret. She couldn't even pick up their peripheral thoughts, something that should have been easy.

*Rafael*, she realised. He was shielding their thoughts from her. Perhaps even communicating with Aidan as he did so.

"Go with him, Eva." Rafael didn't send the words directly into her mind, though she had not doubt that he could. A courtesy to Aidan perhaps, or a reluctance to engage in intimate contact with her just yet. "Later." He laughed and she saw mischief in his dark features as well. "I'll debrief you myself."

He laughed again and Aidan joined him. They seemed to expect her to join in too, but Eva withdrew into herself, into the safe inner shell that protected her in the Guild, and had done all her life.

"Come," said Aidan more softly now, realising perhaps the fear that stirred in her. This time he did not touch her. When she glanced around for Rafael, he was gone, the door to the building banging shut in his wake. His abrupt departure almost left her bereft, but then Aidan spoke and the feeling passed. "He went through hell to get to you, Eva. It was only with Burgess's cooperation we were ever able to find you."

"But why? Why would you?"

Aidan shook his head as if struggling for an answer he wasn't sure how to give. "A promise," he said at last. "A promise and a dream."

"Tell me," she insisted, but again he shook his head, firmly this time.

"That's for Rafe to do. And he will. He owes you that. Now please, Eva. Come with me. Let me at least make you comfortable here."

Comfortable. Yes, she'd seen his idea of comfort. And yet, she had to admit she was intrigued by it, by the intimacy, by the way her body reacted to him, to both of them. But Aidan didn't touch her again and he kept his thoughts to himself. Handsome as summer, a gentle warrior, all the elements that could coax her to relax and could work on her addled senses to make her succumb to his charms. But this time, he didn't use them.

"Are you hungry? We should be able to rustle up something out of the kitchen. What do you like? Chicken? Beef?"

She couldn't help herself. Her mouth watered at the thought of food and her stomach decided to conspire, growling loudly. "Salad?"

Aidan's face twisted in disbelief and disgust. He barked out a laugh and caught her gloved hand in his, pulling her along after him. "Salad," he scoffed. "Right."

The building they entered was not as sleek and polished as the Guild compound buildings she was used to. Instead of industrial artwork and monotone décor, this place displayed a riot of colour and life. Nothing was uniform. From murals, to chalk drawings, woven rugs and handcrafted furniture, everything was an eclectic mix which spoke of creativity and imagination. Every item caught her eye, though she tried to keep up with Aidan and hide her interest.

She doubted he was fooled, but she could pretend. And she was grateful now it was not Rafael who accompanied her. He'd see through her and make her know it. She could imagine the mocking smile, the twist of his mouth, that glint in his dark eyes that told her he would never let her get away with it either.

Then Eva heard it, a different type of laughter—bright and young, and filled with joy that had never seen the disappointments or fears she knew so well. With a series of squeals and shouts, three children tumbled from a room to the right and tore past them, careening off the walls as they went, calling out a greeting to Aidan before they crashed out the doorway and into the sunlight.

"Children," she whispered, reeling from the surge of energy left behind them. "You have children."

"Well, not personally."

"Here, I mean. You...your people have their children here, with them."

Aidan's face quirked in an appealing grin. "Of course we do. Where else would we have them?"

Eva's face flared red. "A...a nursery, an education centre and dorms. Not here with you. Not..."

His smile saddened. "Is that how you grew up? Locked away like that?" Pain filled his eyes, compassion, and she sensed he wanted only to embrace her.

This was no skilled psychic like Rafael. Just a man. And a man whose passions controlled his life. That should have made him wild and dangerous but she didn't sense that at all. Aidan cared so deeply about people. About *all* people, not just his own, not just the hedonists here. He loved with all his heart.

Eva jerked away the moment she realised her hand was about to reach for him. He hadn't seen, had he? She folded her arms and dropped her gaze to the floor.

When she didn't answer, he shrugged. "I don't know much about how the psychics live in the Guild, but we hear the stories, you know? They're not—not pleasant."

*Pleasant. No.* Not a word that could be applied to the cold and clinical dorms, or her apartment that had replaced them. Eva's embarrassment reached a new level of humiliation. "It's hard to form relationships when you see inside people's heads," she muttered.

Aidan pushed open the door ahead of them, his manner less jovial now, and led the way into a bright and airy dining room. At the other side of the room a young woman sat with two small children. She glanced up, grinned at Aidan and nodded at Eva in greeting. Then she returned her attention to feeding the children. The youngest pursed his lips together and turned away from the spoon. The little girl stared at Eva, her face unmoving.

Clearly the room had been designed to accommodate a large number of people, but now it was crammed with mismatched tables and chairs. The delicious scents made Eva's mouth water and her treacherous stomach rumble again.

"Hungry?" His teasing tone should have been infuriating, but it wasn't. Rather she found it endearing and something inside her warmed in that glow. He pulled out a chair for her at the nearest table and she sat down obediently.

Her heart rebelled. But obedience came easily to anyone Guild-born and Guild-trained and she would gain nothing by fighting now. She would wait, bide her time, find her moment and seize it. She folded her hands in her lap and lowered her gaze to the tabletop.

"So what can I get you?" When she didn't respond, she felt the trace of irritation rise in him. Good. It was better that she kept him at a distance. A good arm-length or more at least. "I'll rustle up a selection," he told her and marched off.

Eva sat in silence, waiting, listening to the pounding in her chest that, after a moment, she realised was her heart. She was alone, wasn't she? She could make a break for it now.

A small, cold hand touched hers, ever so quickly, and she jerked her head up. The little girl flinched back but stood her ground. Huge grey eyes almost filled a pale, porcelain face. Her small mouth formed a rose-bud pout and she studied Eva more carefully than anyone she'd ever known. Eva blinked, tried to smile, and then her mind filled with flowers, wildflowers of every kind, in every colour. The scent swirled around her, overpowering, vibrant.

"Daisy!" The voice came from far away, distorted as it reached Eva's ears. "Daisy, leave her alone."

Eva blinked, pushing the images back with a gentle but determined force. Her own defence mechanism—a sea of multihued butterflies—filled her mind, and she was able to focus once more on the little girl and on the woman enfolding her in defensive arms.

"Flowers?" Eva said and the woman blanched.

"She didn't mean anything by it. She's just a child. She doesn't understand."



“She’s psychic?”

“She’s...she’s special. Please...” The woman pulled Daisy behind her, never letting go of her for a moment. “Oh God, you’re Guild, aren’t you? A Guild psychic?”

Eva made to rise to her feet, but the woman scrambled backwards, heading for her son, dragging Daisy with her. “Stay away from my children,” she snarled.

“Laura?” Aidan gasped. His hands were laden with three plates, one balanced precariously between the other two. “What’s going on?”

“I don’t know what you were thinking bringing her here, Aidan. Just keep her away from the kids.”

He set the dishes down with a clatter and spread his arms out wide. “Laura, you need to calm down. Eva didn’t do anything.” He glanced at her. “Did you?”

She shook her head, saying nothing, but the shame that filled her even at the accusation made her recently acquired appetite flee.

Daisy stepped around her mother, darting free of her grasping hands and ran to Aidan. *No...* Eva recoiled in alarm as the girl grabbed her sleeve and tugged hard.

The flowers came again. This time Eva was ready for it and able to control it before it washed over her.

“Why are you showing me this?” she asked softly.

“She doesn’t talk,” Aidan answered for her and Laura came closer, ready at any moment to tear her daughter away again.

“She doesn’t need to,” Eva replied curtly and sank down to Daisy’s height so she could look her in the eye. Those same cold little hands pressed to her cheek and Eva couldn’t help but smile. “You weren’t supposed to show me, were you? But you...you want to share...”

*Wanted to share. She loved to share the flowers. They made people happy. And since that night...that night when they’d had to be so quiet, quiet as mice, she couldn’t show anyone anything else. The men had come, the men in black clothes, with guns, with scowls... “And Momma said be so quiet and don’t show anyone...”*

Guild Security, Eva realised. The girl was telling her Guild Security had come for them. They’d been in the compound, or one like it, and they’d come to take her away from her family when tests had shown up her psychic abilities.

Eva’s own memories surged to the fore, unwanted, uncontrolled, and she shoved them back with an iron will. Daisy started, staring at her. Had she caught a glimpse of what Eva had experienced? No, please, no. She didn’t want the poor kid to see that nightmare. Or any of her nightmares.

Daisy hugged her hard, a small body pouring love and comfort into her in another vision of torrents of flowers. Tears stung in Eva’s eyes, spilled down her cheeks into Daisy’s hair. God, this was terrible. She

struggled to quell her tears again, sealed away the memories, the pain with an expertise born of years of practice.

“They were trying to take her?” she asked Laura, aware of the crack in her voice.

“Yes,” Laura replied bitterly. “To put her in some education unit, locked away to be stifled and trained, and *used* for the rest of her life. To be turned into—”

Eva lifted her face and looked Daisy’s mother right in the eyes. “—into something like me.”

Laura blanched, falling very still, unwilling or unable to tear her gaze off Eva now.

Heartless and cold, a perfect instrument of the Guild, its creature.

At least Daisy had been spared that. The trauma of escaping had marked her but in time, with help, she would recover.

“*Rafael is helping you, is that right?*” she asked.

Daisy pouted again and shrugged. “*When he can. There’s only one of him. It was Harmon first. I miss Harmon.*”

Harmon. Her father’s name. Eva disentangled herself from the child and tried to smile. “*We should stop this, Daisy. You’re scaring your mother.*”

“*But you’re like me. Like Rafael and Harmon.*”

Was she? How could she possibly be? She was Guild. Always had been. She swallowed so hard that it hurt. “*You should try to talk to your mother. Like this, at least. With your voice if you can. She’d be so happy.*”

“*Can you show me your special thing, Eva? The thing that keeps you safe?*”

Eva nodded and let the vision of the butterflies flow out around the little girl. Daisy’s eyes widened and she laughed with delight, laughed out loud.

Laura gave a cry of alarm and joy combined and swept the child into her arms. “Did you hear her? Aidan? Did you hear?”

It was a start. A small push in the right direction and Eva couldn’t help but feel a swell of pride. When she’d had her first posting it had been with the kids in education. She’d found nothing so fulfilling since then, not until now.

As Laura swept her children out of the dining room, Eva sank into the chair once more and found Aidan sitting at her side, studying her. “Did you just perform a minor miracle there?”

“I did?”

“Rafe couldn’t get her to speak. Even Harmon couldn’t get her to make so much as a peep. You just waltz in and make her laugh. I’d call that a miracle.” He handed her a fork and pushed a plate of food towards her. “Eat. Then I’ll show you to your room.”

Something more than desire was flowing off him now. She recognised it, though she'd never seen it make someone glow before. She'd never seen it directed at her before and that made her shift in her seat, uncomfortable with the answering glow she found inside. It was pride.

The moment she breathed in the aromas, she was lost. Her hands trembled and her resolutions to reject their food and drink fell away. A crisp green salad and an omelette stuffed with cheese, asparagus and mushrooms, accompanied by coffee richer than anything she had ever tasted from an office machine, enriched with milk...

She had eaten everything before she realised it was gone, savouring each mouthful, the flavours erupting against her taste buds.

They climbed the stairs in silence and at the top Aidan opened a door. The room she entered was comfortably appointed and well proportioned. And there the similarities to the austere apartment she called home ended. The bed was wider, softer and covered with a silken quilt, hand-stitched and embroidered. On the far side of the room another door led to a bathroom. Aidan crossed to the wardrobe and opened the door to show her the clothes inside. She barely looked. It all overwhelmed her.

"How long have you been planning this? To find me. To kidnap me." Her voice shook, but she pushed on. "Aidan, no matter what you say, I can't just pretend this never happened. You took me. Both of you."

"And do you know what he went through to reach you? Rafael let them capture him. They tortured him, drugged him. He risked everything—and all of us here—to reach you. Burgess and I were his only support. But he—"

"Why would he do that? I don't understand." The anguish in her voice shamed her. Why would anyone go through all that for her, of all people?

Aidan paused and then reached out his hands. Eva hesitated, but this time he did not retreat. Unable to do anything else, she took his hands. His fingertips brushed against the leather of her gloves, pressed it to her skin as his hands closed around hers. His touch was so gentle, despite the implied strength.

"Eva," he whispered, his voice a little hoarse. "Please trust me. I want to help. To set you free." He pulled her to him.

Her eyes flicked from his eyes to his mouth and back. He leaned in closer and bowed his head. His lips parted, his tongue moistening them for just a moment. She saw a flash of his white teeth and her heart sped up again. He was so cautious now. Yet she'd seen him move like a soldier, firing on the men in the cell in order to save Rafael—and herself, she now realised. He'd done it for her. They both had, though she could not work out the reason why.

Careful to avoid touching her skin, Aidan released her hands and slid his fingers up the surface of her suit to her shoulders. Such strength in those hands, such tenderness.

Eva's head tilted back as their bodies came together. He'd dreamed this, he said, and she had seen his fantasies or whatever they were. His eyes darted back and forth, studying her face, waiting to see if she would pull away again. But she couldn't. It was inevitable, destined perhaps. She could no more break free of him now than she could fly.

When he bent lower, his lips brushing against hers, she wondered if perhaps she could fly after all.

Aidan's tongue teased her lips, seeking a response from her, one she could not fail to give. She opened her mouth to him with a moan she hadn't been aware she was suppressing. His answering groan made her whole body tighten with lust. There were no images this time. They were both too consumed with the sensations of their kiss.

His breath played on her cheek and he pressed closer, body to body, his tongue filling her, teasing her own to respond to him. Her hands grabbed his shoulders, her fingers digging into the Security uniform's coarse material while their mouths moved softly together in bliss. Far too many clothes separated them, far too many secrets. His hand cradled the back of her neck and again she thought of the first image she had inadvertently caught from him.

*Her body arching to take him inside her, the sweat glistening between them. His mouth descending, plundering hers, filling her. The taste of coffee and brandy.*

Aidan broke the kiss, still holding her against him. She opened her bewildered eyes to find him looking at her more calmly now, his passion smouldering behind those bright blue eyes.

"Rest. Bathe and change into something comfortable. I'll be back later, I promise."

"But I..." Her words trailed off. What could she say? *I want you to stay? I want you to be with me?* Or simply, *I want you*. Why on earth would she think such things? Was she insane?

Eva stepped away from him, escaping his arms and the spells his body wove around her. Not just his body. The mind she brushed against, the tenderness of his gestures, the all-encompassing desire she felt. It frightened her, far more than Rafael's dark glowers and smouldering intents.

She swallowed hard and deliberately folded her hands in front of her, cutting him off, forming the only barricade she could. She made her voice cold. "I can't tell you anything, you know. I have no Guild secrets or information that would be of use to you. No matter what you do to me, I can't tell you anything."

His eyebrows rose. "Do you think we'll torture you? That's not our way, Eva. We aren't Guild here."

She flinched. Well, that was what they'd done to Rafael, wasn't it? Humiliated, she retreated still further to hide behind the shell of her training. Much as she might be coming to like some of them, like Aidan and Daisy, she couldn't trust them. How could she when Aidan and Rafael had sought her out and snatched her from a Security interrogation room inside Guild headquarters itself? Shaking inside, she locked her will around her body and her mind. "And everyone who is Guild-raised would not hesitate to torture someone, is that what you think?"

Aidan's face froze and it took a moment to realise the shadows she saw there were suppressed rage. "You know what they did to him. You saw it in his mind. You were there to pick through his thoughts for them."

"And you saved him. Good for you. You're quite the hero."

Eyes narrowed, Aidan took another step towards her, no longer inviting. He towered over her, threatening. His gilded exterior darkened with flames of anger. "You know nothing about him or what I owe him. Or the lengths I would go to for him."

He turned away, growling in frustration, and headed for the door. As he left, he paused and looked back. "Rest, bathe and eat. You'll need your strength later." With that he slammed the door behind him. The lock turned with an ominous click.

Eva ran to the window, tugged at it, but it was sealed. She tried the one in the bathroom too, even though it was so small she'd never be able to wriggle out. It took some time before she approached the door, but the lock held it closed. There was no way out. She sank onto the bed, her body trembling, tears stinging her eyes. All she could do was wait.

## Chapter Four

Pacing the room brought no relief. Eva stared out the window, but all she could see was the wall of some kind of storage unit. She could hear the children though. They were playing games, just out of sight. Such a strange and wondrous noise, something she had not heard since her own childhood. Even then such nonsense was frowned upon in the junior dorms, quickly silenced. The world she inhabited in the Guild suddenly seemed to lack a great deal, just through the absence of that sound.

Only when her throat tightened to the point of pain did she realize that her cheeks were wet with tears. She retreated to the bathroom and washed her face in freezing cold water, drying it with a fluffy towel. Even the material they used for everyday things like this seemed softer and more luxurious. They put such care into everything they did. More than many Guild members.

Eva folded the towel carefully and hung it back on the rail, tugging it into the perfect position. Like the food earlier, like her room, the children's pictures and the way Aidan treated her.

Such deliberate care, right down to the last detail. She wasn't sure what that said about them, not yet. And she couldn't say what her response to it said about her.

Footsteps coming up the stairs alerted her. With practiced determination she straightened her suit and pulled her hair back from her face, retying it tighter than ever. It strained the skin of her forehead and temples and the low throb of a headache started almost immediately.

When Rafael and Aidan entered the room, she met them as a Guild psychic—calm, collected, silent. She kept her face a mask, the shields around her mind as strong as iron, so that even a psychic as powerful as Rafael could not reach her.

"You didn't like the clothes?" Aidan's eyes trailed over her suit.

She kept her attention on Rafael, ready for even a trace that he might be trying to reach out to her mind with his own. But he didn't. Instead, he just kept his features as coolly studied as hers. The silence made Aidan's anger smoulder. She could feel it now, a slow-burning fire, the inner heat much higher than if he expressed it. White hot now.

What did he want? What did he expect? That she would just happily do as she was told and settle into a new life here? That she would fall into whatever fantasy he had planned?

*“He has some fantasies you might enjoy, sweetheart.”* Rafael’s mouth quirked into that same mocking smile that tormented her so. *“Care to try?”*

His voice pressed to her consciousness, but she kept him out. All she had now were her defences. Everything else was lost. If they wanted her they would have to force her. The thought made her quake inside, not entirely with fear. It excited her, even though it should not. For she knew she was safe with them, that she could trust them. They would never hurt her. Not purposefully.

Oh, but they had the potential to do her more damage than anyone she had every encountered.

“Are you going to say anything at all?” Rafael asked.

“I’m a Guild psychic. You must release me now and let me go back to the Guild compound.”

Rafael shook his head. “That’s not going to happen, Eva.” His mind stroked against hers but she hardened her shields. “You belong here. You need to let go.”

“No. I don’t. I’ve worked all my life to control my abilities. It isn’t safe to just let go.”

“That’s what they say. We say differently.”

Rafael gave a curt nod, and Aidan seized her hands. He tore off the gloves and threw them away.

“Get off me!” she yelled, struggling against him. “Don’t touch me!”

He released her, but he didn’t back away. Instead his blue eyes gazed unwavering into hers. “Pleasure isn’t a danger. And all being a hedonist means is that you let yourself feel that pleasure. In everything. But most of all, in each other, in physical contact, in love. They’ve made you think it’s wrong, Eva, locked you away all your life. Not just behind their walls and under their polluted skies. Inside yourself. Too afraid to feel.”

“We can show you the power of pleasure,” Rafael murmured. “And once you’ve felt that, you’ll never go back. Never. No one can.”

Tears stung her eyes and she blinked them back furiously. “I didn’t ask for this.”

“No one does. It’s...” Aidan glanced at Rafael. “Sometimes it’s easier not to feel at all. But it’s an empty existence, Eva. Empty and lonely.” He opened his hands before her, palms out. “You don’t really want that.”

She shied away from him, unable to face what she saw in his eyes. Instead, Rafael stood there. His face carried something else, something that looked suspiciously like grief.

“Yes,” he said in response to her unasked, unthought question. “You saw my wife, you saw her die.”

She recalled the agony entangled around those images. “You’d choose such pain?”

“Over nothingness? Yes. Every time. For the sake of everything else that is the counterpoint.”

“I...I’m not sure I could stand such...feelings. I might...I might hurt you.” It had happened before. When she was young and inexperienced. And it had been disastrous. It had taken years of reconditioning to recover, to be of service to the Guild again.

“Your mind is powerful,” Rafael conceded. “And if we open your mind to pleasure as we want, that’s a risk. But one I’m willing to take. I’ll help you, shield you, show you how to ground it.” He smiled, the gentlest expression she’d ever seen on his face.

“You don’t have to do anything.” Aidan’s hands touched her shoulders, her arms. “Just let us lead you. Let us show you.”

She trembled, holding herself as still as she could, and had to swallow hard when Aidan began to unbutton her jacket. He wasn’t rough, not really, but he didn’t linger over the task. He wanted her naked.

And soon she was.

When he released her, gathering up the clothes and tossing them into a corner, Eva wound her arms around her body in a vain effort to shield herself from Rafael’s burning gaze. Mortification stabbed at her, quickly followed by shame. She’d never been so exposed, so helpless.

Rafael took a few steps and his hands encircled her wrists, pulling her arms away from her body. Not roughly, nor quickly. He moved with quiet determination, revealing her body to his eyes as carefully as he might uncover a treasure of great beauty, hidden away a lifetime ago. And behind her, she knew Aidan was watching as well. Her body quivered, deep inside, where no one had ever touched her before.

Rafael lifted her arms still further, until they stretched up on either side of her head, reaching towards the heavens. She glanced up to see a beam running across the room, just as Aidan threw some sort of silken cord over it. Rafael held both her wrists with one hand now, just as he had in her vision. He tied them together and released her so she took her own weight again, her arms straining slightly with the effort of the unfamiliar position.

“There now,” Rafael said. “You don’t have to be scared. But this will help you to give in to the pleasure, stop you from fighting it. You don’t have to participate. Just let it happen to you and you’ll see we’re telling the truth.”

“I don’t want this,” she whispered. “Please. You have to stop.”

Aidan glanced sharply at Rafael and his doubts flooded the forefront of her mind. Quickly, Rafael whisked them away and his hand closed on her arm. His touch was warm, gentle, and strangely soothing. But he didn’t press the contact, didn’t force himself into her mind.

Her fear sparked higher and then bled away to be replaced by something else.

It was the same, almost exactly the same. Only it was really happening, right here and now. But they were still clothed, and this was no sterile interrogation room. She shook her head, trying to clear the fog of desire rising up through her.

“Don’t fight it,” Rafael murmured, and his voice rang through her mind and all around her. “Let us help you, Eva. That’s why we’re here, after all.”

“Don’t be afraid.” Aidan smoothed his hand across her back, tracing the length of her spine. He stopped at its base, teasing the sensitive dent above the sweep of her ass with dexterous fingers.



“Please,” she whispered, no longer sure what she was pleading for.

Rafael moved closer still, the warmth of his body encircling her, his scent taunting her. “Please what, sweetheart?”

Eva rocked her hips towards him. The hardness of his cock pressed against her stomach through his clothes, and she gasped. She couldn’t say it. How could she? What sort of a freak did this make her? The feelings that boiled up inside her, the needs, the hunger.

Rafael caught her hips, pulling her closer. Aidan pushed, his hands cupping the cheeks of her ass now, pulling them apart so his fingers could slip between. She gasped, trying to fight the sensation again, unable to just let this happen.

“Please what?” Rafael asked again. He released her hips, sliding his palms up the curve of her sides until they reached her breasts. He cupped them, taking their small weight so gently, so maddeningly gently. Her nipples stiffened, two hard points reaching out to him, begging for his touch, for his mouth, for anything, in ways her voice could not.

Aidan’s lips pressed to hers, soft but firm, determined. Her mouth opened, hungry for his kiss, needing him. His tongue filled her and then withdrew. He kissed her chin, her throat, sinking down and trailing kisses after him, all the way down her front. Her chest leaped, her stomach fluttered as his lips burned their way along the length of her body. Rafael’s thumbs brushed across her nipples with unusual roughness and she bucked, helpless beneath their ministrations. Shudders of panic filled her. Loss of control, terror of release. How could she let go? How could she not? It was too much. Far too much.

It tumbled over her in a wave of sensations for which she had no defence. She gave in and let it overwhelm her. Rafael stroked her skin, seeking out every sensitive spot that Aidan’s industrious lips missed.

“Please,” she groaned, letting her head fall back as she tumbled into ecstasy. “Please, touch me, take me. I need...I need to feel...”

Aidan’s fingertips grazed the lips of her vulva, parting the lips, moistening them with the molten honey he found there. His finger slid deep inside her. Her body clenched around the penetration, even as he withdrew, and the tightness began to unwind, rippling through her, gaining momentum. Fear echoed the sensation. This was unknown, forbidden. This was...

“Shh, my brave heart,” Rafael murmured and his lips captured hers. Not the bruising kiss she was expecting from him. His lips brushed lightly against hers, far gentler even than Aidan’s, soft like butterfly wings and she opened beneath him just as willingly. His tongue tested her, slowly filling her mouth, inspiring hers to coil around his with a series of sultry images which flared directly into her mind.

More. She needed more. And she hated herself for it. Some defect in her that welcomed this.

*"It's not a defect."* His voice reverberated through her mind, soothing her fears. A gentle admonishment. *"Pleasure is natural, a part of you, something to be embraced, not locked away. You've been so strong, so controlled. But you can give that up now. It has no place here. Let go."*

Her whole body shivered.

"You can do it, Eva," Aidan whispered and his finger circled her clitoris again, making her jump. "I know you can. You're magnificent."

Her? She was a frozen shell, closed and unassailable. Or she was meant to be. But she was melting, and all the control she had once prided herself on was slipping away.

Aidan slid to his knees between her legs, lifting her from the ground to take her slight weight on his shoulders. His hands stroked the sensitive skin at the top of her thighs, parting the silken folds of flesh. His mouth tormented her, his tongue seeking out the pearl of her clitoris his finger had so recently discovered. The soft fluttering inside her sharpened as he captured it, sucking gently. Her pulse flooded to a centre there. She shuddered and moaned into Rafael's mouth. Aidan's mouth moved faster now, his tongue darting inside, moving with the pulse of her desire. Her clitoris throbbed against him and she cried out, her voice trapped in Rafael's kiss.

Nothing had ever been like this. Not the timid fumbings, or Tony's graceless touch. It had hurt, left her exposed and in the end seen her trust betrayed. But it had never been so—

*"Shh..."* Rafael's mind soothed hers with the most intimate contact of all. *"That was long ago. Put it away. It will never be like that. I'm here. We're both here."*

Both of them. That was the image that did it. She wanted them...needed them both. Rafael would keep her safe, would protect her, would guard her mind. And Aidan, the warrior who had come to rescue her, the one who wanted to force her to see her life for what it was, and then help her build something new... Aidan, who pushed her to the edge and with the deftest flick of his tongue toppled her over.

Her body spasmed and she tore her mouth from Rafael's, crying out. Her mind uncoiled and Rafael cradled her, keeping her safe as she tore the memories of her past, through the confines the Guild had knotted around her. She reached for the freedom they offered, her mind opening, her whole being straining for the relief she so craved. That she hadn't even known she wanted. That she needed. Everything she needed...

Aidan sucked hard on her clitoris, one...two fingers sliding deep inside her, curling against the most intimate part of her. Her body convulsed, the channel tightening around his intimate touch, holding him to her. His tongue licked her throbbing core, hard and fast. Rafael's hands stroked her neck, her breasts, held her safe.

Eva broke like a wave against them, the orgasm tearing through her pulsating body, breaking the bonds she had placed upon herself for so long. She rode Aidan's face while his fingers pumped inside her,

clinging mind to mind with Rafael, and sobbed out her release. The wires of Guild training fragmented and spun apart. Everything else was pleasure, all-consuming, unadulterated pleasure.

When Rafael untied her, she slumped into his arms. He carried her to the bed and laid her on the silken covers, his hands brushing her hypersensitive skin, his lips following. Aidan shed his clothes and stretched out alongside her. She blinked at him and he propped himself up on one elbow to study her. He laid his other hand flat on her stomach. Her skin warmed instantly at his touch.

“Still scared?” he asked with a grin.

“More than ever,” she whispered her reply.

Rafael joined them, his body more impressive naked than even her visions had promised. Dark hair dusted his broad and well-defined chest. His fingers, unlike Aidan’s, didn’t keep still. They roamed across her flesh, finding every sensitive area that would make her shudder and gasp again.

“More than ever,” he echoed and gave a smile. “I heard what you wanted, Eva. Do you want to tell him or will I?”

She swallowed hard and her eyes flicked from one to the other in sudden terror. How could she have been so stupid? He was psychic. He had seen inside her mind. She could hide nothing from him.

“Not really,” he assured her. “It kind of...escaped.”

Her voice failed her and Rafael laughed. She was looking right at Aidan when Rafael sent him the mental images he had gleaned from her during the moment that pushed her over the edge. Aidan’s eyes widened for a moment, their brilliant blue darkening with lust as the full impact dawned on him.

“You learn fast, beautiful.” His voice came out hoarse with need. “We’ll have to keep an eye on you.”

She frowned, despite the sudden reckless amusement that seized her. “Just an eye?”

Rafael’s laugh sounded again, rich, infectious. That was part of the problem. “How about you let us figure that out?”

His hands went to work, his mouth following them. He closed his lips over one nipple, sucking so hard she lost the ability to speak. When Aidan’s mouth took the other, rational thought went with it. They took their time, sucking, teasing, rolling the sensitive skin between their lips, their teeth stinging, their tongues soothing. It was like a competition, she realised; which one could make her cry out, make her arch off the bed. She sensed their competitiveness and their need to share her. They shared so much. Their minds, each other, lives, lovers.

Lovers like her.

Blind with need, Eva reached out and her hand brushed Aidan’s cock. Rafael adjusted himself, eluding her other hand, his mouth smiling as he continued to torment her. Aidan thrust towards her instead and she wrapped her fingers around him. His body felt strange, both hard and soft at the same time, like velvet stretched over iron. So warm in her grip, he undulated against her, pushing himself more firmly into her grip. His eyes closed, his face strained with pleasure as she explored the length of him, the heaviness of

his balls, the smooth shaft with its leaping pulse and the warm marble of the head, already dewing with moisture.

“Do you want him, Eva?” Rafael released her breast. He nuzzled against her.

She couldn’t form words again. Instead she nodded, while images filled her mind—Aidan prone beneath her, clutching at the sheets with his hands. And that cock, the one that filled her hand, inside her, stretching her, filling her. Aidan, who had awakened her to this new self.

“*And where am I?*” Rafael laughed at her.

Another image filled her, not her own but which flowed into her mind through Rafael’s contact. Her mouth closing around his hard length, swallowing him down.

“She has interesting ideas,” Rafael said.

Aidan growled deep in his throat. “So do I. That was one of them.”

A new picture blossomed—Eva on all fours, Rafael’s cock thrusting down her throat, while Aidan took her from behind. She moaned, shifting her body between them, more excited than she thought possible. And this time it was Rafael’s thought. She could sense that much even as the pleasure threatened to obliterate her.

So many options. So many iterations. Aidan disentangled himself from her grip. Before she could protest another image filled her mind, one which left her astounded, burning, helpless. *On her knees, trapped between them. Aidan fucked her slowly, his kisses ravaging her bruised and breathless mouth, while behind her Rafael parted her ass cheeks, his fingers stretching her anus, working slick oil into her depths. His cock nudged at the opening and she gave a stuttering cry.*

The same broken gasp forced its way from her mouth, shock and desire.

“So many options,” Aidan chuckled, his hand roaming down to her ass. His thought then. “I think I like that one best though. Turn about is fair play, beautiful.” She wriggled nervously and gave a whimper of fear.

“Don’t be afraid of us,” Rafael said, his tone darker.

*Easier said than done.* “How many women have you...?”

“Shared?” Aidan finished for her. His eyes met Rafael’s over her body and softened. “One or two. Does it bother you?”

Strangely, no, it didn’t. And she couldn’t say why. All her Guild training screamed at her that it should. And that she shouldn’t even be here, be contemplating it.

“We’re with you now.” Rafael’s breath brushed her earlobe. “And we wouldn’t be anywhere else. We’ve been waiting for you. It’s such a privilege to show you this world. Your face blossoms with every new discovery. And believe me, we’ll do nothing you don’t want, brave heart. I swear it.”

Eva nodded, swallowing down her nerves, and rolled towards Rafael, capturing his mouth with her own. He let her simply kiss him for a moment, revelling in his surrender. But he couldn't do that for long. It wasn't in his nature. He didn't give in, he didn't succumb. He was the one in control. All the time.

He kissed her back, hard and determined, his mouth forcing her down beneath him. Breaking the kiss, he smiled at her. "I want to see you with Aidan."

Unable to stop herself, she grinned back. "Same here."

The image formed in her mind. She recognised it as one of Rafael's this time, as if his thoughts carried a shade or a scent that was uniquely his. She reached out, embraced it and felt it unfold.

*Aidan knelt on the ground, his body glistening with sweat, every muscle straining, his face stretched with ecstasy, and behind him Rafael pushed inside him. Slowly, so slowly, allowing Aidan the time he needed, restraining himself. His face was a mask of need. It took every ounce of self-control he possessed. Rafael reached around to grasp Aidan's straining cock. Aidan cried out his name and started to come, bucking helplessly against his lover.*

His lover. And soon enough, her lover.

Aidan let out a groan and his eyes fluttered closed. "Rafe, too much. You'll send me over."

"You share your fantasies with him?" she asked, squirming between them.

"We share just about everything."

"And be warned, he likes to tease." Aidan bent to kiss her this time, nipping at her lower lip until she wound her arms around his broad shoulders and pulled him closer.

"Roll over, Aidan." Rafael's voice tightened. "On your back. I want to see her astride you."

At the same time, he cast her a look, a question in his dark eyes. He was offering her a moment to argue, to deny him, to ask for something else. But she didn't, couldn't. She wanted this. Oh, how she wanted it.

They followed his directions, using every opportunity to touch and be touched, to drag the moment out. As much to tease Rafael as each other. As Eva moved astride Aidan's prone form, his cock jerked against the hard ridges of his abdomen and he slid his hands up her thighs.

"Slowly," Rafael instructed. "It can be sore, after so long. And I want to feel your pleasure, beautiful. Not pain."

The thought of pain made the spark of panic leap back into life, but Aidan's hand on her thighs soothed it away. So careful, so gentle a man, so full of the ability to care for others. So much so that people cared for him too. Couldn't help themselves. She marvelled as he licked his lips and her body vibrated beneath his ministrations. His fingers teased the slick folds of her labia, parting them again, caressing them.

She shivered and Aidan smiled up at her. There was something more than lust in his eyes now. Something that mirrored the compassion she had sensed in him before. But more than that. Far more.

Aidan guided himself gradually into her, deep and deeper, stretching her body around his length, tormenting her with slowness and care. His face tightened with the strain of control, much as she had seen Rafael's face do in the vision.

Eva's body pulsed around him and he growled her name, his grip tightening on her thighs just to the point of pain. The feeling lanced through her, maddening her, and she slammed herself down on his full length. Slick and ready for him as she was, she felt no pain. Her body convulsed and her heart beat wildly. Her body closed around him, tightening, welcoming, needing.

Aidan stilled beneath her, waiting, his face fixed and desperate, but patient. His eyes reflected her face, the wonder she felt flooding his features. Slowly, she began to move, rocking against him. His hands rose to her hips, closed there, urging her on, faster, harder. She couldn't help but oblige. He thrust into her, his back arching from the bed.

*"Touch his mind,"* Rafael told her. *"Make it complete. Trust me."*

Eva reached for Aidan's mind with her own and he welcomed her. No shields here, none of the usual barriers. He opened to her touch, releasing her legs and reaching out to either side. Her skin mourned the loss of his touch, but her body moved on in spite of herself.

His hands clawed at the quilt and his head tilted back, his eyes closing, unable to remain open though they clung to her until the last possible moment. Their minds and bodies entwined, joined, and his release, when it came, tipped her over the edge as well.

She thrust against him, her own hands rising to her breasts to join with the heat engulfing them, which turned out to be Rafael. He was behind her, holding her, cradling her, keeping her safe as she lost the last strands of the clinical control she had once prized.

And found it no loss at all.

## Chapter Five

When Eva woke, Rafael was gone, but Aidan still lay by her side, breathing deeply, his chest rising and falling in an easy rhythm. In sleep he lost that studied intensity. Something almost boyish hung around his eyes and mouth. She reached out to touch him, her fingertips playing along the defined muscles of his pecs.

He moved so fast, she never saw his hand rise. Even her psychic abilities didn't warn her. He caught her wrist in an iron grip and slowly opened his eyes. Bright blue, almost aglow, beautiful.

"You're awake," he said, pleased to have outsmarted her. She could read the satisfaction rolling off him like the musk of scent. "I thought you'd sleep all day."

His grip loosened and turned into a caress.

"Where's Rafael?" she asked.

Aidan shrugged, as if he didn't have a care in the world. "Working. He's always working. You'll get used to it. You just have to let him go and wait until he needs you." He brought her hand to his mouth and kissed her knuckles. "And he *will* need you."

She stretched out beside him, body to body, ignoring the stir of desire that was building yet again. She wanted some answers. No, she deserved them.

"He's a strange man, Aidan."

He nodded, his tongue teasing between her fingers, as if he wanted to explore every inch of her.

"He doesn't let go. How can he be a Hedonist with such a tight wire of control?"

"You've only just learned to give up control." He grinned at her. "But sometimes control—retaining control of yourself no matter what, being in complete control of yourself, or another—is part of the pleasure."

"And everything in this life is about pleasure?"

He rolled her onto her back, pinning her down on the bed. "Try to get away."

She struggled feebly, unable to shift him. He wasn't hurting her, but she could see in his eyes that he wanted her to fight back, to tear herself free. This was another demonstration of some kind, not one she found as pleasurable as the last.

"I can't."

His grip tightened. “Try harder,” he teased. She wriggled beneath him, her anger rising now. He was too strong, a trained Security officer, perhaps more. A terrorist, or so the Guild would say. A spy and a traitor.

A shiver of fear ran through her veins and her breath caught in her throat. And with it a burst of desire flooded her. Her body ached for him, the muscles still recalling the feel of adapting to admit him, the joy of taking him inside her. She remembered the force with which he bucked beneath her, the harnessed strength that he held back just for her. Control. Aidan could have overpowered her like this at any moment, but he hadn’t.

He’d given her the control. And that was part of the pleasure, for both of them. And for Rafael as well.

Aidan’s mouth closed on hers in a hard and determined kiss. His tongue filled her, teeth grazed her. He pressed down on her so she could barely breathe, could hardly move, could do nothing to fight him.

Memory surged again, a memory she didn’t want back.

A dorm room in the early days of her training. Her body and mind sluggish. A figure in the darkness, unexpected, unwelcome. Hands on her, a body crushing hers, his legs forcing hers apart. She couldn’t fight him. Not with her body. But her mind—drugged, but still strong and unruly—could.

She lashed out with her hysterical thoughts and unleashed his nightmares on him. Aidan froze, his whole body stiffening in alarm and shock. He didn’t move, couldn’t move, his eyes wide with pain. Not just pain. Agony.

“Eva! No!” Rafael yelled. The door banged off the inner wall as he sprinted inside. “Let him go. Please, Eva! You don’t want to do this. Let him go.”

With a sob of fear, she released Aidan. Disgust sickened her stomach as he rolled off and recoiled from her. She’d seen that look before, too many times. But never so pronounced as now.

Rafael caught Aidan in his strong arms, his own mind wrapping around his lover’s, soothing the hurt, healing the wounds, making him safe and calm once more.

Eva curled in on herself, bringing her knees up to her chest, wrapping her arms around them. She rocked forward, trying to push the memory away and the reality of what she’d done. The sob that built up inside her wrenched its way out and she hid her face, unable to look at them anymore. She was what the Guild had made her, what everyone apart from the psychics said.

A monster.

“Eva?” Aidan’s voice shook, but it was his voice. It reached her ears, not her mind. He was—

“He’s okay, sweetheart,” Rafael assured her. “He’s strong. You didn’t hurt him.”

The sharp breath and suppressed groan as Aidan struggled to move again gave that the lie. She looked up, afraid but relieved.



Their eyes, when she met them, held none of the hate or the pain she expected. Concern. That was there. Concern for her.

“Eva? What happened?”

“I...I’m sorry. I’m so sorry. Aidan, I didn’t mean—”

His hand closed on her again, gently this time, Aidan as she knew him, not the shadowy figure from her youth.

“What happened?” Rafael asked, a growl of impatience entering his voice now.

It only took a moment to show him. His face fell and he glanced at Aidan, whose skin paled.

“Foolish.” Rafael sighed, though whether he meant Eva or Aidan there was no way to tell. “But you’re safe now, Eva. No one here will hurt you. Did they...did they find him?”

Her mouth twitched. It was still hard to describe her feelings about that night, and the subsequent re-conditioning to make her fit for service. Because she knew how she had left him. And she had never for a moment regretted it. “As far as I know he’s still catatonic.”

Aidan tried to stand, but slumped back onto the bed with a groan, colour draining from his face. With a curse Rafael flung open the door, shouting for help.

Eva backed away, picking up some of her clothes as she did. The bathroom door stood open and she darted inside, closing it behind her.

She’d hurt him, or worse. She’d killed him. Rafael sounded like a demon, shouting outside, all tenderness and concern gone now.

Shivering with guilt and grief, Eva tugged on her clothes. When she could bring herself to step back into the bedroom, a woman was bending over Aidan, studying his face intently. Aidan bore the examination with bad grace, his chest still rising and falling rapidly, his hands clenched on the bedclothes.

Anger rolled off him in waves that nearly drove Eva back into the bathroom.

“Are you all right?” Rafael asked, his voice calm and measured. A rigid shield of control encircled his mind.

Eva winced, withdrew from the unwanted, unintended contact. “I...I didn’t mean... He...he frightened me.”

The images reared up again but she quashed them down, filling her mind with the images of butterflies, the one thing that might bring her peace.

Rafael reached out with an open palm. “Come with me.”

Instinct told her to shake her head. She’d just attacked Aidan—a member of Rafael’s group of Hedonists, a man he loved—and for that she would have to be punished. Tears spiked in her eyes again and she dropped her gaze to the floor.

Fingertips brushed her cheek, a touch as soft as butterfly wings. Maintaining his guard, never infringing on her mind, Rafael lifted her face so he could gaze into her eyes. Eva tried to look anywhere but at him, and failed. He was too much, too compelling, too enchanting. He was just...overwhelming.

"I know it was an accident, Eva."

He was lying. Had to be. No one should trust a psychic after an attack like that. Not even another psychic. Some might say, *especially* not another psychic. She'd seen them wipe psychics who went too far like that. She'd almost faced that process herself. Only her youth, inexperience and the circumstances of the attack itself had saved her from an institution cell. Or worse, a complete wipe.

"Please, look at me," Rafael said.

Forcing herself to look him in the eye, she found herself startled by the compassion she found there. His dark eyes brimmed with it.

"It's difficult to control your emotions," he said. "After all you've been through, that's hardly surprising. Myra needs some time to ensure that Aidan is okay. Come with me."

His hand closed around hers, a warm and firm grip, not too tight or domineering, but there. She couldn't have slipped out of it had she wanted to. Not easily.

"He needs rest," Myra growled at Rafael as he passed.

Aidan started to struggle up. "I'm fine. There's nothing the matter—"

Myra pushed him back down with the flat of her hand on her chest. "You're no medic, Aidan. You need rest." She glared at Rafael again. "Both of you do." Her eyes slid over Eva and away as quickly as possible, but not before her lips tightened. "You most of all, Rafe. They put you through hell. You can't expect to just carry on as before. Not without some recovery time."

Rafael shrugged, a nonchalant roll of his shoulders. "I've always managed before," he told her dismissively and led Eva from the room.

Aidan's gaze followed them. Eva could feel it on her back, caressing the skin between her shoulder blades—or holding a knife there. She wasn't sure which. Perhaps a bit of both.

Rafael led her down the hall and into another room. A study. She turned slowly. Books lined the walls and a desk sat in the bay window overlooking the gardens outside. The chair was upholstered in ancient leather and the wood shone with polish. A computer tablet on the desk blinked for attention but Rafael didn't move towards it. It was the only thing of a modern era in the whole study.

His study, she realised. It had to be.

Two doors led off, one to the left and one to the right. Bedroom and bathroom, she supposed. These were his quarters then, no more than a stone's throw from hers. To keep an eye on her. In case something happened...

Like her attacking Aidan.

She wrapped her arms around her chest and felt more exposed than she had when they had stripped her of her clothes and made love to her. A shiver ran over her skin and deep inside a tingling warmth responded. Inner muscles tightened and a delicious warmth flooded her. Her breath escaped in a soft moan.

“Better?” Rafael asked.

Eva narrowed her eyes. “Are you making me feel this?”

“Yes.” He stepped closer. “And no. Not deliberately in any case, though the results are wonderful to behold. I’m not playing with your mind, Eva. But I hope I cause desire in you. I know Aidan does.”

“And look how I rewarded him.” She couldn’t keep the bitterness from her voice. She didn’t bother to try.

Rafael reached for her again. She flinched but when she didn’t actually retreat, he carefully stroked her face with the back of his fingers.

“It was an accident. I warned Aidan to be careful. His play can get a little...rough? But he would never hurt you. To know that he scared you that badly, it’s eating him up inside.”

“He told you that?”

“I know,” Rafael replied solemnly. “We share everything, Aidan and I. Even when he couldn’t speak, his sense of guilt screamed his remorse to me.”

“You love him.”

“We love each other.”

There, it was said. They were a couple. Which made her a third party, an interloper, and at best a means to an end. This wasn’t about them wanting her, but about freeing her. But that was all, clearly.

Rafael bent his head and kissed her. His lips on hers made her cry out in surprise and he smothered that cry. His tongue slid into her mouth, coiling with hers and he seized her shoulders, holding her in place. Helpless before him, Eva brought her hands up to his chest, finding the rich cotton of his shirt a maddening barrier between them.

With a growl of need, Rafael propelled her back to the door, still kissing her, as if he could not bring himself to let her go. The edges of his mind trembled with need, with hunger. His shields began to buckle.

*“Eva, oh God, Eva...”*

Images filled her mind. Rafael with Aidan, Rafael with his golden-haired wife, Rafael here and now, with her. Naked. She tugged at his shirt, thrilling as the buttons gave way and she could brush against his skin. The wildness took on a beat now, a rhythm that could not or would not be denied. Heartbeats pounded in unison.

“They’re using you,” he murmured against her skin. “They’re still using you, controlling you, with your own thoughts, your own memories.”

Eva shuddered and tried to pull back. But she had nowhere to go. “I know what happened to me, Rafael. I remember—”

His lips trapped hers again. Catching her wrists in his hands, he pinned her against the door, trapping her with his body. With her body intimately pressed against him, her pulse went wild. Panic surged through her, panic and terror, but Rafael bore down on her, his mouth pleasuring, his body driving her beyond control.

*"They can change your memories, Eva, alter what you think you know."*

No. It couldn't be true. Couldn't be, because if it was...well then, what in her life was her own? Nothing at all. She was nothing at all, just a shell, just a tool of the Guild.

Rafael broke the kiss, and his body pressed against hers, holding her still so he could gaze into her eyes. Her own face reflected in his black and endless eyes—pale with fear, her eyes too wide, her cheeks hollow.

"You must never think that, Eva," he whispered, his voice harsh. "You...you are everything. So warm, so vital, so..."

Though he pinned her against the door, she forced herself forward and kissed him. For a moment he didn't respond, but just as the fear that she'd made another terrible mistake swept through her, Rafael growled her name and returned the kiss savagely.

*"You need to fight your fear,"* he told her wordlessly.

*"I can't. You saw what I did to Aidan. I can't risk hurting you."*

With his free hand, he reached beneath the gaping blouse and caressed her breast with firm, determined fingers. He wasn't rough, not really, but nor was he gentle. He was...he was perfect. Her body began to melt inside, burning with hunger for him. And a trembling that was only half fear.

*"You won't hurt me."* He sounded so certain, so sure of himself. If only it were true. Oh God, she needed that to be true.

Rafael pinched her nipple and she cried out. Panic lanced through her and before she could stop herself, she lashed out, just as she had with Aidan.

His consciousness curled around her, a warm, safe place, a gentle caress on her panicked mind. And at the same time he tore her blouse open the rest of the way. His mouth devoured her, teeth, tongue and lips moving in a torturous harmony.

Eva almost fell when he released the grip pinning her hands above her head. But she didn't have time. Rafael seized her thighs, lifting her, parting her, wrapping her legs around his waist.

*"Show me. Show me now. What happened?"*

*Fear. Pain. Humiliation. She was powerless. Hurting. Doomed.*

So she lashed out. Then, with Aidan, and now. Now she hit hardest of all.

Rafael recoiled. His head snapped back as if struck by a fist. His cock slid deep inside her, right up to the hilt, filling her and making her cry out his name.

Every nightmare poured out of her, into him. Rafael groaned and then thrust again. Eva tore at his shirt, baring his chest to her hands.

*“Let go of it, Eva. Let go. They use your fears to hold you down. Let go.”*

Her body closed around his, holding him close, clenching around his pulsing shaft. He drove into her again and she came, calling out his name and relinquishing all her terrors to him.

Rafael drank them down, his voice ringing off the ceiling and walls, breaking as he crested inside her.

Another image formed, not hers. Her fears were gone. Which left only one source.

*Rafael cradled a woman with golden hair. He held her against him, even though her body hung limp from his shaking arms. Even though her blood drenched his clothes, stained his skin.*

*And slowly, slowly the woman’s face changed.*

*To become Aidan’s.*

*Dead eyes stared at the world, still so blue, but without the light in them, without the laughter that made them sparkle. His arms hung limp and lifeless. And Rafael wept and said his name, desperately trying to call him back to life.*

With a gasp, Rafael released her. Eva slumped against him, too spent, too wrung out to speak. His body trembled against hers as they disentangled their limbs and slipped to the ground. The study filled with their beating hearts, their ragged breath, the air tense with all they had shared. And slowly it all subsided until there were two of them once more. Two people, marooned, alone.

Rafael moved, like a panther, crossing the narrow space between them until his face hung over hers. Tears dripped onto her cheeks and he bent his head, resting his forehead against hers.

*“Don’t let them use your fears, Eva. Otherwise you’ll never be free.”*

Aidan was asleep when they went back into the room. Eva pulled her tattered clothes around her body, but Rafael left his shirt hanging open, his torso tempting her. She forced thoughts of him away. Not now. She needed...

God, she didn’t know what she needed any more. How could she?

She groaned as she sat on the edge of the bed and Aidan’s hand closed around the point of her hip, a gentle caress through her skirt.

*“You two quite finished?”* he asked, the words stretched by a yawn.

Eva’s face flamed so hot she was sure it must be scarlet, but Rafael just laughed.

*“For now.”*

Aidan harrumphed and rolled over so he could look up at the other man. What he saw, the pleasure reflected in his eyes, held no trace of jealousy but it proved too much for Eva. She buried her face in her hands.

“Eva.” Aidan gasped, dismayed, and she felt the bed move as he sat up, leaned towards her. Not just him, Rafael too. The world pitched around her as their hands touched her again. Their touch, strong and gentle, with the capacity to drive her out of her mind.

Their hands soothed her, massaged the tight muscles of her shoulders. “I’m sorry Eva,” Aidan said at last. “I never thought I would bring back something like that to you. I can’t apologise enough.”

She nodded, her body finally relaxing, letting trust drive out terror. But why did she trust them so? What was possessing her in this place? They were her enemies, weren’t they? That was what the Guild taught, what she had believed. And yet here she was, indulging at every turn in the pleasures they offered, in the unfolding of the person within at their expert hands.

“Sometimes we indulge in control for a reason,” said Rafael. “You can unwind it slowly, carefully, but Aidan has always loved to rush through things. Much to his personal peril. He acts before he thinks. All that grunt military training, I suspect. They teach them to follow orders, to act without thinking things through. On instinct, as it were.” He stroked her hair back from her face, tucked a strand behind her ear. She looked up, twisting around to face him and he smiled. “I think I tore your clothes. But we have others. Get dressed. Aidan will show you around and you’ll see we aren’t monsters. Okay?”

“And you?” Aidan slipped out of the bed. Standing over them, he rolled back his shoulders and tried to pretend a relaxed demeanour he clearly didn’t feel. Her eyes were immediately drawn to his cock. It hung down heavily, and, as her gaze alighted on it, it twitched. She blushed again and looked up to see Aidan pursing his lips, frowning down on them. No, on Rafael. He didn’t appear to have noticed her scrutiny at all. He looked...impatient, irritated and concerned. He waited, completely unfazed by his nakedness. Comfortable in his own skin in a way she could never be.

“Burgess sent in a report,” said Rafael. “I need to see him. I’m heading out to the rendezvous but I’ll try to join you for lunch.” He frowned at Aidan then, sensing at last the reluctance that was crystal clear to Eva. Of course, she had been deeply inside his mind more recently than Rafael, intent on locking him in his own private torment. “A problem?”

“No, but I—perhaps you should—”

“He’s scared,” Eva interrupted.

“No, I’m not,” Aidan snapped before Rafael could reply. He grabbed Rafael by the arm and pulled him from the bed and towards the door, lowering his voice. As if she wouldn’t hear. “But this changes things. You said strong but I had no idea that was even possible. She could have—”

“Yes. She could have.” The warning tone in his voice stilled Aidan’s protests. “But she didn’t.”

“Because you stopped her.”

Rafael shook his head. “She stopped herself. I would have been far too late. You scared her, you idiot. Don’t do it again. If it helps...” He met Eva’s eyes over Aidan’s shoulder. Rafael was fully aware that she could hear them. He found it amusing that Aidan didn’t know. And he understood. He’d felt her terror and

he had dealt with it by turning its force upon himself, by using his own fears to counter it. Problem was, he'd felt Aidan's fear too. Aidan, who he didn't dare think of losing. "If it helps, think of her as a loaded weapon. And handle her with care. But don't turn her away from you because of it."

"You shouldn't go alone," Aidan said, still arguing, still determined. "Even something as routine as meeting Burgess, it's dangerous."

Rafael shrugged, his expression saying he accepted the concern but would not be swayed. "I'll take Hugh with me. He could do with a break."

He leaned in close, whispered something in Aidan's ear, his lips brushing against the lobe just as they had against hers.

Aidan waited until he had gone to turn around. Shame marked him, a blush of embarrassment staining his cheeks. He bowed his head.

"What did he say?" she asked.

"Can't you just reach into my mind and pick it out?"

She bit against the inside of her lower lip. "Not if you don't want me to. I'll never do that again without your consent. I promise. I'm sorry, Aidan. Really I am."

He sighed and raked his hands through his shaggy blonde hair. "So am I. Let's move past it, okay?"

"And on to what?"

"Come with me. Just to talk. Okay?" He looked up, though his head was still lowered, and she got the impression of a boy, a lost and uncomfortable boy who could articulate desires and lustful thoughts but didn't appear to be able to express his feelings. She couldn't figure him out, but she wanted to try.

"To talk. Okay."

"And try to put it behind us."

She nodded, but she knew they were both lying. It would be there forever now. How could it not be?

## Chapter Six

The clothes Aidan picked out of the wardrobe felt as sensuous to her as everything else she had encountered among the Hedonists. They thrived on pleasure alone, the Guild said, thought of nothing but pleasure, nothing but themselves. And yet, here among them she saw that the pursuit of pleasure was extended to everything, so that everything was pleasurable. They were not the wild and reckless creatures, the animalistic monsters the Guild would have everyone think. The realisation shook her to the core. Pleasure in everything. That was their secret. What they ate, what they wore, how they loved...

The flowing cream skirt and loose, gypsy-type blouse felt strange and unfettered on her, the material tantalising her skin. So used to tying up her hair every morning, she almost did it again, but paused as she swept its length over her shoulder. There was no reason to. And she felt like a different person when it was down. So she left it there. Just to see what that person would do.

Aidan wore black, as he always did, tight on his body like the Security uniform she had first seen on him. A disguise, she realised, as much a part of the façade he hid behind as the trappings of Guild Security.

“What did I throw back at you, Aidan?” she asked, nervous to voice the question.

He stiffened and tried to mask it by pushing the door open and holding it for her. “You didn’t see?” She shook her head and waited for him in the corridor outside. “I lost my family. When I was a kid. I was in the Guild compound during the purges and our neighbours were seized. Dad tried to stop them. So Security...”

Eva winced, understanding instantly. “They killed him?”

“Not just him.” His eyes took on that fixed quality people wore when they were trying to report horrors they had seen. “My mother. My sister. And the neighbours, and their four children...”

She wrapped her arm around him and schooled her mind to soothe his. The reverse of what she had done before. Somehow, she hoped she could win back his trust. She just didn’t know how. “But you survived?”

“Barely. I was shot in four different places. But I lived. A ‘terrible misunderstanding’ the officials called it. They were looking for subversives and over-reacted. Ironical, huh? Someone took me to medical. I ended up in the military as a grunt. They taught me everything I needed to know. Moulded me into a perfect soldier. And then, one day, I had enough of hunting down runaways. Can we talk about something else, please?”

“What else?”



“Anything,” he replied coldly.

They descended the stairs in silence and made their way outside. Evening was drawing in with the setting sun. The first thing she noticed was the sensation of the combined breeze and sunlight on her skin. Then the sunset, the western sky aflame. Nothing could have prepared her for it. She sucked in a breath.

“Makes a change from the compound, doesn’t it?” Aidan’s fingers brushed her arm again. An apology, perhaps.

God, she hoped so. She wanted that intimacy back, the closeness she had felt to him from the very beginning, from that first touch. If he was Rafael he would pick the thoughts out of her head and know at once. But Aidan couldn’t do that.

She stopped, turned to face him, lifting her chin to do so. “May I show you something?”

He would have winced, but he was too good at hiding his emotions on the surface to do that. But that didn’t help when it came to a psychic. Even without touching his mind, she could read those surface emotions he refused to show. They rolled off him, unmistakable. Aidan felt so very deeply, he could do nothing to hide it from someone like her, like Rafael. Emotions poured off him like so many exotic perfumes, tantalising and intoxicating. And that was a vital part of his attraction.

His eyes studied hers and then, slowly, he nodded, his Adam’s apple moving in his throat as he swallowed down the uncertainty. Eva reached up to touch his face, keeping her fingertips light as a gossamer. She had one treasure, one thing of value in her memories, something that warmed her heart and formed a safe place to which she could retreat. Like Daisy with her flowers, somewhere to hide. So she showed him this.

*Light and a breeze, the whisper of foliage and the sound of running water. The flutter of colourful wings, bright blue, spotted, crimson, golden brown, and saffron. Whirling around her head, landing on her hands and taking flight once more. Butterflies. Exotic, beautiful, perfectly formed. To the Guild, useless. Pointless. What good were they. But to her father...*

“I was just a baby. I thought for years it was just a dream. But it didn’t fade or go away. They couldn’t dislodge it from my mind.”

“Harmon—your father kept butterflies in the Guild compound?”

She had no answer. In truth, she had no idea if it was real, how it could possibly be real. “It’s all I have of him. But I don’t know if it ever actually happened. This...talent, gift, ability...whatever you want to call it...it had to come from somewhere, didn’t it? I think it was his last gift to me.”

Aidan stared at her for a moment, his brow tightening into a frown, but then his features relaxed again and he sighed. “That sounds like the sort of thing he’d do.”

Eva froze. Aidan had known him. Both he and Rafael had said so. She’d been so bewildered at the time, so afraid, that she’d forgotten.

A thousand questions clamoured to the forefront of her mind—What was he like? Why had he left them and put her mother in the impossible situation of choosing between her children, of giving her daughter to the Guild? What had he done with his life?—but one drowned out all the others.

“How did he die?”

Aidan’s lips tightened and he led her over to the edge of the garden where a low bench nestled in the shade of an apple tree. Long shadows stretched across the furrows in the soil, filling them with darkness.

“He was trying to get to you. He found out from Burgess where you were posted. Shocked us all.”

“Burgess, my boss?”

“Yes. He knew your father of old. They were partners once, friends. He helped your father escape when Security found him helping others escape. He’s been good to us too, sends us news, leaves supplies at the drop point, even vaccines for the kids.”

It was her turn to frown. “Vaccines? For what?”

“Illnesses the Guild no longer have to concern themselves with. But out here, well...”

“I had vaccinations as an infant, everyone does.”

He shrugged and his hand brushed her thigh. It sent a shiver through her. “Come back to your room with me,” he murmured and inside her, something melted.

“You haven’t told me what happened to him.”

“Oh God, Eva...” He exhaled in a rush of air, exasperated. “They found him in the Guild Compound looking for you, cornered him. You’d been reassigned or something.”

When? When had she been reassigned? She was about to ask a date, but he ploughed on.

“They had shocksticks.” The word meant nothing to her. His narrowed eyes registered her blank expression. “Shocksticks. You have to have seen them?”

“I have no idea what they are.”

“Shocksticks,” he repeated, more urgently now. “Short, thick batons, about as long as your forearm. They emit an electromagnetic pulse. On me, they hurt like hell, but on a psychic, even one as strong as your father... The pulse not only electrocutes them like any other human being, it scrambles their abilities, renders them powerless. Guild Security have them. Standard issue. If you ever see someone coming at you with one, you do anything—do you understand? *Anything!*—to get away.”

Icy claws dug into her lungs, tightening them until she could no longer breathe. “I’ve never...never heard of them.” And it made sense. Horrible, sickening sense. If you wanted to use someone, to make them cooperate willingly, why tell them you had something that would render them a gibbering heap of terror? Unless you needed to give them something to fear. And there were so many other things to fear. Being wiped. Being assigned unwillingly to a cell. Being cast out. Being left in the wilds for some errant group like the Hedonists to seize.

“Are you okay?” His touch was a comfort, a balm.

“Do you know that they teach about Hedonists?” she asked. “In the Guild?”

“Yes.”

Not the answer she expected. She kept forgetting that Aidan had lived undercover inside the compound, that he’d been born there. She closed her eyes, trying to compose herself again.

“Eva?” He squeezed her shoulder. “Your father rescued me. He was assigned to me in medical, as a counsellor, and more probably I think they wanted him to get information out of me about my parents. Maybe he did, but he helped me. He got me out of the military when I needed to leave. He rescued Rafael from the Juvenile too. At great risk. They wanted to keep Rafe more than anyone—well, anyone before you, perhaps.”

He wrapped his arm around her shoulders and pulled her closer. This time she didn’t panic. “But they didn’t keep me. You rescued me.”

“Yes.”

Eva rested her head on his shoulder, closed her eyes and let the sunlight play on her face and Aidan’s hand on her upper arm soothe her.

“He brought us together here, you know. And when they called us Hedonists, he explained what the word *actually* meant. That it’s about pleasure in all things, not just sex or perversion or whatever they would have people believe. Although...” His lips brushed hers and she started a moment before succumbing. And it was oh so easy to succumb to Aidan. Just as it was to Rafael. Together they embodied all her fantasies. Together they were worth all the mornings of waking up alone, reaching for a friend, someone to touch and share with. And finding no one. Not until now.

Aidan’s hand brushing against her arm had been the first rush of sensation in her life. He’d been so daring to go in undercover. And after the flurry of Rafael’s rescue, his first thought had been for the other man. Aidan was young, dynamic, a life force buffeting her carefully constructed cocoon. She was ready to rip it off and join him, dancing with her new wings.

She returned his kiss until he withdrew, resting his forehead against hers. The action mirrored Rafael. Something learned from him perhaps, an intimacy that he wanted to share with her.

“That side has its advantages,” he continued, his voice shaking a little more than he would like her to know, so she pretended not to notice. “I must admit. The Guild names us Hedonists as a slur, implying it is all about the moment, about debauchery and lack of responsibility. Harmon—your father explained that pleasure as an end isn’t wrong, that pleasure can be found in every aspect of our lives and that we should allow ourselves to experience the joy of it all in order to do it justice. I owed him a lot.”

Eva nuzzled closer to him, lost in the moment, in the rise and fall of his voice. The cadence rocked her to relaxation. But it didn’t stop her from lifting her mouth to his again, from kissing him tenderly and waiting for him to continue.

“Come back to my room with me,” she murmured. This time, there were no arguments. Not from either of them.

Aidan brought her down to breakfast the following morning, where he introduced her to so many people that she couldn’t grasp all the names. They smiled politely, nodded to her, for his sake. No doubting the tensions that lurked in their eyes, that sizzled in the air around them. Fear, loathing in some cases, but so much distrust. Despite the change of clothes and the lightening of her spirit just walking into that room again, just facing them all reminded her palpably that she was Guild to them, and Guild could never be trusted.

She followed Aidan, keeping her eyes averted, trying to be as small and unobtrusive as possible. She recalled, so many years ago, walking through a grey and featureless canteen, one of a line of children. Wanting to shrink in on herself. Disappear. A chill ran down her spine as this new memory reached the surface, a bubble long buried, slowly and inexorably breaking free now. And it was *her* memory. No chance of it being anyone else’s. It was too clear, far too vivid. But worst of all, it was new to her. Brand new.

Eva swallowed hard on a suddenly tight throat and her stomach clenched in alarm.

*This isn’t possible. Memories don’t just appear. By their very nature...they’re memories. I’d have remembered this if it had happened to me. I should have remembered.*

But she did. And that was the problem.

She just hadn’t remembered this memory before now.

Her head throbbed and then her consciousness lurched inside her head, nauseating her. She stopped in her tracks, vaguely aware that Aidan turned, concern replacing his thoughts of food. But the world swirled in nauseating shades of grey, of brilliant light and shadows so dark they stained the soul.

Abruptly, her head cleared again and Aidan caught her in his strong, sure hands. “Are you okay? What happened?”

“I don’t...I don’t know...” Her voice grated on her throat and tears stung like acid in her mind.

“She broke through a Guild block,” said a youthful voice. A teenage boy stepped closer, still eyeing her suspiciously. “It hurts when it happens all at once like that.”

Guided by Aidan, she sank onto the nearest chair. The boy stood carefully out of reach, but he didn’t back away. Veiled fascination vied with his fear. Nothing else was clear. She couldn’t read him. Another psychic. God, how many of them were here?

“You’re Guild,” he said at last.

Was she? Still? Always? There seemed to be no escaping it. She hung her head. “What was that?”

“A block. Your mind broke through one of the blocks they’ve put on you and you remembered something.”

“A canteen, standing in a line... I was so young. There were so many of us.”

“Juvie,” said the boy with a sneer.

“Hugh.” Aidan’s voice held a warning.

“Juvenile Hall. Where they keep us until they can work out who to reprogram and employ and who to wipe, lock up, drug and wring prophecies from. Some would say you were lucky.”

Eva studied his face. His hair was so short she could see his scalp through the strands. And scars. Vicious-looking scars cutting into his scalp.

Sensing her scrutiny, Hugh ran one hand over his head in self-conscious defence. It gave her a glimpse of his inner arm, riddled with smaller scars, like needle marks. Eva sucked in a breath and Hugh scowled.

“I don’t understand,” she whispered. “I don’t remember anything else.”

“That’s enough, Hugh,” Aidan growled, but Hugh didn’t move away.

“You’re like me, but you must have been stronger. Or more easily used. So while the likes of you had their minds wiped and new memories put in, the likes of me were just drones. Shot up with smack so we babbled out every vision in our minds but couldn’t put one foot in front of the other. Hooked up to each other to make us stronger, a whole interconnected nest of parasites. Why do you think people fight to keep their kids away from the Guild? Why do you think there’s so many of us here? Rafael got us out, that’s why.”

“And he got Eva out too. Do you think she suffered any less? At least you know who you are, who you were. Now back off.”

*So many of us here.* Eva looked around. Every eye in the place was focused on her. Every single one. Child and adult, male and female. But some looked more keenly than others. Especially the children.

Laura pushed her way through the crowd, Daisy in tow, little David perched on her hip. She took her place by Aidan, glaring at the others.

“You leave her alone,” she said. “She helped Daisy. That’s all that matters. You were all given a fresh start and she’s just like you. Leave her alone. Or better yet—” She prodded a finger into Hugh’s chest, driving him back a step. “Better yet, help her. Like her father and Rafael helped you.”

Eva could only gape as the crowd dispersed, Hugh among them. Laura sat down opposite her but didn’t flinch as Daisy took the chair at her side.

“Well, that was...dramatic,” Aidan remarked blandly.

Laura huffed and fussed over the baby. “Daisy didn’t like what she was seeing. That Hugh is a good lad, but his heart is a little cracked with what they did to him.”

“Is it—” Eva broke off. Her voice came out thin and tortured. “Is it true? What he said? What I saw?”

Aidan's hands closed on her shoulders, squeezing gently, trying to offer a small comfort perhaps. "Yes. I'm afraid so. I've seen it."

"But how could I..." Her body shook as if something invisible rattled her inside. Breath seemed impossible to grasp and her skin shrank around her bones. "How could I not know?"

*"They made you forget."* Daisy took her hand and cuddled in against her. *"They crept into your mind while you slept and stole the memory away."*

The revelation that most of her life was a lie wouldn't leave her. Eva ate only because food was placed in front of her. She helped Laura in the garden, watched Myra reading stories to the children. Eight of them were clearly psychic, Daisy the youngest and Hugh the eldest. They stood out like night lights amid the others when she concentrated. Some, like Daisy, were bright, but others were just a faint glow. Weaker. Those destined, if Hugh was right, to be "drones" as he called them.

Eva bit her lower lip and tried to remember again, but could recall nothing else. Just empty blackness spotted with brief moments: her mother handing her over, the canteen line, and then nothing. Since she had exposed that one memory, like peeling back a foil seal on her life, the things she thought were moments of her past had evaporated. Dreams. False memories. Lies.

Part of her longed to relax into the lifestyle she saw unfolding around her. But each time that temptation arose, another part reared its ugly head, making her seize up inside and fall silent.

*You've no right to be here. You don't belong. You're Guild. You always will be.*

Always. Like it was stamped on her soul, a mark she would never be able to shake off. Day by day, night by night, she wrestled with that knowledge. She should go back. Or she should run, far away from both Guild and Hedonist. She didn't belong here or there. She didn't belong anywhere.

Dumped in the midst of people who distrusted her, what choice did she have?

## Chapter Seven

“You’re very quiet,” Rafael said, as they sat in the garden and evening fell. He’d spread out a blanket and brought their dinner outside so they could sit beneath the moon and stars while they ate.

Eva managed a half smile. “It’s nothing. Just lost in thought.”

“They told me what happened the other morning.”

“Did they?” Hardly surprising. Most of them looked on him as some sort of prophet. Which made her father a God. Which made her... well, who knew?

“You know there’s nothing you could have done, don’t you? You were just a child when your mother died.”

Like a hook in her mind, painful and violent, tugging her attention away, Eva shied back from the words.

“My mother gave me away. She didn’t die.”

Rafael looked startled. “I’m...I’m sorry. Your father said...”

Sudden anger surged in the place of her pain. “What? You know so much about him and I don’t. I remember three things before my first day of work now. Only three things. The ridiculous dream my father planted in my head, my mother being forced to hand me over to the Guild, and standing there in line for food like a beggar. So what did he say?”

Rafael took her hands and the rage inside her bled away. Tears threatened to take its place but she pushed them away with ruthless force.

“I’m sorry you don’t remember him, Eva. Really I am. He told me your mother was killed by Security, just like...” His eyes fell. He couldn’t quite say it still, not out loud. “*Like my wife.*”

An urge to ask her name came with a sharp stab of jealousy. She studied his face instead. Strong, tortured, and so handsome in his pain. “When?”

“I first met him when he got me out of—”

“No, your wife. What happened?”

“Ah...” His grip on her hand loosened as the boundaries he placed on his mind quivered. To keep holding on would have allowed her to see the extent of his pain. And he wouldn’t do that, would he? Not Rafael. “Seven years ago. We married very young, but we were very much in love. Sorchia had golden hair, same colour as Aidan’s but her eyes were more like yours. We weren’t here back then, but in another encampment, only about fifty miles north of the Guild compound. Too close. Far too close. Harmon was

still leading raids in to get kids out, and anyone else he could contact who needed an escape. We didn't have the name then that we have now."

He grinned, as if hoping to see a similar smile on her face. When she didn't, the expression faded.

"Sorcha and I were in the open when the Guild came. Grey AVs—those old-style armoured vehicles they use in ops, you know?"

She nodded solemnly even though she didn't and kept her mind to herself. No doubt that he was telling the truth. His hands were shaking violently now and his voice was clipped with the stress of retelling it. She didn't need to press into his consciousness and let him tell his tale his way without digging into his thoughts—even if he would have let her.

"Well, we were totally unprepared. Naïve, I see that now. We thought we were free and they wouldn't come after us again, but we'd underestimated our value to them."

"Even unwilling?"

"Yes. The Guild has built its corporate success on the psychics it *employs*."

Eva pursed her lips. *Employs*. Interesting choice of word. The veiled resentment she had always felt from her superiors made much more sense now. Maybe it had just stemmed from the fact that her father had betrayed them, but a more likely source was the idea that psychics were tools rather than people. Things to be used. Which meant she had the same basic worth to them as a highly advanced computer. No one thought twice about wiping a computer, did they? About changing a memory board, or upgrading an outdated machine.

"They rounded up everyone they could catch. Some of us got away and tried to fight back. Sorcha was shot." Rafael wrapped his arms around his chest and stared up at the stars. "She died right there."

And so did part of him. Eva frowned as the thought became perfectly clear. His thought? Had he meant her to see it?

"I'm going to be away for a few days," he said quietly. "But Aidan will be here for you."

She reached out, touched his arm. His skin felt warm and smooth, the dark hairs teasing the pads of her fingers. A shiver ran through him and he turned to face her.

"Will you be in danger?" she asked. Not that she needed to. Rafael lived his life in danger. She understood that now.

"Possibly."

Good, he didn't lie to her. She moved in closer, lifted her face to his and pressed a kiss to his lips. "Come back to me."

He nodded briefly and returned the kiss. Easing her down onto the blanket beneath him, his mouth teased hers, gently at first but with growing determination.

A second spike of jealousy lanced through her and Eva gasped. Not her own this time. Rafael froze, feeling it too, a powerful emotion which slipped out into the night, unexpectedly strong.



Rafael sighed and lifted his head. "You don't have to stay there and watch, you know?"

Eva couldn't help but laugh at the tone. Affection stained the words, and flirtation. And love. She rolled over so she could more comfortably follow his gaze. The mind stood out like a fire to her, because she knew it so intimately, because it had become so very special to her.

"Not unless you want to," she added.

Rafael laughed as well, the sound rumbling through her body.

Aidan stepped from the shadows by the trees. His hands were deep in his pockets, and he strode forward like a surly teen caught in an act of rebellion. "I suppose there's no point in saying I was just passing," he muttered.

Rafael raised his eyebrows. "None at all."

Aidan rolled his eyes and then sank down to his haunches beside them. He picked up the bottle of brandy and knocked it back, his throat working, the movement hypnotising Eva. He broke off with a long gasp and smiled. "Needed that."

Rafael sank back onto his side, his body stretched out the length of her body. In the distance, back inside the house, there was a sudden burst of laughter, followed by the sound of a guitar. A rich voice filled the air, singing a song which stirred her blood, and she closed her eyes to listen.

A faint grunt startled her back to alertness and she let her eyes flutter open, already guessing what she would see.

The two men were leaning across her body and, just above her face, their lips met. Rafael's hands framed Aidan's face, dark against the gold of his skin. The music drifted through the air, guitar strings strumming right through her body. Their lips moved, hypnotic in the darkness, and she lifted her hands to touch them, to feel and caress them.

Their hands touched her. Amazing really that they did so, that they thought to include her when they had seemed so wrapt in each other. For several moments, she watched them, her body aching, melting, yearning. Their kiss continued, but suddenly it seemed she was part of it too. Light and dark mingled above her, drawing her in, making her part of their love, and the feelings that washed through them found an answering echo in her.

Aidan broke their kiss and bent to her, his lips claiming her. The rich taste of coffee and brandy filled her mouth with his questing tongue.

Rafael pushed the blouse up to expose her breasts to the night air and his demanding lips. The wet heat of his mouth alternated with the chill breeze and she arched up with a groan.

Aidan's hands closed on her shoulders, but he didn't push her back down this time. He caressed her skin through the light blouse, his touch so gentle, maddening.

"Someone might come," Aidan murmured. "Maybe we should go inside."

“Prude,” Rafael teased and rose up from her body. “The kids are all in bed by now. No one’s going to mind.”

“I don’t think Eva would appreciate an audience, that’s all.”

Damn right, she wouldn’t. But she didn’t want them to stop either. She couldn’t bear it if they stopped.

Rafael scooped her up in his arms, so strong, holding her without any effort at all.

“Of course. Let’s not put anyone in a position they would find unpleasant, Aidan.” He laughed, the sound rippling through her, infectious. She smiled as she glanced at Aidan and saw, in the faint light, the blush in his cheeks.

Aidan? Golden-haired, brash and handsome, so sure of himself, Aidan was embarrassed. The laughter she had been about to let out fell still in her chest.

“What is it?” she asked, her desire still pounding through her, but tempered by concern.

Aidan looked away quickly, but Rafael smiled fondly. “Just because we love freely and indulge in all of pleasure’s hues doesn’t mean we’re all exhibitionists, sweetheart.”

She reached out a hand, her fingers touching Aidan’s cheek, stroking his fiery skin. His own hand rose abruptly, closing around hers, enfolding her fingers in such a gentle grip. The pad of his thumb pressed to the racing pulse on her wrist. That simple touch alone made her gasp his name.

“Come with us,” she whispered. “Come inside.”

Rafael set off without a word, and since Eva didn’t release him, Aidan followed after them.

They crept through the now silent house, all the time touching, keeping contact with each other, each brushing of their bodies and stroke of their minds together an intimate caress. When they reached Eva’s room, however, Aidan broke away, lingering by the door once he had closed it behind them. He stayed in the shadows, watching Rafael and Eva together, his eyes hooded.

“What is it?” Eva asked.

He hesitated, then sighed. “Nothing.”

Rafael tilted his head to one side, studying his lover. “Aidan?”

Eva sensed his curiosity, and his concern, but he kept his mind to himself. He could have reached out and plucked whatever thought was troubling Aidan right from his head, but he didn’t. He waited patiently, just waited.

So she did as well.

Aidan lowered his gaze. “You two...you’re good together. You’re alike. You belong together.” His voice came out strained and painfully sharp. He grabbed the handle again. “I should go.”

“No.” Eva surged to her feet. He was leaving? He couldn’t be leaving. “Aidan, please—”

“What are you thinking, Aidan?” Rafael covered the space between them in moments and grabbed Aidan by the shoulders, pinning him there, as he had held her. But Aidan wasn’t her.

He moved in a blur, knocking Rafael's arms aside. "Don't, Rafe. Please. You want her and she wants you. And you're the same. You belong together."

"You're making some awfully big assumptions." Rafael reached out again, gently now, and cupped Aidan's chin.

"Rafe, I can't—" He shuddered, caught Rafael's gaze for just a moment and then looked away. "I won't be the one who clings on. I don't want to hold you back. I only want—"

*"—what's best for you."*

They couldn't help but hear the words. The pain in his mind sent them careering out, slamming into the minds of the two psychics. Fear powered them, fear of being cast aside, of being abandoned. Of losing either of them, even to each other.

"What...what makes you think that I'd..." Rafael's voice trailed off and he frowned.

The image struck Eva a moment later. Sorcha, Rafael's wife, as she had been before her death, the two of them blissfully happy.

Rafael recoiled, releasing Aidan as if he burned. "It's not like that."

"She was your wife. You loved her."

"Yes. And I...I love you, Aidan. You know I do."

Eva took a step forward, her stomach quivering now. She caught hold of Rafael's outstretched hand and lifted it to her lips. Aidan's eyes followed her movement and the light in them hardened to a glare.

He wanted her, his body screamed it at her. He wanted them both. But he was afraid. Not of being with them both, but of being left behind afterwards.

Aidan fumbled with the door handle, ready to escape, ready to run and never stop.

Eva gritted her teeth and wrapped her mind around him, holding him there, immobile. She reached inside his mind, setting aside regretfully her promise not to do so. But she wasn't there to look, just to make him stop, make him listen, just to hold on to him for as long as she could.

His face flushed red for a moment and then went white, blood draining away from his skin. "What are you...what the hell are you doing?"

She took another step forward. "You think we don't want you?" she asked in a low and dangerous voice. Aidan shuddered and Rafael's hand dropped to rest on his chest. A gentle, calming touch, an attempt at comfort and reassurance.

*"Are you sure about this?"* The question popped right into her mind.

*"He needs to know, to see as we see, that we want him. You do, don't you?"*

Passion flared red around Rafael, flames that licked through her body as well as his own. Yes, Aidan needed to see this, to feel it, to know as intimately as they did that what they felt—what all three of them felt—was real.

And that he would never be cast aside, forgotten, left behind.

Eva held him still and nodded to Rafael. Aidan trembled, outraged, trying to fight her off. But he couldn't. He kept up his struggles right up to the point where Rafael ripped his shirt open to bare the ridges of his abdomen. He let his hands explore the fevered skin while Aidan squirmed beneath his touch.

"Rafe, stop it. Please. This isn't...this isn't going to help..."

Rafael ignored him and slid his hand down to Aidan's bulging crotch. "You think?"

Aidan just groaned, his eyes fluttering closed as his head fell back against the door.

Rafael sank to his knees, his hands working deftly at the fly until he drew out the long shaft and pulled Aidan's jeans down, casting them aside. Aidan gave an inarticulate cry as Rafael took Aidan's cock in his mouth, swallowing it down, working its length while his other hand cupped the heavy balls.

"Please," Aidan gasped and his mouth opened wide.

"Please what?" Eva asked.

Aidan's hips jerked forward at the sound of her voice and his eyes snapped open, blue and brilliant, unfocused but sharp as polar ice. "Please, Eva. Please..."

"And what about Rafael?" she teased.

Aidan moaned, his words lost. Eva stepped closer again, struggling now to maintain her hold on him. Her body ached for him, for both of them. She longed to release him and beg them to take her. But this wasn't about her. Not this moment, this time.

This was about Aidan.

She reached his side, ran a hand over his chest, teasing the sprinkling of hair, pinching his nipples until he cried out and his back arched from the door where she held him pinned, his muscles still obeying her. Rafael worked faster now, revelling in his work, delighting in the joy he felt and the joy he gave.

Eva slipped her hand up behind Aidan's head, tangled her fingers in his overgrown blonde hair and pulled him down to kiss her.

There was nothing tender about it. A kiss of possession, of hunger and need. A way of branding herself onto his soul as he was branded onto hers.

Aidan came, thrusting deep into Rafael's willing mouth while Eva's tongue filled his mouth. His muffled shout of joy and release almost made her come herself. Warmth flooded her cunt, slick and ready, desperate to be filled, to be taken, as if his delirious passion had been transferred to her.

She couldn't hold him anymore. Her body betrayed her, its demands on her mind leaving her unable to resist him any more. Aidan fell back against the door, only Rafael's hands on his hips holding him up.

Eva stumbled back, startled by her own reaction, by the very fact that she had done it.

Aidan's eyes blazed as they released him. Rafael kissed him and for a moment all Eva could do was watch them share the taste of his juices. They broke apart, their eyes filled with each other, and she was the one who suddenly felt lost, alone, abandoned.

The two men turned as one, their eyes gleaming with desire for her as well as each other. Aidan was still hard. She'd never seen a man so hard. And Rafael's erection tented his trousers.

"Time for some payback, Aidan?" Rafael asked. At the same time, he sent a ripple of reassurance to her. He would protect her, even as he held her still for Aidan. A smile twitched her lips as she drank in their love, the trust and adoration that filled this room. And the excitement. The sheer thrill that came with being with them. With either one, it was wonderful.

But with both...

"I think so, Rafe. I think she needs to know just what that was like, don't you?"

Invisible hands seized her, pulling her towards them. She didn't fight this time, knowing what this was, understanding their love now. She reached out mentally for Aidan, but Rafael blocked her.

*"Just for now. Just for a little while. Trust me."*

*"I do,"* she sent back, relinquishing all control. *"You know I do."*

Laughter flowed through him, filling her. But Aidan remained still and silent. He took hold of the hem of her shirt and pulled it up over her head. At the same time, Rafael removed her skirt. In only moments she found herself bare before them.

Between them, they lifted her. She closed her eyes, let her head tilt back against Aidan's chest while he braced himself against the door. He held her firmly, opened her legs wide. In moments Rafael had sheathed himself deep inside her. He held himself still, straining there.

"She's wet," he told Aidan. "So damned wet and hot. And smooth."

She ached for him to move, trying to will him to thrust but they held her still, overpowering her more completely than she had overpowered Aidan. Her own mind conspired with them and her body flat out betrayed her. Just as she knew it would.

Aidan's hand brushed against the rose of her anus, slick with some kind of lubricant and she suddenly wondered how much of this had really been her idea. It wasn't exactly the kind of thing you kept to hand, was it? How much had they planned? They were closer than she could guess, these two, sharing an empathy greater than any she had ever encountered, as comfortable together in mind as they were in body. And they welcomed her into that intimacy. She was pressed between them, body to body, the three of them standing just a foot from the door, the way out, and yet a world away from escaping.

Aidan worked the lube into her ass, tracing circles around the tight hole until it admitted him. His finger wriggled its way inside her and withdrew. She shifted nervously, but with an unexpected urgency as well. Wanting it, fearing it, she tightened. It would hurt. She was sure of it. And this position...they were so tall they dwarfed her. She sucked in a breath as Aidan's lips pressed to the nape of her neck, his breath rolling over her skin.

"Kneel down," he ordered on a whisper.

Rafael withdrew, knelt and took her down on his straining cock. With a few brief thrusts, he filled her, driving almost all thought from her mind and her hungry flesh. Aidan dropped down behind her, his hands smoothing over her skin again, returning inexorably to her ass, teasing her, parting her, filling her with a determined, artful finger.

Rafael moved in counterpoint and she couldn't help herself. The groan wrenched its way out of her, enmeshed with a plea.

Rafael's lips smiled as he captured her mouth.

Aidan's finger entered her again, pushing some kind of silken gel into her, opening her effortlessly. Two fingers now, pushing into her like Rafael's cock. Then three. Three fingers which soothed and ached and made her gasp his name. Rafael's slow rocking took up a definite rhythm now, slow and smooth, but so deep. So very deep.

When Aidan withdrew again, she sobbed.

The head of his cock replaced his fingers, guided by a skilful hand. She shivered, cried out, tried to tell him no, but couldn't find the words. She didn't want him to stop, despite the instincts rising inside her. Something else drowned the panic, dissipated her fears. A fierce and desperate hunger.

Slowly, so slowly, Aidan forced his way inside her, the way eased by the lubricant and his previous ministrations. Rafael's mind wrapped around hers, taking away the pain she expected, heightening the pleasure as they filled her more perfectly than she would have thought possible.

*"Can you feel him against me?"* Rafael asked her wordlessly. *"Can you feel us both moving within you?"*

A whirl of images and sensations flooded her. Skin to skin, body to body, hands and mouths, flesh that filled her, that wrapped itself around them and tightened, never to let them go.

*"Let him see,"* Rafael instructed her. *"Not through me. Show him how you feel, what you want. Let him see you as I see you, Eva."*

She reached out blindly but Rafael's firm will guided her now. Aidan's mind was the steel of determination, strained with the need to hold himself back. He feared hurting her, feared losing her as much as he feared losing Rafael. His mind swirled with need, with the red flames of desire and lust, and...and love.

It was love.

She'd never encountered a fire so bright. It tipped her right over the edge, helpless, flailing. She came, pulling them both over with her. Two bodies, strong and as hungry as hers, loving her, thrusting into her, filling her body, mind and soul.

She cried out wordlessly and felt Aidan come, his cream pumping deep inside her and at the same moment Rafael pulsed and arched his back as he responded in kind.

Aidan drifted to sleep quickly, exhausted now, spent. Listening to the rise and fall of his breath, Eva followed. Her breathing deepened and her heavy eyelids drifted closed. She didn't know how much time passed but she had no dreams. Her body still ached, but with pleasure, with a fulfilment she had never before known.

Movement brought her awake again. In the darkened room, Rafael was sitting on the edge of the bed rather than lying alongside them. Moonlight from the gap in the curtains illuminated his sculpted features and the hard planes and angles of his body. He gazed at Aidan for long, silent moments and then, sensing her wakefulness, turned his dark eyes on her.

"What is it?" she asked on a breath. "What's wrong?"

He sighed and held out a hand to her, but this time she didn't take it. Her nerves jangled. She didn't want to share a vision of something so terrible as to put that devastation in his eyes.

"Is it something you've seen?" she asked instead. "About Aidan?"

The pain etched itself further into his face and she frowned, reaching out to him even as her body curled nearer to Aidan's sleeping form. Want to or no, Rafael needed her to see, to share, to understand as intimately as he did.

*Aidan shouted an order and brought up his weapon in a blur. He fired off three rounds and broke into a run, still shouting.*

*Rafael slumped on the ground, his body jerking helplessly, a black-uniformed body beside him. Guild Security. Aidan reached his side, shouting Rafael's name to no response. Explosions ripped the air and the buildings all around him trembled.*

This building, she realised. It was here, this attack. This settlement.

*Screams flooded through her and still Aidan yelled Rafael's name. He kicked the guard's weapon aside, a short black truncheon.*

Shocksticks he'd called them. She'd never seen one inside the Guild compound. Maybe there was no need for them there. Or maybe, she realised now, she'd never looked.

*Aidan bent over Rafael, struggling to lift him. Stunned, his muscles rigid and unyielding, Rafael couldn't help. Aidan staggered forward with Rafael, out into the courtyard, making for the garages.*

*The shot came from the gardens. Deafening, unnaturally loud, drowning out the roar of AV engines, weapons fire and explosions. Aidan jerked back as it stuck him, tearing a hole through his stomach. Rafael tumbled from his grasp, landing heavily on the ancient flagstones.*

*Aidan sank to his knees, his face shocked and pale. He teetered there for a moment and then tipped forward, horribly still.*

Eva ripped her hand free.

“No.” It was all she could do to say it. Rage balled up inside her and if she opened herself to that, it would wrench its way out of her all in one go, devastating all of them.

“I’ve seen it more than once,” Rafael whispered. “And if I’ve seen it, it will happen. Unless we can stop it.”

“*We will,*” she assured him. “*We have to.*”

Rafael’s shoulders sagged and he hung his head, powerless in the face of his own gift, desperate to be wrong, convinced he could not be.

Eva pulled him, unresisting, into her arms. So strong a man, so helpless.

“*We will stop it,*” she insisted. “*Find a way to change it. I promise.*”

Rafael buried his face in her hair, in the curve of her neck. “*I can’t lose him, Eva.*” The thought was so powerful it sent all her defences reeling. “*I can’t go through that again. When the time comes, you make him run. You leave me there and make him run, promise? I can’t lose him.*”



## Chapter Eight

They were gone the next morning, both of them. Eva sat in the darkness of the pre-dawn cursing whatever had sent her to sleep, immediately suspecting Rafael. Without them, she couldn't move, craved no food or drink. Their scents clung to the bedclothes. She could pretend they were still there if she closed her eyes and breathed in, almost. There was no shame in hiding up here, away from the others, was there? No shame at all.

So why did it make her stomach clench hollowly? Was it the thought that they were gone? Or in danger?

Rafael had said he was going alone, that Aidan would be here. But he wasn't. She ran her mind over the surface of the world around her and found no trace of either of them.

Daisy stood out like a beacon, iridescent. Hugh, like a nightlight. And the others, lights like stars, some distant and far away, some blinding.

She pulled back before they could notice and take offence, withdrew into herself. And hid once more.

A knock at the door startled her and she jumped to her feet. "Just...just a second."

She wrapped the sheet around herself and opened the door a crack. The medic Myra stood outside, holding a lamp, with Daisy behind her. The little girl grinned at her. So very bright.

Eva blinked at them. "Daisy, please stop it."

"She isn't doing anything." Irritation sharpened Myra's tone.

The light the child gave off dimmed and the image of little white flowers filled the ether between them. They faded slowly. Daisy's apology.

"Can I help you?" Eva forced her voice to calm.

"I thought you might help me today." Myra didn't meet Eva's eyes. "I have a backlog of vaccination boosters to administer and a lot of nervous children who hate the idea of needles. Daisy brought me here. She 'said' you might help. Since Aidan and Rafael have taken off."

"Off where?"

The skin around Myra's eyes tightened. "I couldn't say. So. Are you going to get dressed and help?"

"Isn't it early?"

"I start early. It'll be dawn in no time and once it's light, everyone wants a piece of a medic."

So many questions crowded in her mind. Where were Rafael and Aidan? They would have told her, or someone, what they were up to, wouldn't they? Who else had gone? Rafael had said he intended to go

alone. Had he changed his mind after the vision? Or had Aidan found out and followed him? She wouldn't put either scenario past either man. Her men. Stubborn, impulsive, reckless, determined. Both of them.

Frustration made her want to shout. And Myra looked more irritated than anything else.

"I'll just be a moment," she replied and closed the door.

They were not the only people up early. Someone clattered around in the kitchens. Myra gave Daisy a pat on the head. "Go on back to your momma then, sweetie." Daisy skipped off, without a care and Eva had to smile to watch her go.

As they approached the medi-centre, a figure detached itself from the shadows by the door. Hugh's arms were folded, his brooding look making her stomach quiver.

"Any trouble?" he asked

Myra's hand tightened on Eva's arm. What was this? Some kind of trap? Eva shied back, but didn't run. He was just a boy. Just a scared, damaged boy. And he blamed her for all the things people like her had done to him. She flinched inwardly, but made her exterior firm.

Hugh rolled his shoulders and finally relaxed, unfolding his arms and leaving them hanging by his side. His fists didn't uncurl however. His oversized hands remained balled up so tightly that the knuckles showed white, even in the pre-dawn. No matter his years, he was strong, broad-shouldered, a brawler. And dangerous.

"Had some words with Mr. Burgess at the last rendezvous." His jaw tensed. She tried to press closer mentally, to discern what was different. His shields went right up and she backed off warily. Hugh wasn't Daisy or Rafael. He was scarred on so many levels. "He had some...opinions about you, Ms. Lee."

The straightforward approach seemed to be the best one. That and hope that Myra would help her. A very fragile hope. "Burgess has never made any bones about the fact he doesn't like me."

"He helped Rafael get to you, to get you out of the Guild. He got so many of us out. Me as well, Daisy, all the precious psychics that hide here."

She raised an eyebrow, with full knowledge of how that might look to him. "He helped Rafael *kidnap* me. I didn't ask to be taken out."

"Mr. Burgess says you've got a tracer in you. Care to let me take a look?"

A what? She let him see her confusion, her utter lack of understanding. Guild life was sheltered, especially for a psychic, a treasured asset. Up until now she had no idea how much they had kept her in the dark.

But she was starting to realise it now.

A dart of outrage ignited the fire inside her. Everything she knew was a lie. Everything she thought she knew. But they'd used her. Hidden the truth, bought her from her family and now—now, when she finally saw the world beyond...well here was another figure of authority from the Guild tainting it for her.

"What the hell is a tracer?"

"They inject you with a trace substance," said Myra rapidly. "One their computers can track. That way they know where you are all the time. Look, if it's true, if there's even a chance, we need to know. But it can wait, Hugh. Let Rafael deal with it when he comes back."

Eva's world lurched around her. "Oh God," she groaned. "This can't be happening. You're saying they can use me to find you? Can you test for it?"

Myra just nodded and to Eva's surprise compassion bled into the medic's eyes. "It's not your fault, Eva."

"Maybe not, but...I never knew how much they used us. I should have. So many things in my life should have told me. Maybe I...I just didn't want to see."

"We'd better go inside and see what a blood test will tell us. It's only short term, it breaks down in the blood fairly quickly. It certainly doesn't last forever and then you'll be in the clear. We'll talk to Rafael. He'll be able to shield you until it wears off. We just have to find somewhere else that you can be safe until it's gone and then—"

"Wait. Exactly how long does it last?" This felt so wrong, so terribly wrong, like something worrying at the pit of her stomach. Her instincts were crying out to be heard, but she couldn't quite grasp the whole picture.

"A few days. It's just an injection. You wouldn't even notice—"

"But I haven't had an injection in...in years..."

No need in the Guild compound. Filtered air, filtered water, manufactured and sterile food. They'd eradicated disease. Wasn't that what the billboards proclaimed every morning?

Myra frowned and her eyes met Hugh's, mirroring the confusion there. "Is there another way?" he asked. "Through food or—"

"Not that I know. This doesn't sound—"

"*Burgess*," Eva thought, sending it to both of them. Speech was too slow a means to convey it all. Myra started back, but didn't fight her off. Even Hugh accepted the gravity of the situation and listened, grimacing. "*Aidan said a few days ago that Burgess brought a vaccine to inoculate the kids against disease. That's what you were doing, Myra. That's an injection, right?*"

Eva's suggestion stunned them both. Their faces froze, suddenly white.

Hugh's voice came out in a thin hiss. "No way."

“This is the third or fourth booster I’ve given them.” Myra raked her fingers through her short hair, her eye glistening. “This can’t be true. A tracer would build up in their system and would mark the kids out like—Burgess? But why?”

Blast Burgess. What did she care about him right now. “Myra...which kids? All of them or just...”

The medic shivered, taking a step or two back. “All of them. But he said...” She glanced at Hugh. “He said you’d be resistant, you, Daisy and the others. So there was another serum too which would counteract it. That’s it, isn’t it? The tracer. He used me.”

“He used all of you.” Eva paused. Her as well. He’d used her. Or attempted to. “All of us. Where are the kids now? Where did Daisy go? We have to find them, get them somewhere safe. You said the tracer can be hidden by a shield, Hugh. How?”

“I’m not strong enough,” he protested.

“*I am*,” Eva thought. “*I know I am. I have to be.*” She forced a confidence into her voice she didn’t feel. “Then we find them. We have to. Can you send an alert to Aidan and Rafael? Can you get them back here?”

Myra ran inside, slamming the door behind her.

Hugh stood like a pale ghost by Eva’s side. “He lied?”

“Yes. But let’s find them, before anything—”

The sound of a revving engine shattered the night. Lights flared over the ridge outside the settlement, blindingly bright headlights. Four AVs tore over the top like great black bulls rising up and descending the incline, engines roaring, treads ripping up the ground beneath them. Someone screamed—coherent words lost between a warning and pure terror. Guild Military poured into the settlement, clad in black, weapons at the ready.

Myra raced back outside, the radio dangling from her wrist. “We have to get the kids! Rafael says get them out of here. Hide them. Get them to safety. He’s on the way back. But he’s going to be too late!”

In the chaos around her, Eva forced her mind to still. She had to keep her calm, remain centred.

“They’re everywhere!” Panic made Hugh’s voice come out high and sharp. Eva put out a hand and grabbed the rough cotton of his shirt. Her thought followed, silencing him. Reeling back from her, tearing himself free if truth be told, the youth opened his mouth, but no sound came out.

“*Hugh, help me,*” she pleaded silently. “*I can sense them, the kids, read where they are, but you know the lie of the land. Please. And the others, those who aren’t psychic. I don’t know where they’d hide.*”

Fear washed over her, like the grisly reek of old blood and vomit, sickening, stifling. His fear. No. More than fear, paralysing terror.

“*Please, Hugh!*”

And then his voice reached her. Not the brash, aggressive voice of a teen older than his years, cynical and damaged. This came from a frightened child without proper memories of his own, a boy lost in the dark, wired to machines and other minds, delirious with drugs.

*“Stop it! This is what they did, Eva. Just barged into my mind, like you, and demand to know what I see, or use me to make themselves stronger. You’re just like them. Exactly like them!”*

She forced herself to gentle her thoughts, to mask her strength. Urgency made that almost impossible. She kept imagining those black-clad arms seizing Daisy, tearing her from the clinging arms of a sobbing, desperate Laura. Or worse, from a Laura who lay cold and still.

“I’m not demanding, Hugh,” she said out loud, aware of the tremors in her voice. To say it out loud had to make it easier on him, didn’t it? Less invasive. God, she hoped so. It had to. There wasn’t time! “I’m pleading with you. I’m begging. Help me.”

For a moment she was certain he would bolt and run. She couldn’t blame him. But the thought of the children, the fear rank in the air around them, the noise, the panic...

*“Okay,”* he replied in a rush and his mind opened to her.

She didn’t hesitate, not even to voice the thanks she hoped her consciousness conveyed to him. There wasn’t a moment to waste. To her surprise, Hugh’s face transformed, grinning as her gratitude flooded his mind. The beauty of that sight startled her.

*“Oh yes, handsome when I want to be,”* his thoughts jeered her, but without malevolence now. A humour like Aidan’s, she thought and a pang of concern for her lover speared her. For both Aidan and Rafael.

Eva shook the emotion aside—no need to share that with a boy like Hugh—and focused on the sense of the other minds like hers, like Hugh’s, hovering like lights in the darkness.

“Kitchens,” she told Myra rapidly. “Gardens...near...” What were they? Fruit or vegetable? Red, round... “...near the tomato plants. Bedrooms, on the second floor of the main house. Hiding, scared, can’t move...”

Eva swallowed hard. The brightest light of all, one that came with a sea of flowers. called out to her. Daisy...Daisy wasn’t safe at all. She was running, unable to catch her breath, sobs hiccupping their way out of her, arms and legs aching, stumbling, falling...

*Arms seized her, lifted her. She shrieked and kicked. Tried to bite but her teeth closed on leather...*

“Daisy!” Eva cried and Myra shushed her desperately, her eyes wide with fear. Eva broke off the contact with the girl. “Myra, get the others. Hugh, show her where they are. I’ve got to get to Daisy. They have her. They’ve taken her.”

Flares burst in the air overhead, illuminating the settlement with a rancid yellow glow. To her left an explosion rocked one of the squat storage buildings. The blast sent Eva staggering to her right, scrambling to her knees.

“For your own safety,” a voice boomed out of the night, amplified so it was deafening, “stay in your homes. Security will safely relocate you. Those resisting this relocation will be dealt with harshly. This is in your own interests. Your cooperation is greatly appreciated.”

Three AVs formed a barrier between her and the gardens. Security ringed the house now, closing in. Only a few still manned the hulking transports. They gleamed darkly in the rising sun.

The whine of stunners filled the air. And other weapons, sharper, deadlier. Men and women fell, but there were more Security to take the places of their losses.

Then Eva saw her—Daisy, huddled on the ground at the door of the nearest AV with two older children. All three of them shivered, terrified, clinging to each other.

Eva edged forward, reaching out with the most gentle of mental touches, mind to mind. Daisy looked up, her cornflower blue eyes wide, startled, red-rimmed, and found Eva’s unerringly.

*“Go back! They’ll take you too!”*

No chance of that. No way Eva was leaving them behind. Dirt and gravel crunched under her as she crept forward, nearer now, keeping to the wall of the storage hut for shelter. A distraction, that was it. She needed some kind of—

One of the guards swivelled on deft feet, his eyes widening at the same time as he opened his mouth to call out a warning, to give her away. A stunner whined in the silence and he fell, convulsing and then still.

Hugh charged into the open space before the AVs with a roar, the stunner in his shaking hands firing so wildly it was a miracle he’d hit anything, his scarred face white with fear.

Eva darted forward. She couldn’t let his action be wasted. She grabbed the kids, pulling them to her while the guards rushed Hugh. She felt him fall, felt the kicks and punches that followed even as she ushered the children into the shelter of the nearest storeroom and out of sight.

“Wait, he’s one of ours,” someone said in a coldly determined voice. All other noise seemed to stop and Hugh’s flare of pain faded in her mind. It didn’t matter. Shock drowned it all out. And fear. All she could hear was her own breath. And that voice.

She knew that voice. It was the commander who had captured and tortured Rafael. Her fear condensed like a shard of glass at the back of her brain.

“Just a drone,” he was saying. “Under normal circumstances hardly worth it.” Another kick drove the air from Hugh’s battered body in a stab of pain. “But waste not want not. Put him in the back.”

*God, no!*

Eva jerked forward, determined to find some way to break Hugh free. She couldn’t leave him captive, couldn’t let him go back to the hell he’d come from.

Strong arms clamped around her, one pinning her hands to her side, the other covering her mouth.

## Chapter Nine

Eva drew in breath to scream and her mind coiled to lash out at her attacker, even as his musk snagged her memory. And another voice entered her mind. Just as determined as Commander Kaine's, but never so cold or cruel.

*"Eva, it's us. It's okay. We're here."*

Rafael! And Aidan held her, pressed to his body, safe in his arms.

"Inside," Aidan breathed, pulling her after him through the doorway. His sidearm was already in his other hand, sleek and dark against his skin. Inside the storeroom she could finally breathe again, even though they were just outside, even though any second now the Security officers would find out the kids were missing.

Aidan's arms unwound from her body as if reluctant to do so. He gave her a brief smile as she turned to him, as she leaned in to brush her lips to his, and then his face hardened, his eyes assessing the scene before him. He joined Rafael, who crouched at the doorway, peering out into the growing daylight. She knelt behind them, aware that the children moved too, huddling behind her.

"How did you get so close?" she whispered. The rest went unspoken—without her knowing, without her feeling their presence, without setting off her personal alarms.

*"I'm shielding us,"* Rafael replied without speaking. *"And the kids. Just stay here, don't make a sound. Think we can take them, Aidan?"*

Aidan's eyes gleamed like the armour on the state-of-the-art AVs before them. He nodded once.

But neither man moved, they stayed, poised beside each other, weapons at the ready. Eva counted in her mind, waiting, guessing rather than knowing what they planned. They wouldn't leave Hugh to the Guild, no more than she would. None of them would. She pulled Daisy and the other two in close.

"Stay still now. Stay silent."

As if she really needed to tell them.

Aidan and Rafael sprang forward as one, flinging the door open again. Round after round rang out until they ploughed into their attackers. Three went down, another dodged. Aidan leapt on him, too close for firearms now. Hand to hand, his lethal skills too much for the man he faced.

Rafael bent over Hugh's prone form, trying to wake him, sending out thoughts to draw him back to consciousness. Someone shouted for reinforcements, the voice pitched high with nerves. Eva never saw where the Security officer came from, but suddenly he loomed over Rafael, the shockstick sparking in his

hand. Rafael turned, started to rise, but too late. The stick ignited with a crackle, and ozone filled the air around them.

Eva's mind screamed Rafael's name, though she dared not voice her panic. Not that she could help him. With a sound like glass breaking, the shockstick released its charge directly into his stomach. The backlash of pain and panic his mind sent out almost made Eva's limbs go from under her.

Aidan kicked his opponent in the guts, lifting him off the ground with the force of the blow. But he didn't pause to see him crumple. He continued turning, firing his stunner at close range at Rafael's attacker. Even as both men crashed to the ground, Eva was scrambling across the open ground, half running, half pulling herself forward with her hands. Even the time it would take to stand upright was moments too many. She collapsed beside Rafael's spasming body. He twitched and jerked, his eyes rolled up, his face etched with agony. One final convulsion made his back arch like a bow, and he passed out. The air crackled above her head and a stunner beam burst through the empty air.

"Down, Eva!" Aidan grabbed her bodily and they went down in a heap in the lee of an AV. Pushing her behind him, Aidan fired off three rounds.

Another guard crumpled, a shockstick still grasped in his hands. The second retreated, yelling for reinforcements again.

Without pause, Aidan pulled Eva to her feet. "Quick, before he's back with his mates. Help me get Rafe."

She couldn't move. It felt like her feet were cemented to the ground. It was the vision, Rafael's vision, all over again, playing out this time right in front of her.

"Help, Eva!" he yelled.

He'd been shouting in the vision. Just before he was shot.

Someone stepped from the gardens, a tall and imposing figure, one she knew. The commander lifted his ancient revolver. This was no stunner, designed to incapacitate and capture. Made in the days before the Guild, its purpose was death. Like Kaine's. So suited to the man. She could read him, just like reading a viewscreen. He wasn't going to risk letting Aidan go, let alone alive.

Eva surged forward, grabbed Aidan's lowered sidearm and, turning, squeezed off the charge before she even focused on their enemy.

A cry rang out from the far side of the courtyard, followed by a thud. Kaine lay in the dirt.

Aidan heaved Rafael into his arms. "How did you see him?"

"Just lucky," she replied breathlessly and tried to take some of Rafael's weight herself.

Between them they dragged the unconscious Rafael into the AV. The back of the vehicle was like an armoury. Aidan didn't hesitate, grabbing as many weapons and ammunition as he could pack about his person. "Keep an eye on the door."



The shouts were coming closer. Weapon fire lit up the night, and the headlights of other AVs swept through the settlement. There were more on the way. More and more.

He took Rafael from her arms and settled him down in the base of the AV as comfortably as he could.

“We have to get the kids,” Eva said. “And Hugh.”

“Shh...”

She went silent, sensing the approach of someone outside. Still as a statue, Aidan waited, listening to the crunch of dry dirt outside, then kicked the door open. With a thud it caught the nearest Security officer full in the face and Aidan fired off two more rounds. The body jerked.

“Run!” Aidan tossed her a loaded weapon so hard the impact made her hand spasm. She almost dropped it, fumbled, and brought it up just in time to see light glint off the smooth surface of a Security guard’s helmet. Her hand acted before her mind could catch up, squeezing the trigger. The stunner whined and the guard went down.

Eva scrambled for the storeroom and Daisy flung her arms around her neck. “*No time, sweetheart. Get into the AV. We’ve got to find the others.*”

She got them inside the vehicle at the same moment as Aidan pulled Hugh through the door.

“I’ve got to get the others,” he panted. “Can you hold the AV? If we can take these beasts we can go anywhere.”

Aidan’s chest was heaving, but more from adrenaline than exhaustion. He transformed in battle, like an intense flame, quick and determined, terrible and beautiful at once. Now he pressed against the wall beside the door, coiled, ready to strike.

“Yes.” She didn’t hesitate, couldn’t allow herself to think of what might happen. He’d be all right. Nothing could bring him down. Not now.

He gave her another nod, his teeth gritted, his jaw tight. And then he was gone. She pulled the door closed, locked it and climbed into the front of the cab, ducking down so as not to be seen.

“Eva?” Hugh groaned. “You okay?”

“Yes,” she told him, desperately searching the gap between the buildings with her eyes. And then she saw them, Aidan in the lead, twelve other Hedonists with him, all heavily armed, and the kids. The rest of the kids.

Eva slammed her hand on the lock release as they reached the AV.

The kids tumbled inside, along with Myra and Laura. Daisy flung her arms around Laura, who sobbed into her hair, wrapping her in arms that would never let go, holding her close. They were okay. The sudden relief of it made Eva’s eyes sting with unexpected tears.

Myra cursed when she saw Rafael. She climbed inside the AV and scrambled towards him. “What happened?” She bent over him, the consummate medic, checking his breathing and heart rate with practiced capability.

Aidan's eyes never left the shadows outside. "We got back by the skin of our teeth—Guild Military and Security everywhere. One of them got Rafe with a shockstick. We have to get the kids out of here, Myra, and work out some way to either get the trace substance out or give it time to wear off."

"He's okay. Stable at least." But her voice shook.

Eva wrapped her arms around her chest, squeezing tight. If Myra sounded so scared...

"There are four AVs." Aidan strapped more weapons onto his body. "You drive this one, I'll get the others sorted."

He was hiding something. Hiding something huge.

"Aidan?"

He made for the door without a glance back, but his shoulders tightened as she reached for him.

"Aidan."

He didn't look back, but his voice was low, so only she could hear. "We need a diversion, something to draw them off. You have to get him out of here. The kids and the psychics, that's who they're after. Do you understand? You know what the Guild will do to them, to any of them. You have to get them away at all costs. They have other AVs and gliders on the way, no doubt. We've got to hold them off. You have to get away."

And she knew, knew what he planned to do. And knew she couldn't stop him. "Please, no—"

"No time," he said.

The weapon fire was getting closer. Three of the Hedonists retreated across the space outside, firing rapidly, but two others held the gap between the stores and the main buildings. The roar of the AV engines starting up drowned out their cries as they fell.

Not just to stunners, Eva realised. Blood blossomed crimson in the air and she sensed the lights as their lives flickered and went out. These weren't psychics. They were just people, but now, in that brief moment before death, all their life condensed to a spark of pain she could sense clearly. The Guild had switched to using live rounds out there. Aidan's people were dying. The rest fled into the remaining AVs. Just a few remained, holding their escape route open, their lives glowing as they fell, as they died.

"Ready, Myra?" Aidan asked.

Myra slid into the driver's seat, her face a mask.

Aidan swallowed hard and finally looked at Eva, his eyes boring into her, wanting to go with her, unable to do so. There was no other way.

The children huddled around her, Hugh, and Rafael in the base of the AV, and she stilled her mind, forcing herself to be calm and create the strongest wall around all of them, pouring every fear she had into fuelling it. It meant closing off her emotions, her desires. Everything. It meant becoming the same cold-hearted bitch again. But she did it willingly. How could she do anything else?

Myra hit a switch and the AV roared to life. Aidan still stood outside the door. His mouth quirked into a grim smile and his cornflower blue eyes sparkled like glass.

“I love you, Eva,” he said. “I love you both.”

And he slammed the door.

Myra hit the accelerator and Eva was jerked against the vehicle wall as the AV tore out of the compound. Concentrating on the shield, Eva couldn’t keep her mind fixed to Aidan’s as she wanted to. But she could still sense him. She knew he was there—moving, fighting, shouting out orders, his mind a whirl of combat and jeopardy—right up to the moment when that white-hot flame flickered in agony. And went out.

She pulled Rafael’s prone body to her, pressed her face to his chest and sobbed out Aidan’s name.

It was morning before Rafael woke. Weak as a kitten, he grudgingly allowed Eva to help him drink some water and listened to Myra’s hushed report of what had happened. She’d counteracted the tracer in the affected children and Eva no longer needed to shield constantly. They were camped several miles from the settlement and many of the other Hedonists had made their way to this previously agreed rendezvous point.

He didn’t ask about Aidan. From the moment he’d awoken, Eva knew he’d picked up on her grief. He just pulled her into his disturbingly weak arms and held her against him while she wept. She must have fallen asleep that way. When she woke, he was talking to Myra again.

“You can’t. It’s as simple as that,” the medic said. “It’s going to be days before you’re even close to physical fitness again. And that’s the least of your problems. The disruption to your abilities...” She shook her head firmly. “I can’t allow it.”

“It isn’t up to you, Myra,” he growled. “I know what I have to do.”

“With all due respect, Rafael, it *is* up to me. I’m your senior medic here. And the agreement was that in medical matters I have the final say. I’ll order you confined if you try it.”

“Try what?” Eva asked shakily.

He attempted to shield—a hasty, ragged barrier—but the thought spilled out of him, his abilities both weakened and scrambled after the force of the shockstick. The image assaulted her and made her cry out.

*Aidan. It was Aidan. Manacled to some kind of frame, muscles straining, mind at breaking point. Blood drenched his golden hair on one side, a rich glistening red. One eye had swollen shut. His chest hitched, trying to breathe, trying to keep going. The stabbing pain of a cracked rib and a punctured lung accompanied each intake of air.*

*“Again,” said Kaine.*

*The shockstick thudded against Aidan's abdomen, winding him. The impact ignited it, sending electricity coursing through his body. His muscles ratcheted with pain, cramping and tearing. He threw his head back and screamed. Blood filled his mouth, drowning his cries, but the pain went on and on.*

Rafael tore Eva away. It took all his strength to do it. She found herself bent over, breathing hard, tears streaming down her face and sweat pouring off her skin.

"Where is he?" she gasped when she could form words again.

"Somewhere in the Guild Compound. With the same bastard commander who had me."

"Kaine. It's Kaine. I thought..." Part of what she was feeling was relief. Sick and twisted and unmistakable relief. "I thought Aidan was dead."

Rafael regarded her with fathomless eyes. "He probably wishes he was."

She shuffled around, getting control back of her own body. "But why take him? They were after the psychics. Why Aidan?"

Rafael tilted his head. "Information, I suppose. He knows where we'll go and they can't find us now. A shortcut to scouring the countryside perhaps. Or revenge. He masqueraded as one of them, betrayed them." He nodded slowly, almost to himself. "Revenge."

"We have to get him out," she said.

"Rafael isn't up to it," Myra said. "He can barely keep himself conscious, if he would care to be honest about it. No. He's not going anywhere."

Eva lifted her head, swallowed hard and regarded the medic with a cool expression she hoped might intimidate her enough. There was no sign of it having any effect, but still, she had to try. "Then I'll go. I assume you don't object to that."

Eva pulled on the soft kid gloves and flexed her fingers. The material caressed her skin, as familiar as breathing. They'd never felt like imprisonment before, the mark of a slave. She scowled at her reflection in the narrow mirror that came as standard equipment in Guild quarters. Her apartment, she'd once called it. But sneaking in here at night trailed by two of the Hedonists disguised as Security officers had felt like breaking into a maximum-security detainment area.

No. Not quite. That was what she was planning to do now. As soon as she was ready.

She'd been amazed she still had even the smallest level of clearance, but clearly if Burgess wanted to use her, he hadn't made it official. He'd sold her out, true, but he'd sold her out both ways. He hadn't told the Guild she'd been taken. Just in case he could wipe her mind or something and take her back. To use her again.

She wore another of the standard-issue business suits—charcoal grey, flawless lines, immaculate—and swept her hair back into the same austere chignon. She looked like a different person, cold and heartless, empty inside.

Outside, the compound was almost silent. She took the empty 'rail down to headquarters, aware that her protectors shadowed her all the way. Just because she couldn't see them didn't mean she didn't know they were there. Faint glows, warm and comforting, but growing distant. They might follow her into the headquarters but not to the sub-levels, not unless they got exceptionally lucky. She couldn't count on that, or by extension, no matter what they might wish, on them.

The door chimed as she swiped her entry and walked in without a backwards glance. The Security guard didn't smile, and this time neither did she. It was all she could do to keep the revulsion of being back here from her features and the forefront of her mind. In the elevator, the light above her flickered and she closed her eyes, offering a little prayer to a deity she barely believed in anymore. Swiping her card again, she punched in the lower level and hoped they hadn't revoked her extended permit yet.

The door slid shut. No arm interrupted them this time, no cheery face apologised and then reddened. No Aidan. She breathed in and out—*calm...keep calm*—and closed her eyes.

Something fluttered in the forefront of her mind, something which couldn't possibly be there. A flash of brilliant blue edged with indigo. Like his eyes. But not. Wings.

As she tried to capture the image it eluded her, gone like smoke on a breeze.

Part of her longed to reach for Rafael, to see if he sensed that as well and what he made of it, but Rafael wasn't there. And he couldn't reach her in here, not so weak. She heaved in a nervous breath and dispelled her own doubts. Even finding Aidan in here was a long shot. She hadn't dared to let on to any of them how unlikely it was. They all loved him, needed him, in as many ways as Rafael did.

So did she.

The elevator gave a slight jolt as it reached the sub-level and the door slid silently open. As her shoes tapped on the tiled floor, she lifted her chin and faced the Security officer who sat behind the desk. He stared at her, waiting for her to speak.

Standard-issue Guild Security, she told herself.

She glared at him. "Eva Lee. Guild psychic. Reporting as ordered."

When he checked the sheet she slammed her ID down on the table and reached out with her mind, encouraging him to relax, to believe her, to let her go by.

"For...for Room Seven, ma'am?"

"For the Valetti case, yes."

"Yes ma'am. I'll buzz you through."

“Good.” And just for good measure, she sent a suggestion that he’d fall asleep when she was gone. He was already yawning as she left the corridor and stepped into the antechamber. The middle of the night was a bad shift to pull, even in Security, and he wasn’t likely to make it right through awake.

The room beyond was dark, and also empty. The one-way window spilled light from the interrogation chamber, cold and blue. Inside, Aidan was spread out on a torture frame like the image of Vitruvian man, his head sagging down to his chest and his eyes closed.

A sub-commander paced around him. “Where’s the bloody psychic?” he growled. Not Kaine. Thank God Kaine wasn’t there.

“On the way, sir,” one of the guards replied, rubbing his fist in his other hand. “Again, sir?”

“Yes. Make him talk before one of those freaks pokes through his mind and there’ll be a commendation in it for whoever succeeds.” He was in a rage. He wasn’t thinking. He’d probably kill Aidan simply out of carelessness. Kaine would never make such a mistake. The thought chilled her. Even her brief acquaintance with the commander had left the mark of his mind upon her, giving her these ugly little insights.

The dull impact of fist on flesh made her jerk back. Aidan’s groan burst from his split lips.

“*I’m here,*” she tried to tell him, pushing her mind towards his and begging for contact. “*I’m coming. I’ll get you out.*”

Butterflies filled her mind, flying everywhere, helter-skelter, all the colours of pain and humiliation, cross-cut with blind panic. She stood in the midst of a rainbow maelstrom of wings trying to drive her back. His mind...in pieces...hardly able to focus. There was almost nothing coherent to grab hold of.

Another series of punches sent his consciousness reeling and the images fragmented like the reflection in a shattered mirror. The slice of agony that followed could only be a shockstick. This time his scream cracked off the walls and ceiling as she burst into the interrogation room.

“Guild psychic reporting as ordered, Sub-Commander,” she bit out before he could question her. She kept her back iron-rod straight and didn’t make eye contact. Nor did she look at Aidan for fear the horror of it would give her away.

“About bloody time,” the sub-commander snarled without sparing her a glance. “The terrorist cell he works with is in retreat. Get their location out of this fucking traitor. Now!”

She flinched, couldn’t help herself, but it was the right thing to do. He loathed psychics and so long as he saw her only as a freak, he didn’t see *her*. So long as he was angry, she had a chance. She kept her head down, her shoulder curled over, afraid, submissive, inconsequential.

“Yes, sir.” She glanced around at the soldiers barring her way to Aidan. “If you could please stand aside, Officers?”

“Dismissed!” the sub-commander snarled at his men and they filed out grudgingly. A commendation meant a lot—better pay, bonuses, sometimes better accommodation. They didn’t like losing out on it. With any luck, they’d take themselves off to the nearest rec hall, drown in booze and blame her for their loss.

She approached Aidan as she would a wounded animal, slowly removing her gloves and tucking them into her pocket. The sub-commander began to pace again. He was in trouble, she realised, and gleaned his thoughts from the surface of his panic too easily. This plan to seize the Hedonists and their children, particularly the psychic children, had been supposed to make his name. Commander Kaine already blamed him for his injuries and the escape of their quarry. He could easily blame the whole debacle on him if it ever came to light, and surely would if he failed to get the information they required. An incompetent subordinate was a convenient excuse. Not one of their superiors would know it was Kaine’s plan. Kaine’s and Burgess’s.

Fighting for control, Eva felt the skin around her eyes tighten as she reined in anger. Burgess had been in on it all along? Was she to have been a scapegoat? Rafael and Aidan pulled her out, but they’d assume, willing or no, she led the Guild right to them, and Burgess would just let the Hedonists think he couldn’t do anything to warn them, to stop the attack. Kaine and Burgess would get all the glory the Guild could bestow, Burgess would get more children to indoctrinate and use, and the Hedonists...

Eva reached out and pressed her fingertips to Aidan’s burning skin. The butterflies swarmed around her again. He was holding on to the image she had given him, the one thing he could use that wouldn’t give the others away. Butterflies, whirling, flying, falling from the skies, dying in the dirt.

“Are you planning to take all evening?” The sub-commander folded his arms across his chest.

She bit the inside of her lower lip and pushed his grating voice from her consciousness. She could fry his brain in a moment. It would only take one push, one tiny push. All she had to do was give in to the urge. Steeling herself, she drew in a breath and pushed him from her mind. She had other concerns. Aidan. She stood in her own dream, surrounded by foliage and butterflies.

*“Aidan? Are you still in there? Please, come back to me now. We need you.”*

He didn’t react, but the sunlight faded overhead, and an icy wind blew through the foliage, tearing the leaves aside and sending the butterflies back into a storm of terror.

She pressed on, trying to wrap her mind around his, to comfort and calm him.

*“Aidan, listen to me. It’s going to be okay.”*

“A nice promise,” drawled Burgess. “Shame it’s also a lie. He can’t hear you, Eva.” He laughed, the sound startling her back into the interrogation room. “He’s broken. His mind’s gone.”

## Chapter Ten

Eva spun around to find Burgess standing in the doorway, a shockstick in his hand. Beside him, Commander Kaine trained a sidearm on her. The sub-commander was gone, probably sent in search of reinforcements.

With a sneer, Burgess approached her, the shockstick primed, energy fizzing along its length. Eva backed up until she found herself against Aidan's chest, standing between them and her lover.

There still had to be a way out of this. There *had* to be. They were blocking the door, but they were the only ones there. No other guards. Just the two of them. Maybe, if she was quick, if she could reach a weapon...

"Don't," Burgess told her and his mind reached out to her like razor wire. He engulfed her, far stronger than he should have been. Eva barely managed a cry of alarm before her defences fell. Her body stiffened, frozen in place by Aidan. "Now, why don't you sit down like a good girl and *finally* do what you're told!"

He slammed her down into one of the interrogation chairs, heedless of her petrified muscles. Breath burst from her lungs and though she struggled against him, there was nothing she could do to break free. It wasn't possible. He couldn't be this strong. No psychic was this strong.

"No single psychic, it's true." Sweat beaded on his forehead, glistening in the artificial light. "But when you have access to a cell like I do, Eva—well, then all things become possible."

A cell, like the one Hugh had been in. Wiped, mindless, helpless. He was using them, using other people like them to power himself. Her stomach twisted. Children. She could feel them on the fringes of his mind now. So young, so vital, so...empty. Lost children, in the darkness.

Burgess smiled, a thin cruel smile which told her he had read her discovery. "They have to be young, Eva. They burn out eventually. Then they're useless. The younger ones last longer, see? But too many kids going missing from Juvenile would be suspicious. So I had to get them from somewhere else."

From the Hedonists and other splinter groups, from homes and families here in the compound before they were tested and sent to Juvenile, from those who thought they were escaping! From people like Rafael, Aidan and her father, who thought they were helping others start a new life. God, it didn't bear thinking about. He'd been using them, every one of them, all this time.

Burgess took another step forward and laid his shockstick down on the metal table. It rolled back and forth, the sound and movement distracting. Eva flicked her gaze to it and then back up to him. If she could



reach it... She squirmed in his grasp, trying to find a way out, a crack through which her mind could wriggle. There was nothing. He was all encompassing, the sum of her world.

“You don’t remember the first time we met, of course. Had to wipe that right out of your head.”

She heaved in a desperate breath. Her fingers tingled. Pins and needles? Or something else? She tried to move them, but failed.

Burgess snapped his fingers in front of her face. The sound struck her senses like a physical blow.

“Focus, Eva. I’m talking to you.”

*“You’re talking for your own benefit. There’s nothing I want to hear from you.”*

The thin vicious smile came back and he bent in, right up to her face. His breath stank of mints, his skin of sweat.

Why? Why was he sweating? Instead of trying to probe his mind—far too powerful now for her to challenge—she took in his physical attributes. The link worked both ways, it seemed. Keeping those kids deprived of sensation meant that they craved experience, life. He was their only source of contact with the outside world and they were greedy for it. God, the things they must have seen through him. The horrors their minds must have beheld...perpetrated even... She pushed such thoughts away. The link took its toll on him too, all that effort to stay in command. It was wearing him out.

Eva sank back into the chair, partly to put more space between them, partly to gather her racing thoughts. She had to find something, *anything* she could use.

Burgess launched himself back and grabbed the shockstick. Eva tensed, panic telling her he would attack, that she’d feel the same agony as Rafael, like shards of glass tearing through her mind. And she could do nothing to avoid it.

But Burgess kept going. He rammed the end of the stick into Aidan’s chest and set it off.

Aidan’s scream broke off the walls, echoing, rebounding. He tried to fling himself aside, but the frame held him in place. His muscles convulsed, cramping and releasing violently until finally the charge was spent. He slumped in his bonds again. Blood tricked from his nose and fell, like a star on the ground.

“Leave him alone!” Eva screamed, her voice at last her own again, if only for a moment. Or had Burgess lost another fraction of his control? “For God’s sake, leave him alone.”

But Burgess just laughed and tossed the shockstick to Kaine. The commander flicked the switch and it began to crackle again, recharged, ready. He took up position beside Aidan, his eyes gleaming like the buttons on his uniform.

“Let me tell you a story not too different to this.” Burgess circled her, like a cat playing with its prey. “A long time ago, I found out my partner was helping people. People who didn’t understand the concept of civic duty or loyalty to the Guild, which has saved us from economic ruin, pandemics, moral collapse, oh and a million other things that were gnawing at the heart of our civilisation. He was helping them run away before their precious children could be gainfully employed for the good of all. Just a small fraction of them.

The freaks, the oddities. The ones who counted themselves as so special. His wife, as it turned out, started it. Led him astray.” He ran the back of his hand down her cheek. His knuckles dug into her skin. “You’re very like her, you know? It would have broken Harmon’s heart to see you as an adult, to look into that face again and realise what he’d lost. I probably did him a favour in the end.”

“My mother left him,” Eva gasped. “I remember. She handed me over to save herself.”

Burgess just chuckled and resumed his pace, circling her. “Of course you do.”

Rafael’s words came back to her, taunting her now.

*They can change your memories, Eva, alter what you think you know.*

Memories could lie. But that one? The only family memory she retained, no matter how bleak? She squeezed her eyes tightly closed and clung to it, to her mother’s face, to the desperation in her voice as she made her terrible choice. Bitter and heartrending as it was, it couldn’t be a plant. It was all she had.

Mother and siblings, desperate to keep her, desperate to survive. Her family. Abandoned. Lost...

The voice of her tormentor resumed its sing-song storytelling. “I caught them taking one of my cells. I don’t know where you were. In daycare or something. Such a little thing and they’d never risk you on one of their escapades. Not their precious only child.”

*Only child.* The words seemed to taunt her just like Burgess. Only child. She’d never had siblings. Her mother had never given her up. She was precious to them. Precious.

“I made that interrogation last for hours. Harmon had to watch me pick her mind apart, one layer at a time, just like I did his.” He jerked his head over his shoulder to where Aidan hung. “You missed the beginning, but I’ll ensure you’ll see the end.”

Aidan! She couldn’t let him destroy Aidan.

Burgess waved a dismissive hand, the only cue Kaine needed. The shockstick slammed into the small of Aidan’s back and ignited again.

Eva’s body reacted instinctively, trying to rise, but Burgess slammed her back down onto the chair again, driving the breath from her body.

When Aidan’s screams fell away, when Eva could see again through her tears, Burgess leaned in face to face.

“I made your father watch while we killed her, just as you’re going to watch this treacherous piece of shit die. And then I wiped his mind. We were friends and partners again and your dear mother... Well, a man needs his friends when his wife betrays him. Harmon fled to the Hedonists but he never stopped looking for you. And with every one of his little raids, he took out other children, other Hedonists. And when I was ready, I could just take what I needed, building up cell after cell. I alone had access through him, and through Rafael. And now through you.”

The sound of a fist hitting flesh made her wince. The shockstick would be too quick for Kaine. Such a sadist needed to feel his victim's agony. Aidan's breath came out in a grunt. No words, nothing intelligible. Not anymore.

Butterflies filled her mind, butterflies whirling, falling, dying. All the bright colours crumbling to dust.

*"Aidan, stay with me. Please, don't go."*

"We're going to kill him slowly, and you can watch, Eva. Then I'll wipe your mind but you will still be able to take us to wherever bolthole Rafael has hidden in. Or if not, you can join my cell and lend me that exquisite mind of yours. And a lot more, I think."

His hand curled around her neck, but she felt it only distantly, as if it happened to someone else. It slid lower, bringing with it rising revulsion as it delved into her cleavage and groped at her breasts.

It was a lie. It had all been a lie. Her life. Her father's life, all his good works, her mother's betrayal...

The uniformed arms that cradled her, the sobs of her mother, and the chimes as the credits were transferred...the smiling face that had crumpled in sorrow...

Her own screams.

No, there had been screams. Endless, tortured screams.

Kaine laid into Aidan, no pretence of wanting information, no interrogation this, just the intent to beat him to death. To make her suffer. To break her.

And Aidan, that brightness of their love, the whirl of coloured butterflies, slipping away from her, weakening, falling...

*"Don't leave me! Don't go!"*

She reached for her final false memory, the lie that her mother had given her up, the last control she had kept Rafael from breaking. And she tore through it like tissue paper.

Memories roared back through her, too many to separate. A tidal wave of experience—laughter, love, joy, her family. Burgess reeled back from her, the backlash startling him as his failsafe fell, but the other minds, the cell upon which he fed like a leach—they craned towards her, reaching out, hungry for experience, for a taste of life.

Eva's mind sharpened to a razor's edge. She had her crack, the weakness in his power. She reached out to the others, to the grey minds in their grey cell, hidden down here in Burgess's domain, the sub-levels he and Kaine ruled with a joint iron fist. Where no one ever asked questions because they got the job done. Where no one dared raise their voice.

*"Help me."*

The backlash nearly hurled her chair from under her, brought her to her feet so quickly it felt like levitating. She had no idea how many there were, perhaps only five, but it felt like a million voices invading her mind. They were so strong. So very strong.

"It doesn't have to be like this, Eva," Burgess whispered, his voice low and beguiling. She could feel him trying to work on her defences, to heighten her fear. And beneath it, the reek of his own terror was rising. "You can come home, back to the Guild. You're one of us, after all. Raised by us, and of great value."

A shudder ran through her, and Burgess came closer, the shockstick in his hand again, at the ready. She knew that, knew what he was like and how much he hated her. Feared her.

Oh yes, he feared her now.

And if he got past her, they'd all suffer. The cell, the Hedonists, the children, Aidan, Rafael...

A single image assaulted her, the one Aidan had inadvertently triggered. Her attack, the faceless figure in the dark who had drugged her and tried to rape her. Burgess brought the stick up, ready to strike her and she unleashed every nightmare she'd ever heard of upon him: his, her own, Aidan's, the children in the dark room and the terrors of everyone whose minds she'd ever touched. She wrapped all those nightmares in everything he and Kaine had done to others and hurled it directly into their minds.

Burgess reeled back, the shockstick igniting against his own body and sending him down in a jerking heap of flesh. Kaine flung himself away from her, clawing at his own face as he shrieked and sobbed.

Eva scooped up their weapons and slammed her hand onto the release switch on the far side of the frame. She was too late to catch Aidan. He crashed to the ground, the final indignity. Hauling him to his knees, she tried to get him up further, but his body just slumped against her.

"Aidan. Aidan love, you have to get up. We have to get out of here!"

His eyes parted a crack—all he could manage, he'd been so badly beaten—and a sliver of blue ringed with blood red focused on her.

"You...go. Give me...the gun. Get out."

"No!" she snarled at him and he flinched back. Tears flooded his martyred face and he gritted his teeth.

*"Please, Eva..."*

She tightened her grip on the commander's sidearm as footsteps reached them, thundering down the hall outside. It shook as she trained it on the door, ready, waiting, whatever happened.

Three men in black featureless uniforms slid into the room, sleek and silent in their movements. Two took up defensive positions, their weapons charged and ready to fire. The third stooped over them both, gun in hand.

Aidan tried to pull Eva aside, to place himself between her and this new threat, but he didn't have the strength.

"Hardly according to plan, Eva," Rafael growled in reproach. Then he dropped to his knees and pulled Aidan into his arms, holding him close.

“You had my secondary card,” she reminded him testily. “I knew you wouldn’t be far behind if I needed you.”

He hugged Aidan to his chest and glared at her. “I felt it all. What they did to you, what they did to him! I might have lost you both!”

She reached out, ran her fingertips down the tense line of his jaw. He trembled beneath her touch. “But you didn’t, love,” she whispered. “Now, let’s get the hell out of here before someone gets interested in what we’re all doing here tonight, okay? I doubt they had anything but the vaguest kind of clearance for this but that’s hardly going to help *us* if we’re caught here.”

“Are they dead?” asked Hugh from his place by the door. She hadn’t recognised him in the uniform. He looked hard rather than cynical now, fired with purpose.

Eva got to her feet. “Forget them. Hugh, I need your help. We have to find the cell, get those kids out of it. I can take you there.”

As they passed the sprawled figures of Burgess and Kaine, Rafael paused, his weapon rising again, the narrow whine of a full and fatal charge filling the air.

“Don’t,” Eva said. “Leave them.”

“Do you think they’d show mercy? Did they show mercy to him?” He nodded at Aidan.

She shook her head. “Look. *Really* look. Then tell me they don’t deserve that.”

Rafael’s face took on that now-familiar studied expression and all colour bled from his skin. His mouth tightened to a thin white line and his pained gaze met hers. “Let’s get Aidan out of here,” was all he said.

The AVs rolled across the countryside, taking narrow roads that had not seen traffic in decades, passing through abandoned towns and villages until the signs of former civilisation dwindled and died. The escape of four AVs from the settlement gave Eva some hope. Add to that the one they stole from the Guild compound and the prospects began to improve. The newest one carried the five children rescued from the cell, attended to now by Myra and Hugh. And they were miles from the Guild, putting more distance between them and the compound with every passing hour. Some of their ragged company walked alongside, scouted ahead or rode on top.

She rarely saw Rafael during the day, staying with Aidan, who, fighting off a fever, slept and woke screaming and incoherent with nightmares. Rafael, she suspected, couldn’t bear it. He’d lost a loved one long ago, a wife he’d cherished. He couldn’t bear the thought of losing another. She understood that. But it didn’t mean she was willing to give up so easily. Aidan would live, she kept trying to tell him, but Rafael never responded and her insistent attempts to engage and reassure him were gently turned away.

Eva fell asleep each night through exhaustion, and Rafael stretched out alongside her. The two of them lay under the stars together, with Aidan no more than a few strides away in the AV. Though they slept wrapped in each other's arms, it went no further than that. There was no "two of them". Not really. They were three and one part of their hearts was missing.

When Aidan's fever broke and he opened his eyes to see her once more, Eva wept tears of relief. And also of grief that Rafael was not there. Especially when Aidan's cracked voice managed to form words.

"Where's Rafe?"

"Scouting ahead. He'll be back soon. Rest now. You need to build your strength up again. I'll fetch Myra."

He slumped back down, petulant as a child, and winced at the pain the petty demonstration caused him. As she rose to go, he caught her wrist in a grip surprisingly strong after his convalescence.

"You came for me."

"Of course I did." She tried to smile.

"Your butterflies..." He winced again, tried to shift to a more comfortable position and then, failing that, he forced himself to sit up. "Your butterflies saved my sanity."

She smiled and kissed his forehead.

Rafael didn't come back that night. Nor the next. While Aidan grew stronger by the hour—through sheer determination, she thought—Eva watched the countryside roll by and tried to keep an eye ahead for the returning scouts. He had to come back. She sent out mental summons, no longer caring who might catch an accidental glimpse, image after image of Aidan, but with no response.

Some of the others, Daisy in particular, tried to send her comforting thoughts, reassurances, but she pushed them away. There were too many psychics around her, it seemed, and the only one she really wanted—really needed—was missing.

The third day, when she woke, her mind filled with butterflies again. Her heart took wing in her chest as she sensed Rafael's approach.

"He's here," she told Aidan.

The AVs formed a metal shell around the camp. Further up the road, figures were running towards them in the morning light. Rafael was foremost. When his eyes fixed on Aidan standing by Eva's side, he broke into a sprint which outstripped everyone else.

For a moment Eva feared Rafael would slam into them both, or seize Aidan in his bearlike grip and undo all the healing in his enthusiasm and relief to see their lover whole again. But he stopped short, staring in wonder. Words froze in his throat. She felt him longing to spill out his love, voice his relief, but he couldn't.

"Where the hell have you been?" Aidan asked gruffly, hiding his smile.

Something passed between them, something Eva was not party to, nor did she wish to intrude. Rafael reached out and his hand shook as he closed his grip on Aidan's shoulder. Then he bowed his head.

"Forgive me."

Aidan grabbed a fistful of his jacket and pulled Rafael abruptly to him, kissing him with force and determination. "Don't do it again. You had her worried sick."

Rafael glanced at Eva, who felt her face redden under his enquiring gaze. Then he dropped to his knees, bowing his head to her instead. "Forgive me, my love. I was a coward. I couldn't bear the prospect of losing him. It's only thanks to you that I didn't."

She smiled down at him but before she could reply a scoffing noise broke the moment.

"Yeah, 'cause Myra and I had *nothing* to do with my getting better," Aidan said. "Now unless you're about to propose to one of us—or *both* of us—get up!"

Rafael scrambled to his feet, too overjoyed to be put out by Aidan's teasing. He enveloped them both in his arms. "Come. I have something to show you both. Something you two, of all people, have to see. We checked it out. Spent some time scouting the area to make sure it's safe, and it is. It's perfect."

"What?" Eva asked, as he pulled them along behind him.

"Our new home."

It was, or had been, a manor or farm in some distant past, before the Crash, the pandemics and the rise of the Guild, before the compounds and the general depopulation of anything outside a city. It nestled far enough away from an urban centre to be ignored during the spread of the compounds. Far enough away to be safe now from a people who didn't dare stray too far from what they knew, what they thought they knew. After so long travelling in the AV, Eva couldn't wait to get out and stretch her legs, to explore the place. A single long road swept through rolling meadows, past a river which fed a well-stocked lake. And at its heart rose a house.

Eva had never seen anything like it outside of old clips and online movies. It was huge, though ramshackle, but not so bad that it could not be repaired. Vegetation ran wild in what had been a kitchen garden.

"If some of those herbs are medicinal, Myra will go nuts," Aidan said.

"And what if Guild troops come?" Eva asked.

Rafael rolled his shoulders and gazed off to the south. "They won't. We're too far from their comfort zone out here. They don't see anything of worth out this far. Not while they can continue to use their own people. We...our children were convenient for Burgess, under the radar as it were. The rest of the Guild would sooner exterminate us. But only if we're a threat. And we aren't." He turned his face back towards

the house and its gardens, the fertile fields overgrown but spilling out promise. And he sighed, a sound of pleasure that came from his heart. "It's going to take work. But we're good with our hands."

Aidan snorted. "I am." And he ran them up the sides of Eva's body to demonstrate. She shivered with suddenly renewed lust.

"You're feeling better, I see." Rafael's smile made him glow.

Aidan hummed his reply, deep in his throat, a noise which rumbled through him and into her. Eva snuggled closer, her body reawakening at last.

"One more thing to see. It's why the three of us came on ahead," Rafael said. "Please."

He took their hands and led them away from the house, away from their friends who were delighting in all the new home had to offer. They walked through long grass, down an incline and through a grove of apple trees. Beyond them, a meadow opened up, dotted with wildflowers. Dots of white and pink, but mostly blue. The blue of cornflowers, the blue of Aidan's eyes. Long grass, seed-heavy, swayed in the breeze, and at the bottom a river curved into a deep pool. The scents encircled her, sweet and high, warm like summer. And beneath them, another note—musk and earth. Like Rafael, like Aidan. It stirred desire in her stomach, and something began to melt inside her, like molten honey.

As they walked through the grass, many of the patches of vivid colour Eva had taken for flowers took wing, circling around them. Bright blue, crimson and saffron, speckled and striped, decorated like great eyes, all the colours of the world, swirled around them in butterfly wings.

"It's beautiful," Eva cried, lifting her arms to the creatures. Some were as large as both her hands. She danced beneath them until Aidan caught her in his arms and pulled her to the ground in a tangle of limbs and laughter.

"Juvenile," Rafael said sternly and Aidan tackled his ankles, pulling him down with them.

They rolled in the long grass, in the sunlight, kissing, stroking, expressing their love with minds and bodies too long denied, shedding clothes as buttons and zips gave way to questing hands. When their tongues met her hyper-sensitive skin she gasped in arousal and shivered.

Aidan propped himself up on his elbows, parted her blouse and slid his hands inside, cupping the swell of her breasts in heat. Her body clenched inside, wanting him, needing him. Wanting and needing both of them.

"Aren't you worried someone will see?" she protested, her humour sparking as she teased him. She knew the others would be too busy exploring the house and gardens to bother coming this far. For now, they were alone.

"Let them." Aidan smiled as his mouth claimed hers. He brought his hands up to the sides of her face, teasing the sensitive skin where the smallest tendrils of her hair met her cheeks. His thumb brushed her cheekbones, his fingers buried in her hair. She arched off the ground to meet him, hungry for him, desperate. He tasted so sweet, so perfectly suited to her. To them.



“They’ll only be jealous.” Rafael nuzzled into the weight of her abandoned breasts and then filled his hands, caressing them, stimulating the nipples to hard points which he caught in his mouth. He sucked hard, and sparks of desire fired off deep inside her, connecting the growing ache between her legs with their mouths upon her.

Eva gasped out their names, reaching out to return the gesture. Her hand passed over the fading bruises on Aidan’s skin, gently caressing him until he pressed his hardened cock into her hand. She broke free of his kisses and wriggled around, climbing onto all fours so she could take him in her mouth.

His cock throbbed as her tongue wrapped around it, teasing the ridges, the pronounced vein and the oh-so-sensitive head. He tasted of salt and cinnamon, of the joy of pleasure, of all the whispered words and gasps of pleasure they shared, of Aidan. His taste thrilled her. His scent wrapped itself around her and filled her mind with need.

His groan came out muffled and she lifted her eyes to see Rafael kissing him, holding his face in both hands so there was no escape. Aidan reached out blindly, one hand kneading the muscles of Rafael’s shoulder, the other tangling in her hair again, more firmly this time, pulling her closer. His hips moved with ever-increasing urgency, pressing deeper.

“*Pull back,*” Rafael instructed, “*don’t push him over too quickly.*” Even his mental voice sounded husky with desire.

Reluctantly, Eva slid her lips back up Aidan’s length, releasing him gently. His cock strained towards her again, but Rafael intercepted him. He eased Aidan to the ground and pinned him there, so carefully, so gently.

“Sit over his face, Eva,” Rafael told her and kissed her when she complied, climbing astride his prone body.

Aidan’s lips and tongue sought out the slick folds of her vagina, exploring their depths like the expert he was.

Moving behind her, Rafael sighed. “*I’ve longed for this,*” he told her, “*ever since the first time.*” He slid his cock deep inside her. “*Sometimes I think all I do is long for this. For the two of you together.*”

She was tight, despite her body’s eagerness, and he had to slow himself, easing himself deeper with slow deliberation, letting her flesh adapt to his.

Eva gasped his name out loud, one of the few words she could form.

“*Yes, Rafael. Please, yes.*”

“*And more,*” Aidan promised. She heard his mind through Rafael’s, as clearly as if he whispered in her ear. “*Much more. Make her come, Rafe. Make her come so I can drink her down.*”

His tongue rubbed her clitoris, caressed the base of Rafael’s cock until she wasn’t sure where one man began and the other ended. It took all her strength to hold herself up, her body absorbing the power of Rafael’s thrusts, soothed by Aidan’s mouth.

And that self-same mouth wasn't finished with her yet. His teeth grazed her clit, closing slightly while he sucked hard, his tongue tormenting that hyper-sensitive knot of nerves. He teased her, tormented her, drove her relentlessly on.

Eva's body convulsed as an orgasm broke over her in a wave. Their hands stopped her from falling. Rafael's fingers dug into her hips and her body closed hard around him, pulling her with him into the bliss of release.

They half-fell, half-lay down together, three tangled bodies in the sunlight. Dirt and grass stains smeared their flesh. When she tried to brush it off, Aidan grinned and grabbed a fistful of mud, rubbing it onto her ass. He slapped her as he did so.

"What is it?" she squealed in surprise. "Does it come off?"

"Earth!" Aidan laughed and scooped up some more. "Come here and I'll show you."

Eva made a noise of outrage and mirth combined. She dug her hands into the soft mud and flung a clod right at him. It splattered against his golden skin and he yelped out loud. In only a moment they were all three of them at it, wrestling in the dirt like wild children. They rolled towards the pool and splashed into the freezing water, laughing out loud. The water was deep, coming up to her breasts, lapping against them as Aidan had. Seeing her pleasure in the touch, Aidan moved to help, ready to lick her breasts again but before he could reach her, Rafael pushed him under the water. He came back up glistening in the sunlight, his hair plastered to his head like liquid gold.

"That's the way it's going to be, is it?" he protested and dove under the water. Strong hands grabbed her calves, dislodging her stance effortlessly, pulling her under with him.

She couldn't see. She flailed wildly in the depths and a mouth closed on hers, kissing her until she was breathless and then letting her go. When she surfaced, they were gone. The air tasted so sweet and fresh. She heaved in a breath of it, looking for them, but there was no sign.

The water rippled around her and stilled. Sunlight glittered across the surface. Eva turned in a circle, trying to see them underneath, but before she'd finished, they were on her.

Aidan rose before her, Rafael behind, sweeping her feet from under her and carrying her deeper. Before she knew what was happening, Aidan had buried himself deep inside the slick folds of her flesh, moving slowly. Lust made the skin around his eyes tighten, and his lips part. His tongue flashed along the line of his teeth and Eva would have stretched her neck so she could kiss him, when Rafael's cock pressed between the cheeks of her ass. Still hard, still eager, his hands parted her and toyed with her anus. She let out a cry that was part plea and Rafael's fingers penetrated her, working slowly, gradually to open her.

Aidan shushed her tiny protests and the water swirled around them as he thrust—long, determined movements, deep inside her, setting off a rippling effect like the water lapping at her breasts, that moved through her body. Rafael's cock replaced his hands, sliding into her, a fraction of it at a time, hardening still further as it did.

Aidan pulled her to him as she sobbed and used him to brace herself. She thrust herself back, to claim more of Rafael, and squeezed them both tightly, vowing never to let them go. Rafael's lips teased her neck, Aidan's hands buoyed her up in the water. Or maybe it was the other way around?

Eva arched her body and Rafael gave one final push, right inside her, his cock rubbing against Aidan through the thin dividing wall of her flesh. Aidan bent his head again, seizing her nipple between his teeth, biting so gently that she could do nothing but groan and try to impale herself on them both still further.

"Eva." Rafael's voice echoed through her mind. "Aidan..."

Love, that was all she could feel from him. Love, pure and unadulterated love. The love he feared he'd lose, the love he'd thought he'd lost when Aidan was captured. He teetered on the edge, caught there, trying to wait for them, but losing the struggle.

Eva reached out with her mind, gathering the two of them in, letting them see the myriad sensations of pleasure that filled her, overwhelmed her. There was no ending to this, just a moment dragged out to infinity, a moment of before, of almost, a push and an embrace. Mind and body. Three minds and three bodies which pressed closer, deeper, nearer, and her voice drawing them to her to become just one, a single, eternal moment of fulfilled joy in physical form.

Aidan thrust again. She tightened her legs around his waist, and Rafael's chest pressed to her back, the tension of his muscles mirroring hers. Her head fell back, in the moment which lasted forever. It rested on his shoulder and his lips sought hers blindly.

She came with a mental cry which could not find voice in the physical. There were no words for it and in truth no sound would do it justice. The edge rushed towards her and she threw herself over willingly, hearing Rafael's answering cry while Aidan thrust into her, his shout of fulfilment setting the birds in the trees to flight and scattering the butterflies in the meadow.

Where her first orgasm had been a wave, this one, shared with them both, was a tsunami that rid her of conscious thoughts.

Aftershocks of pleasure, tremors that shuddered through her, made her muscles contract around them both. Each noise they made echoed that pleasure still reverberating through her. Reluctantly, they eased apart and climbed onto the bank, lying there in the sunlight, curled together, unable to part, to stop touching, stroking, kissing.

Sunlight played on her wet and sated skin, and she reached for Aidan and Rafael again, even as their hands reached for her. She stroked them, revelling in the sensation of their skin against hers, in the scents and sounds all around her. The breeze ruffled the grass, rippled the water; the butterflies drifted lazily from flower to flower, stirring up the fragrance as they went.

Aidan sighed, half a moan of pleasure, half a sound of relaxation. Rafael gathered them both into his arms and they lay on either side of his smooth, hard body, indulging in the simple pleasures of the world around them.

And of each other.

The Guild had no idea, Eva thought idly, as her body stirred again and her mind brushed against the erotic images Aidan's was already conjuring up. The man was insatiable. Wondrously so. Rafael's touch brought a smile to her lips. Answering images, fresh ideas pouring from him. They both were. Pleasure was everything. So was love. And to combine the two just made it blissful. But they didn't shirk in duty, they loved with their full hearts, minds and bodies, all three.

And now, finally, so did she. She reached out to either side, to draw both of them to her again, to take Rafael's lips with her, to fill Aidan's hands with her breasts. With just a touch—of the body, the mind, and the heart—she was free.

## About the Author

Rhiannon Leith didn't mean to write erotic sci-fi, fantasy and romance, it just worked out that way. And when you find something you're good at...

She's written stories about vampires, djinn, psychics, angels and demons. All of them are very naughty indeed.

To learn more, please visit her website [www.rhiannonleith.com](http://www.rhiannonleith.com) and get a taste of fantasy on fire.

Look for these titles by Rhiannon Leith

*Coming Soon:*

Edge of Heaven

*Iron born and iron bred. Trust not iron, it will see you dead.*

## Soul Fire

© 2009 R. F. Long

Rowan Blake could really use a magic wand to keep her struggling art gallery afloat. But the faerie key she stumbles across is far from a lucky charm. It's a magnet for danger, and by touching it she's unwittingly put herself in the middle of a war between the forces of light and dark. And in the arms of its rightful owner, Prince Daire.

While searching for his brother, Daire finds himself trapped in the Iron World with a mere mortal woman who ignites his passion like no other. Each stolen kiss deepens their attraction and sends him spiraling closer and closer to the edge of his inherent dark desires. Desires that act as a homing beacon for the Dark Sidhe, who are intent on forcing him to fight on their side.

The longer he lingers in her arms—and in her bed—the closer his enemies get to her door. And the greater the risk that the gateway to the Faerie Realm will shift, destroying not only his power to protect her, but his very life

*Warning Contains enchantments, danger, some very scary monsters, a trip to the dark side and hot, soul-transforming sex with an immortal prince.*

*Enjoy the following excerpt for Soul Fire:*

Daire lifted her again and carried her through to the living room, to the same sofa on which he had lain. Rowan tried to fight the exhaustion eating away at her consciousness. With precise clarity of distraction, she watched him turn the catches on the window with the blade of his knife, securing her home, protecting her.

“What are you doing?” she asked.

“The original builders of your home knew enough to place iron locks on doors and windows and to bury iron beneath the thresholds. I can feel its sting. As your guest I can bypass them, and any Sidhe or fae with enough strength could break through eventually. Not without pain, or sacrifice, but even iron cannot hold in perpetuity.”

He took the plant stalks from her unresisting hands, wincing as it touched his bare skin.

“What’s wrong? What is it?”

Daire didn’t reply at first. He snapped the long stems and threw them into the fireplace, shaking his hands as if to clear a sting.

“It’s broom.” He knelt before her. Red welts, raised and obviously painful, covered his palms and fingers. “It likes not my kin and me. If they come, light your fire. Your windows and doors are bound with iron already. The smoke will prevent them using the chimney.”

“How?”

He shook his head briefly, a rapid gesture, almost too quick for her tired eyes. “Not now. They’ve gone for now. You need no nightmares.”

She lay back, closing her eyes in relief. All she wanted now was sleep, to relieve herself of the terrible burden of exhaustion. Deep inside her lay a quiet, dark place where she longed to curl up and hide. She found her consciousness burrowing towards it.

“No.” He pulled her up from the sofa. “Rowan, you can’t sleep. Not now. Talk to me.”

Part of her wanted to. The rest wanted to push him away. The logical part of her said *stay awake and find out as much as you can, find out what is wrong with you, what makes you want to sleep like the dead*. The rest of her told the logical part precisely what it could do with itself. She wanted sleep, needed sleep, as she had never needed it. And nothing on the entire planet could induce her to—

Daire kissed her. His lips claimed hers, burned against the sensitive skin. His mouth parted slightly, requiring a response. It was both invitation and a plea. His breath caressed her flesh, driving her senses beyond what they could stand.

His hands cupped her shoulders, holding her swaying body in place as his kiss filled her. She wasn’t sure how to respond, even if she had the strength, so she let him hold her to him and drank in kiss after delirious kiss.

Daire broke away from her and when he spoke, his voice sounded ragged. “Rowan, I’m not sure how much of this you’ll understand, but try to follow me. Magic needs energy. I am a creature of magic. And you...”

As if unable to help himself, he leaned in and kissed her again, like someone faced with a long-denied addiction. Hunger, need, and desire, beyond reason. She sensed his failing reluctance and yet couldn’t help luxuriating in the sensations, the touch of his lips, his tongue filling and enticing her. Her heart thundered against her ribs as he pulled back.

“Somehow, you are a source of enormous magical energy. It is a mortal’s gift from the Creator, the ability in turn to create. That is true magic. Do you understand me?”

She nodded, but with the movement the exhaustion flooded back again, a dark wave of oblivion which crested far above her. Her head lolled back as she surrendered to it.

Daire kissed her again, buoying her back to the light of his embrace, to the sound of his voice. His lips trailed across her cheek, up her jaw line, to her ear.

“I asked you to give me some energy, without thinking you would give me so much. You are a giving person. It isn’t in you to hold back. I should have thought—for that I am sorry. I should have guessed you would not understand the implications. I need to give some back to you, Rowan. Or you will be ill. Dangerously ill. Your *tine anama* is unbalanced, your soul flickering. I must restore what is yours.”



“How?” He sounded so serious. And the way her consciousness lurched sickeningly between the dark and Daire’s light, it felt serious, or would if she could bring herself to care for more than a moment. Every time she could grasp the importance, it slid away, straight into shadows on an oil-skimmed track.

Daire cradled her against his body again, rested his face against her hair. His words drew her back, though she felt certain he thought she slept.

“Would that I could make love to you, Rowan. I can imagine no greater honour, nor admit no more earnest desire. And that would restore any amount of your power, for it is a shaping of all things. But I dare not. I cannot. I wish I could, but I am not the man to love you. There is no heart left within me for love.”

She stirred, disturbed by the tack this was taking. Opening her eyes, she looked into his smile and knew no matter what he thought, he felt nothing of the sort. Daire had a heart. She could feel it hammering against his chest, echoing through her body. She could see its glow in the depths of his wondrous eyes.

“But there are other ways, Rowan, if you will but give me your permission.”

“Permission?”

“To touch you. To fulfil you. To bring your strength back.”

“But the other night—”

“That is part of the problem. Two nights in a row, two nights I have—” He cursed, though the words were ancient and unknown to her. “I’m like nothing more than a Leanán Sidhe, feeding off mortals for my own purposes and enrichment. Please, Rowan, let me return what I have pilfered. It burns within me, tortures me with the knowledge of the forbidden.”

His lips brushed her neck, a little trail of fiery kisses down the edge of her erratically pulsing jugular. Her blood beneath surged in response and her breath caught in her throat.

“But you said you...you can’t make love...”

“Other ways, sweet Rowan,” he murmured into her skin. “I will never harm you. May I?”

Rowan bit her lip, intrigued. He couldn’t make love to her, by his own admission, couldn’t or wouldn’t love her. Other ways? Excitement mingled with fear and yet the dark silence still called. Rest, oblivion, peace...and if their enemies came she would be completely helpless.

“All right,” she said, unable to hide the wariness in her voice.

“I will stop if you command it,” he promised solemnly, and she believed him.

Rowan released all control to the Sidhe prince and allowed him to draw her back from the shadows calling her. Daire made her comfortable on the sofa, removed her shoes and her coat, all with the neat precision of a ritual. He loosened her hair, running his fingers through its length as if he was experiencing the finest silk. Just when Rowan was sure he had changed his mind, that he had decided to grant her the peace she craved and feared, his mouth closed on hers.

Daire’s kiss was determined, no chaste brush of the lips this time, no mistaking his intent. She opened beneath him like a flower to the sun. He smiled as he kissed her. She could feel it in their lips and somehow

that made her too scared to open her eyes. Daire of the sombre expression, Daire who was constructed from hard lines of determination, Daire was smiling.

He trailed his way down her neck while his hand slid beneath her body, cradling her, massaging the taut muscles where her neck met her shoulders. For a moment she lost all sense of self, her body relaxing into his touch. She lay so still that one might think her deeply asleep, and yet inside herself, she struggled desperately for equilibrium.

Rowan had no idea when he opened her blouse or removed her bra, but she gasped as his mouth closed over her nipple, drawing it into his mouth, warm, wet and welcoming. His tongue swirled around the areola. His other hand brushed the soft skin of her thighs, parting them effortlessly. Fae enchantments? She squeezed her eyelids tighter, and arched her back, her breath coming harder as he switched breasts, as his hand cupped the mound and pressed with just the right amount of pressure.

That was one of the old stories, wasn't it? The fae lover who could make a woman wild with desire, fulfil her so that she would never want another, would waste away with the need for his touch. Hadn't she suspected his glamour of acting on her before? Hadn't she thought of her reaction to him, her need for him, and wondered if it was deliberate? She had been a fool. That was a vague shadow to the things she felt now. That was just a dream, a myth, a fleeting shadow. Now she lay in the heart of the sun.

"Daire," she forced the words out. "Daire, please!"

*An alien warrior discovers what it is to love...and to share.*

## Grady's Awakening

© 2009 Bianca D'Arc

*Resonance Mates, Book 4*

Alien super soldier Grady Prime's missions routinely lead him in unexpected directions, but his latest assignment—to kill a rogue warrior—is far beyond routine. This time he meets a woman who embroils him in an adventure of the highest order. Love.

Gina has lived among aliens so long, she's lost her fear of them. She is undeniably attracted to Grady, even though their respective duties force them apart. Then, on a mission to a far-flung outpost, an encounter with a man from her past leaves her torn between her flaming desire for Grady, and her still-simmering love for an old flame.

Jim and his group of human dissidents live in secret, away from alien patrols. He has responsibilities, and covert operations to manage. But when Gina re-enters his life, only one thing matters—being with her.

Brought together by chance, the three form an alliance that pushes the boundaries of desire and make unexpected connections that could save the human race from alien conquerors...

*Enjoy the following excerpt for Grady's Awakening:*

The idle time with Gina would be over soon. Jim hadn't yet asked whether she'd be returning with him to Colorado. He was almost afraid to broach the subject because that would bring reality all too close. Grady had to be considered. He undoubtedly had a ship secreted somewhere nearby and at some point he'd have to make a choice.

He would either return to the Alvians or go AWOL. If there was some third possibility, Jim didn't know what it was, but the cousins had counseled him to wait and see. The Oracle said Grady had a role to play, and Caleb O'Hara was seldom wrong. According to his vision, things would work out—somehow. Jim just didn't know how yet.

"Penny for your thoughts." Gina smiled at him as she touched his arm.

"Sorry. I was woolgathering." He straightened from his slouch against the table and pulled her in for a quick hug. "What do you say we blow this popcorn stand?"

"What did you have in mind?" She blinked up at him, and he knew they were on the same page.

"What do you say, Grady? You in the mood?"

"Mood for what?" Grady looked confused. "I don't understand any of what you just said. What's a penny, and why would she give you one for your thoughts?"

Gina laughed, turning to Grady and taking his arm. "That's just an old saying. A penny is a coin we used to use to pay for things."

“So you were willing to pay him for his thoughts? Shouldn’t such things be free between mates?” Grady frowned at Jim, and he had a hard time not laughing in the alien’s face.

“They should indeed,” Gina agreed readily as she started walking, taking Grady with her. Jim followed along close behind.

“Where are we going?” Jim protested when they neared the main entrance to the underground complex. There was a series of tunnels before they’d reach the outside, but this short tunnel, sealed by two huge, metal blast doors, was the entrance to the facility itself.

“I heard about a special place, just outside, in one of the side tunnels. A hot spring.” She sent him a daring look that immediately fired his libido. It didn’t take much to get his motor running where Gina was concerned.

“You don’t say?”

“It’s secluded and private with an independent water source. The ladies I spoke to swore by it for bathing...and other things.”

“Really?” Jim allowed her to coax him out into the small entry tunnel.

There were guards posted at both ends of the small tunnel—one inside the facility and one just outside, in the tunnels. The man inside gave Gina a wink as he heard where they were headed. The second guard cautioned them to be back before they sealed the facility down for the night at midnight. They had a couple of hours to enjoy themselves.

The grotto was lovely. Jim peeked into the chamber before entering, noting as Gina placed a discrete marker at the entrance.

“What’s that for?”

“So we won’t be disturbed. The ladies came up with this little system.” She winked at him.

“Ingenious,” he agreed, pulling her hips to his as he leaned in for a quick kiss.

He was aware of Grady behind them, but didn’t pay the alien much mind until he brushed past. Jim raised his head and followed the alien warrior into the chamber, letting Gina precede him.

Jim crouched down at the lip of the pool, dipping his fingers into the water as he looked around. A cold waterfall doused the rocky depression, which was filled from below with piping hot water. The result was a mixture of perfect temperature, the mineral content diluted with fresh water filtered through the rocks from above. The mixture cut the earthy scent of the minerals.

Jim would bet the area around the vents was bubbly warm if one wanted to soak. He also imagined the brisk waterfall would be a refreshing way to clean up. The combination in one heavenly grotto was nature’s perfection.

Grady had stripped and was in the water before Jim even straightened. Gina, laughing, wasn’t far behind.

Jim took his time, watching Grady and Gina swim a little, enjoying the water. When they started enjoying each other, Jim stripped and entered the pool. He gave them a few minutes while he swam around a bit, exploring the boundaries and depths of the pool. The thermal vents were toasty warm and bubbly against his feet and legs on one end, the cold water of the waterfall refreshing on the other. If an architect had planned it, nothing could be more perfect in design and function.

But then again, the Great Architect had a hand in this place's building. Jim wasn't an overtly religious man, but he believed in the Creator. Especially when he saw someplace like this. Nature's beauty always had a way of convincing him that somebody up there had a plan for things, and just that small reminder was enough to reassure him.

Finding Gina again made him feel that way too. A relationship that would have been impossible in the old world was not only possible now, but promising. With Gina working with him, they had a chance to positively affect the world for all humans. And Grady might be an integral part of it all.

There was no way he could have imagined it just a few days ago, but now things looked good for the future for the first time in decades. Instead of merely existing and eking out a living hidden from the aliens, humans had a chance to do something proactive to change the world for the better.

Jim took another look at his friends at the other end of the pool. He couldn't be absolutely certain, but it sure looked like Grady was already buried balls deep in Gina's tight pussy. That didn't take long.

It was shallower on this end and warmer away from the waterfall. Natural ledges made this part of the pool almost like a hot tub. That was something he planned to exploit with Gina at length—once Grady was done.

He hoped Gina had eaten well today. She'd need her strength if she was going to keep up with both her men.

The thought gave him pause, but only for a moment. He kind of liked the way that sounded. Being Gina's man would have a lot of benefits and only a few drawbacks. The sense of belonging to another person was something he'd never really expected to feel again in his life. Not since the cataclysm had changed everything.

He'd bet Grady had never experienced such a thing—not even on a superficial level, as Jim had with a few of his girlfriends during his youth. Grady had never experienced love—or any emotion—until very recently. It made Jim feel sad for the guy. He didn't even have the memories of a family's love to fall back on in rough times. Only his emotionless Alvian brethren who seemed more like machines at times than people.

Jim swam around a bit, watching as Gina clung to the big alien. He was definitely fucking her if her soft moans were anything to go by. He liked the way her breasts bobbed on the surface of the water while Grady pounded into her below. Her head was thrown back as the muscles in Grady's neck strained, his big

arms supporting her. His expression was fierce, and Jim wondered for a moment if he looked the same when he was close to ecstasy with this special woman.

One of Grady's arms slipped in the bubbly water, jiggling Gina, and Jim decided it was time to give them a hand. Or two.

He approached Gina from behind, sliding up behind her in the warm, effervescent water. Grady met his gaze over her shoulder.

"Give her to me. I'll hold her." Jim held out his hands, and Grady relinquished her upper body into Jim's care, transferring his hold to her hips. She was stretched out between them in the fizzing water, trusting them to see to her safety...and her pleasure.

*Two vampires, one woman, an eternity of love and desire...if only she's strong enough...*

## The Seeking Kiss

© 2009 Eden Bradley

*Midnight Playground, Book 1*

*London 2069*

For as long as Nissa has known about Midnight Playground, the most exclusive of a world-wide network of vampire sex clubs, she has yearned to gain entrance—and to become one of them. Orphaned and alone from a young age, she has nothing to lose and nothing to stop her from indulging in her darkest fantasies.

Hex and his maker, Aleron, have enjoyed many play partners at the club and have often shared in the euphoria of the Seeking Kiss, that sensual blood exchange between vampires and their lovers. But Nissa's beauty, intelligence and strength is a siren call he can't resist. His desire for her and her willingness to let herself be drawn by their mental pull compels Hex to consider offering to her something he's never given another mortal—the treasured Turning Kiss.

The beautiful vampire pair entice Nissa into an intimate sexual realm beyond her wildest dreams—and she revels in it. But when she finds herself falling for one of the powerful duo, it could mean the end of her deepest fantasies. Or a new beginning she never dared to imagine...

*Enjoy the following excerpt for The Seeking Kiss:*

Her mind was emptying out. Too much sensation going on to think. Too much of her most treasured fantasies come to life. Was this really happening?

But the tall one pulled out, stepped away from his partner, reached out and took her hand. His skin was hard and cool on the surface, with a strange sort of warmth lurking beneath. He drew her in, and the dark one came to stand behind her, his arms coming around her body. They began to undress her, and it was as though it was all happening in a dream. Except that it was real and she was wide awake, and she knew it. Fantastic.

The tall one stroked her exposed flesh—her collarbone, the top of her breast, and her nipples hardened until they hurt. And all the time she was aware of the dark one's hands on her waist, holding her up, holding her tight to them both. His flesh was a bit softer than the other's, in a way that was difficult to explain, even to herself. So, so beautiful, both of them, and she thought she'd die if they didn't kiss her soon.

"Soon enough," the blond whispered to her, his voice tinged with a French accent.

She heard his name in her head, like some distant sort of echo. *Aleron*. And then the other, the tone gentler, full of smoke, and she'd known his voice would sound just like that. *Hex*.

Their hands were everywhere at once then, stroking her thighs, her stomach, her breasts, the small of her back. Their mouths followed, their lips surprisingly warm as Aleron lifted her arm and trailed kisses down that sensitive skin on the inside of her forearm, Hex kissing her back. Small, fleeting kisses, too fleeting. Pleasure like fire skittering over her skin, making her tremble. Her pussy was soaked, throbbing. Needing.

“We hear you,” Aleron told her quietly.

Hex took her then, turning her in his arms so that she faced him. The masculine beauty of his face was staggering, his eyes so dark they were nearly as black as his hair, with shots of whiskey and amber lighting them, and unbelievably long lashes. His mouth was ripe, the tips of his eyeteeth resting on that lush flesh. She swallowed, unable to speak, to think. He smiled at her, and his smile was like pleasure itself, working its way deep inside her body.

“We know you, Nissa,” he said, his voice that low, husky whisper she’d known it would be. “We know you, and we are here to give you what you need. What you desire. You want *us*, yes?”

She nodded her head, her throat dry, and it was several moments before she was able to speak. “Yes. Yes...”

“And we want you. Beautiful Nissa. Beautiful girl.”

She shivered once more, his words, his voice, almost as lovely as his touch. Then he did touch her, his hands gathering her bare breasts, kneading them gently, then a bit harder. And she leaned into him, sighing with pleasure as he took her nipples between his fingers, pinching, twisting. Oh yes, pleasure and pain and the exquisite knowledge of what they were. Vampires. Immortal. And she had some sense of the eternity of their existence, as though they fed her a bit of it, along with the ghostly sensations of what each of them was feeling.

She blinked, found them both staring at her face—blazing blue eyes and hot liquid brown. Aleron gave the slightest nod of his chin before slipping back behind her, his hard body pressed against her spine, like sun-warmed stone. Hex smiled before lowering his face to hers and kissing her.

God, his lips, like nothing she’d ever felt before in her life. Hard and soft, yielding yet unyielding. Then his tongue, as hot and silky as any human’s, yet sweeter, more pure, somehow, pushing its way between her lips, twining with her tongue.

*Love him already...*

And the pleasure pushing its way into her body in long, undulating shivers of desire. She was lost in the kiss, in him.

*Hex.*

Aleron put his hands on her once more, stroking her hips, her thighs, impossible feather-light strokes. She’d never imagined one of *them* could be so gentle. And her sex was lighting up with need, wet and hurting.



When Hex pulled away to look into her eyes once more with that riveting gaze, she whispered, "Please touch me."

Hex's hands came down to cover Aleron's, and together they slipped their palms between her thighs, four sets of fingers brushing the curls there, the swollen lips.

"Ohhh..."

She could hardly believe this was happening.

*Don't think. Just feel.*

"Ah, so wet for us," Aleron whispered into her hair.

"Yes..."

She arched her hips into their touch, but they pulled away.

"Not yet, not like this," Aleron said. "I want her on the bed. I want her open to us completely."

They guided her, helped her climb onto the high, velvet-covered bed, laid her out on her back. They stood, one on each side of the bed, and she was trembling all over.

*Need you. Please.*

Aleron's voice was so low she had to strain to hear him. "Yes, Nissa. You shall have us both. And we shall have you. With our hands. With our mouths. With our cocks. And with our teeth. We will drink from you. You will have the Seeking Kiss tonight."

She was shaking so hard she could barely hold still. This was what she'd wanted for so long. And it was happening. Her mind was a tangle of need, sharpened by an edge of fear. What would it really be like, to have them drink from her?

"You are about to find out, beautiful Nissa," Hex told her. His eyes were glowing amber in the dim light, and she felt some of his power in his gaze. Not as strong as Aleron's, but it was there, palpable.

"Yes," Aleron said, "I am older than he is, by centuries. And the Kiss will be different with each of us. But you will love it. You will drown in it a little. But we will care for you. You have nothing to fear."

Their hands were on her then once more, long strokes down the length of her body: her shoulders, her breasts, her stomach and the sensitive skin on the inside of her wrists, until she thought she might die simply from needing them to really *touch* her.

"Please..." she begged.

A small laugh from Aleron. "Ah, she grows impatient."

And before she had a chance to think, his hand was between her thighs, his fingers pushing into her needy pussy.

"Oh!"

Pleasure like a knife, that keen, that sharp, stabbing into her body. Her back arched, she came up off the bed, but Hex was there, holding her down, his hands warm and solid on her hip and shoulder, grounding her somehow.

“Hex... I need you... I need you to kiss me.”

He smiled, his teeth a stunning flash of white, the long canines glinting. Then he lowered his head, his mouth pressing to hers. And his tongue sliding into her mouth, all soft and hot, was like Aleron’s fingers working inside her, pushing, pushing, into her pussy, into her mouth. She was writhing on the bed, her body on that lovely edge already. Her mind was spinning.

Hands held her down, pressing onto her belly, her breasts, her thighs, as the first wave hit her. And Hex’s tongue in her mouth, Aleron’s fingers deep in her sex, pumping, thrusting, until she couldn’t take it any longer.

She cried out as she came, pure ecstasy shimmering through her in glass-sharp waves. Pleasure rose, higher and higher, her body, her mind, filling with nothing but sensation, coursing through her, taking her over. She was yelling, out of control. Lost.

When she opened her eyes she was in Hex’s arms, half lying in his lap as he sat behind her on the bed. She could feel the flawless surface of his chest and stomach against her back, his bare skin an absolute epiphany against hers. Lovely.

Aleron still stood, smiling down at her.

“That was beautiful, Nissa. *You* are beautiful. But the night just begins.”



# Samhain Publishing, Ltd.

*It's all about the story...*

Action/Adventure

Fantasy

Historical

Horror

Mainstream

Mystery/Suspense

Non-Fiction

Paranormal

Red Hots!

Romance

Science Fiction

Western

Young Adult

[www.samhainpublishing.com](http://www.samhainpublishing.com)