



BONNIE ROSE LEIGH

RYAN'S HOPE

Liana Peterson led an ordinary life back on Earth, if you considered being an Empathic Omega with too many brains and no friends ordinary. When Taliff Shi'Lan offered her a new life on *Chantrea*, her ancestor's homeworld, she thought it would be her chance to have a life of her own, a new start where she wouldn't be abused on a daily basis. It didn't take long for Liana to learn that whether on Earth or *Chantrea*, being the Omega left her with few options. She turns to what she knows best, her love of science as she attempts to solve the *Chantreans'* fertility problems.

Ryan Morgan has spent the last five years since his escape from the Black Rose searching the known galaxies for the treacherous woman who had stolen him from Earth to use in her breeding program. Now free, he's dedicated his life to finding and releasing the other victims of her villainy, male and female. But when his actions lead him to being captured by the Black Rose again, this time along with the head scientist for the *Chantreans* working on curing their fertility problems, Ryan is determined to destroy the Black Rose once and for all, because no one would hurt Liana and live.

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RYAN'S HOPE
WORLDS APART BOOK 4

BY

BONNIE ROSE LEIGH

DEDICATION

An author's life can be very insular, meaning to do our job we often hibernate in our homes, only sticking our noses out long enough to scarf down something edible, check to make sure the house is still standing, and that the rent got paid. So, I'm dedicating this one to Andrea Cope: Beta reader extraordinaire. She's been more help than you can imagine. More help than I could have imagined when I set out on this project. Dear readers, as always, this one is also for you, because you are the ones that insisted I write Ryan's story next. Hence one of the reasons I've been hibernating in my cave for the last few months. Enjoy! And of course, to my real life hero, Chris: Every hero I write has his beginning in you. All my love... Forever and Always!

PROLOGUE

Ryan held on for dear life as the small ship left the shuttle bay. A Laser Canon blast rocked the larger ship as they exited as swiftly as they could during the firefight, using the battle as a distraction. He managed a quick glance over at his companion as another blast rocked the craft.

"We're going down!" Anna screamed into her communications device. "Dear Goddess, we're going to crash on this planet and we don't even know where we are to call for help."

"As long as we're away from the Black Rose, I don't give a damn where the hell we are," Ryan said with a snarl. "Nothing could be worse than staying on that ship." He was tired of being poked and prodded – sick of the drugs they injected him with. He could not have endured hearing another woman's scream as they repeatedly raped her in an attempt to impregnate her. He gave Anna a meaningful look. "Even death was preferable to that hell." He jerked his head toward the others. "I think our friends would agree."

The other three women he'd helped to escape merely nodded their agreement with thinned lips. He wished he could have taken more. Still, four women out of the Black Rose's grasp were better than none.

Fire blazed over the nose of the shuttle as they forced their way through the layer of atmosphere.

"Shit! I don't see anything down there but water." Anna fought with the steering lever, trying to regain control of the ship. "I can't... Brace yourselves for impact and try to find something that floats. We're going in and going in hard!" she called over her shoulder.

Ryan gripped the arms of his chair and kept his gaze glued to the window in front of him. He was a dead man, plain and simple. He glanced over at Anna again. "You know, as soon as that glass breaks, we're goners."

"It's not glass. It won't break." Anna gave him a tight smile. "The dampeners should slow us down at least a little and afford some protection. My main concern is water temperature." She glanced back at the others, then at Ryan.

And whether or not everyone could swim, he thought.

What seemed like forever really took less than a minute, including their conversation. Strange how falling several thousand feet could seem to take so long.

The dampeners held. Damage from the impact was minimal and, thankfully, no one was injured. The women screamed at the bobbing of the small craft. None of the women could swim. They were nothing but big cats when shifted, so he could understand their immediate fear—but fear had to be overcome. How in the hell would he save them? *He* was a water baby. He'd been more comfortable in the water than out all of his life. *And* he was an award-winning swimmer. But none of that suggested how he'd keep them all from drowning. He glanced through the transparent hull just in time to see a large fin disappear.

Anna opened the hatch. Two of the women held cushions that would keep them afloat, if they were lucky. That still left two to keep above the surface. He sighed. He didn't have the heart to tell them they were dead already.

"On the count of three we all need to jump from the shuttle as fast as we can. The force of our leaping out and the loss of weight will cause the ship to spin, take on water and sink. Understand?" They nodded. "One."

The women moved closer to the hatch, two in the doorway and two just behind.

"Two."

The women grasped their cushions in white-knuckled grips and braced themselves for their jump.

“Three!”

He and Anna pushed the first three out, then leapt from the shuttle together. The water closed over their heads as the shuttle capsized and slipped below the surface as predicted.

Something large brushed Ryan’s side. *That’s it. I’m shark food now. I hope they at least wait until we’ve all drowned so we don’t have to feel them ripping us apart.* He exhaled, hoping to quicken the inevitable. His eyelids fluttered open when soft lips pressed against his, forcing air back into his lungs. A strange beauty stared into his eyes. Her golden hair floated around her face in a long, tangled mass. It covered her shoulders and chest, hanging well past her... Ryan blinked, then smiled. Now he *knew* he was dead. He was seeing mermaids!

When she wrapped her arms around his waist and started to tow him toward the surface, Ryan kicked his legs. If he wasn’t dreaming—or dead—he’d be damned if he’d allow a woman or mermaid haul his ass up to solid ground. He hadn’t escaped the Black Rose just to give up now.

Moments later, Ryan’s face broke the surface of the eerie-colored water. Doing his best to tread water, he looked for the others. He saw no one except for his rescuer nearby. As he searched the water, one head popped up, then another, until he was surrounded, not only by the other victims of

the Black Rose, but by more creatures like his rescuer, men and women alike.

An hour later, two guards led Ryan to the palace throne room. He didn't know what he expected—maybe that it would be underwater, not this ordinary, but very expensively decorated, ballroom. At the far end of the room were two thrones, occupied by an absolutely human-looking couple. Not a fin or pool of water was in sight. Before he made it halfway across the room, the male squeezed the woman's hand, then headed down the two stairs that led to the ballroom floor.

Moments later, Ryan clasped hands with Mikel Logann, High Prince of *Manruvia*. Within an hour, he signed up to lead the rebel forces against the Black Rose. Within a month, he began the construction of the Rebel Base of *Glendor*. After his first successful raid of one of the Black Rose's prison camps six months later, rescuing both men and women, he vowed to himself that no one would remain in one of her filthy prisons one second longer than necessary. No one.

CHAPTER ONE

Chantrean Palace, Planet of Chantrea, Five Years Later...

Liana Peterson stared into the microscope and grimaced. Negative. Again. Shoving away from the lab table, she gave a frustrated sigh and ran her hand through her tousled hair. When her fingers tangled in the tresses, she dropped her shoulders and closed her eyes in defeat. How long had she been working since her last break? Forty-eight hours? Seventy-two? Longer? She didn't even know. One hour blended into the next, one day into the other, until weeks and months passed in a blur.

So many people were depending on her research, on her finding the answers to the fertility problems plaguing the *Chantrean* people. Though born on Earth, she'd lived on *Chantrea* many years now and remained determined to solve their

fertility crisis. No matter how long she worked, how many hours she put in, she continued to fail her people, continued to fail the men desperate for mates to call their own. She knew the answer was out there, she could feel it just out of reach, and that only made it all the more frustrating that those same answers continued to elude her, even after all the years of fruitless searching.

Eyeing the disheveled cot in the corner of her lab, Liana pressed her hands to the base of her spine, trying to rub out the ache that had started to spread up her back during the long hours she'd spent bent over her equipment. She should rest, try and get some sleep, but too many people were counting on her. Counting on whatever feeble answers her tired and battered mind supplied them with, no matter what agonies she sometimes suffered to get the answers she needed. With one last wistful glance at the cot, she turned back toward the microscope and the box of slides awaiting her attention.

Before she could even bend to look into the microscope, a wave of bitter rage washed over and through her, practically knocking her to her knees. Her hands gripped the edge of the table, her knuckles turned white as she did her best to remain standing. Venomous hatred and anger flowed through her. Whoever was heading her way was definitely not in a good mood, and as

tired as she was, Liana had no defenses to protect herself, no strength to maintain a shield in her mind against the malignant feelings spewing from the approaching *Chantrean*. As an Empath, she couldn't even defend herself physically because everything others experienced, be it pain—physical or emotional—happiness, joy, even fear, she felt the same as if it were her own. It made her an easy target for the others, made her the Omega when she'd give anything to be able to fight back.

She did what she could to fight the one battle that would mean the most to her adopted people and still it wasn't enough. Still, some went out of their way to use her as their punching bag whenever they needed an outlet. There didn't seem to be a damn thing she could do about it other than call security whenever someone got out of hand. It made her look even weaker in everyone's eyes, something she could ill afford.

Using every ounce of her remaining energy, Liana straightened away from the table and stood proud, tall, and waited for the newcomer to enter her domain. In this one room in the palace, she ruled, she held the control. In the entire palace, it was where she felt safest, especially with no mate and no male family members to protect her if she needed help. The High Princess Amy Shi'Lan had linked this one room to her private quarters in case of emergency. She should be safe here, but

almost immediately, she knew that wasn't the case this time. Someone had bypassed the Prince's secured system. She knew of course, who that one person had to be, the one who still had access to the palace despite the constant security sweeps. The Black Rose, former Princess of the Crown.

Her door slid open with a barely audible hiss, revealing three men towing a fourth, barely conscious *Chantrean Lionese* male. Everything inside her stilled. The world narrowed down to this one male. Her pulse sped up as she instinctively inhaled the scents of the males entering her domain. Her fight-or-flight responses kicked in. Three of the males weren't here simply to drop off a sick *Chantrean*, as they claimed, but to observe the layout of the security and report back to their mistress before the offensive was to begin. Hatred and fear, lust and eager perversion wafted off the men in sickening waves. From the *Chantrean*, she only sensed a deep well of hurt and shame that he allowed the men to use his body to lure her into a trap of some kind, that he would in the end be the downfall of the people he'd been trying so desperately to save since his own capture and escape so many years ago.

It was hard to tear her eyes away from the injured male, but she had to, because he wasn't the most dangerous one in the room—not to her and not tonight. The other three were. She could

feel their evil intent. She knew they had weapons on them that her security system had not detected. For now, she was on her own. By the Goddess, what was she to do?

“Please, put him on the cot, I’ll see what I can do for his injuries. I don’t recognize you. Did you just arrive?” Liana tried to keep her voice calm, professional, but inside, she quaked in fear. Somehow, she had to get help down here without alerting the other spies in the palace, because where there were three, there were bound to be more. If only she could fight somehow, without it coming back and harming her instead, they might stand a chance. Alas, her powers didn’t work that way—not even in self-defense. Her heart stuttered and stammered in her chest. She only knew that she had to protect the male. She must protect him at all costs. He was hers to protect.

Liana swallowed and looked toward her uninvited guests. They made no move to deposit the injured male on her cot, and did not introduce themselves to her. Her unease grew. Someone should have noticed the newcomers. Help should have arrived already. That meant only one thing. Spies were once again infesting the palace, gaining access where they shouldn’t, or someone would have detected this intrusion and sent in a rescue unit already—especially here in this room—a room supposedly monitored every moment of

every day for her safety and because of the absolute importance of her experiments. For now, she and the male were on their own. Gathering all the courage and strength remaining in her small, exhausted body, Liana straightened to her full height, barely reaching the chest of the smallest of the foul-smelling men filling her lab. "Go ahead, put him on the cot before he collapses on the floor and someone comes in and sees him lying there at your feet instead of where I can treat him."

Slowly, reluctantly, they put him on the cot, as though they weren't sure if they believed someone might come in or not. He dropped in an unconscious heap, unmoving. Her gut cramped at seeing her male—her mate—lying there so helpless. It shouldn't be this way. She had to do *something* to help.

"What you are doing here?" she demanded. "Who sent you?" she asked, though she pretty much already knew the answer. If the Black Rose had come here, to this lab, to this place, then she must be closer to finding the cure for the fertility problems than she'd thought. Without a cure, men from all across the galaxy were willing to pay the Black Rose outrageous black market fees for sex slaves to bear their young, to breed more women to bear more young. Liana supposed in the Black Rose's mind, she'd become the single most valid threat against the vile bitch's powerbase—if she

were close to a cure, that is. She wasn't so sure she was.

Even while she waited for the men to answer, her mind spun, trying to come up with some plan to affect her escape with the injured male. With her mind racing, she tried to put as much space between herself and the men as possible, but still stay as close to her workspace as she could. There were things on her worktable she could use, drugs that could incapacitate her attackers or revive her male, whichever she needed, but she needed to be able to get to them.

Sidling up to her table, she casually leaned her hip against it and crossed her arms, attempting to look as if the men oozing menace with every breath didn't bother her—not the easiest thing to do, considering how terrified she actually felt. "I don't recognize you, but then again, I'm stuck in the lab all the time and don't know many of the guards now that that King has increased the patrols. Was this man injured searching for the Black Rose?"

"No."

"No, what?"

"No, he wasn't injured on patrol."

"Then how was he injured?"

"Well, doc, we needed to infiltrate the palace. What better way than to injure one of our own? You'd never suspect your own people of working

for the enemy, even after all the treachery. That's your downfall. It's always been your downfall."

"You're going to kill me, aren't you?" Liana swallowed bile. Her stomach cramped and twisted. Another wave of sick and perverted lust washed through her. Yes, they planned to kill her, but not before brutally using her body.

"The Black Rose sends her regards, Ms. Peterson."

Liana nodded. "I see." And she did see. All too well. She wondered who sold her out and for how much. How else would they have known exactly how to get to her lab and known when she would have been completely alone, without so much as a single assistant to aide her? Keeping her movements casual, she slipped her hands into her lab coat pockets and grasped the handle of the needle gun still loaded with adrenaline—adrenaline she used to keep herself awake on days she had too many tests to run and not enough hours in the day. "So, since it doesn't really matter if I know now, who sold me out?"

"You're right. I don't see that it matters now. You'll be dead soon. Your lab assistant, Victor, has been spying for us the past three years. There are a few others, too."

Her shoulders slumped. This was something she hadn't expected. Of all the people she had thought willing to sell her out, Victor's name

would not have been on the list. He above all others, she thought, worked the hardest at finding a cure for the disease causing the lack of female births among their population. Perhaps she'd seen only what she wanted to see. Perhaps what she had seen was his dedication to his true cause, rather than dedication to the salvation of their people. More than likely, he was the reason her experiments were failing—still—when by all accounts she should have found a cure by now. That line of thinking needed to be put off for another time. Now she had to rescue her male and get them the hell out of here.

"I take it you're not just going to kill me outright? Or you would have done it already?" She needed to maneuver closer to her male so she could give him the injection. He had to be awake if they were to get out of here since *she* couldn't fight physically.

If she could slip the needle gun to him, or somehow inject him herself when they attempted to rape her, she could perhaps revive him enough to give them a fighting chance to escape. A big risk when they didn't know who their enemies in the palace were.

Instead of answering, the three men moved in on Liana, herding her toward her disheveled cot, toward the direction she wanted to go. Despite that, fear still threatened to paralyze her because

she knew exactly what they planned to do to her when they got her there. What if her plan failed? Sweat broke out and slid down her spine as she contemplated the fate that awaited her if she failed to awaken her mate in time to prevent her own rape and death.

Slowly they backed her up sideways until her right knee hit the side of the cot. She toppled over, falling to the bed on top of the unconscious male. Using the momentum of her fall, she turned over to the left and quickly jabbed the tiny palm-sized needle gun into his arm, then quickly slipped it into his pants pocket while pretending to scramble off him. The entire injection and subsequent action took mere seconds. She could only pray that she'd done enough to save them.

She felt his body grow rigid beneath her and knew that he'd become aware of the situation. By the time they pried her off his body, she knew he had regained consciousness. She'd do nothing to give him away, no matter what it might cost her.

CHAPTER TWO

Ryan Morgan became aware of several things at once. The first being his body hurt like a son of a bitch. The second, he had a raging hard on and the woman that landed on him had the most luscious scent he'd ever had the pleasure to smell. And third, despite the fact that every bone in his body hurt and he wanted to have sex in the worst way, every instinct he had insisted that he was in dire trouble.

Keeping still, he feigned unconsciousness and let his senses tell him what he needed to know. It took only seconds to discover everything. There were four others in the room with him. Three men and the woman he'd scented earlier. One smelled of fear, the woman. The men were foul, as though they hadn't bathed in weeks, and unfortunately, it was all too reminiscent of the years he'd spent as a prisoner of the Black Rose. He easily figured out what was going on. Now he had to come up with

a plan...quickly.

Somehow, the Black Rose had captured him and the woman, or the men were in the process of trying to abduct them. Either way, he had to do something to get them out of this mess. He needed to wait until they were distracted and make his move if he were to get them out of there...hopefully in one piece. But time *wasn't* on their side, not according to the struggle he could hear going on around him. The sickening smell of the men's perverse arousal and eager malevolence even now had Ryan's beast demanding freedom. No, they were definitely short of time.

When one of the men shoved him off the cot and on to the floor, he knew that would be the only opportunity he'd have to take the men unawares. He only hoped he could shift before too much damage happened to the female. Now that his senses were more aware, he could smell their strange weapons. If he could disarm at least one, they could perhaps fight their way out—maybe. Only time would tell. Half-hidden beneath the cot, Ryan palmed the injector the female had placed in his pants, before silently kicking off his shoes.

Above him, the bed squeaked and the men grunted, covering the sounds as he quickly out of his pants. When the woman's pained cry ripped through the room, time abruptly ran out and Ryan allowed his beast free, embracing the change. He

could do nothing about the shimmering light that heralded his change. He only hoped the men were too distracted to pay attention to the telltale flash. In mere seconds, a full-grown, enraged, *Lionese* male launched itself at the males attacking his mate, not giving them even a moment to fight back. It took but a second to rip out the throat of the man that had knocked the lady doctor to the cot, and still, a rage the likes of which Ryan had never felt before filled the *Lionese* male.

Ryan's surprise assault on the men gave Liana a moment to get away. She scrambled off the bed and away from her three attackers, quickly crawling away from the tumbling mass of fighting bodies.

For just an instant, Ryan wondered why she didn't just shift, but his mind quickly turned back to the fight. One of the men had managed to get to his feet and was approaching the woman, a strange weapon in his hand, his intent to kill her obvious. That he couldn't—wouldn't—allow.

Something inside Ryan snapped. With a roar of rage, he launched himself across the distance between himself and the man. In one lunge, Ryan tore the man's back open from shoulder to ass with his claws, leaving mortal furrows down the entire length of the man's spine. Turning, he roared a challenge to the one remaining *Chantrean* who was injured but still alive, halting the male in

its tracks. He had no desire to let this male live either, but first they needed answers. They needed to know who had let him into the palace grounds. Who had turned Ryan and the woman scientist over to the traitors? Once he learned that, he'd have no trouble dispatching the male to the hell he deserved. No trouble at all.

Sensing the female's terror, Ryan couldn't remain in his *Lionese* form—not if he wanted to calm her fears. And for some reason, calming the little female had become just as necessary to him as discovering who had set them up. Keeping a wary eye on the *Chantrean* traitor, who even now looked to have at least a broken leg and two broken arms, Ryan headed toward the cot where he'd left his pants before he shifted into his *Lionese* form. Once there, he took a deep breath, centered himself, then reached for his human self, letting the magic simmer and pulse through him. Pleasure and heat whipped through his body, bathing his every nerve ending in a blanket of tingling electricity as the change took him from *Lionese* to human.

Never taking his gaze off the traitor, he reached for his pants and slid them on, then reached over for one of the weapons he'd knocked out of the men's hands during his initial attack. Turning the weapon over in his hands, he examined the remarkable little gun. He had never seen anything

like it. No wonder it hadn't set off their weapons detectors in the palace. The material alone was like nothing he'd ever seen before, almost gel like in substance but firm to the touch. He couldn't even begin to imagine what type of *bullet* it fired, but he couldn't wait to find out. He imagined his King and their people would be very interested in finding out for themselves.

Pointing the weapon at the traitor, Ryan eased over toward the woman, needing to be close to her, instinctively understanding the reason behind his actions. His people dreamed of finding their one, their other half. After the atrocities he'd committed, he'd never dared dreamed of finding his, never dared hoped. Now that he had, he found it difficult to put space between them, even though he had yet to even learn her name. When he'd positioned himself in front of his mate to better to protect her, Ryan began his interrogation of the traitor. "What's your name?"

The foul smelling *Chantrean* sneered, then spit on the floor at Ryan's feet.

A savage growl ripped up and out of Ryan's throat in response to the traitor's disrespect. "What were you planning on doing with us? What were your orders?"

The traitor laughed cruelly. "To drug you, of course. Then use you to kill the *Chantrean's* lead scientist. She was getting too close for comfort to

finding a cure, and you were doing too much damage to the Black Rose's profit margin. Her spies would have *stumbled* upon you after the bitch's death and you wouldn't have lived through the night." The bastard shrugged, his attitude surly but carefree, as though he weren't about to die at Ryan's hands. "You should have left well enough alone once you escaped. You brought this on yourself. Even if you kill me, others will come after you. You and the bitch will never be safe...if you make it out of the palace alive, something I doubt you can pull off, not with that one's weaknesses," he sneered, his chin jutting at the trembling scientist.

Knowing he wouldn't get any more answers from the traitor, Ryan lunged forward and quickly snapped the man's neck. Behind him, the woman cried out and collapsed to her knees, her arms wrapped around her torso as though holding herself together. Ryan could feel her pain wafting off her, but a quick scan of her body showed no obvious injury. "Where are you hurt?"

When she only shook her head and continued to whimper, Ryan knelt down in front of her, unsure what to do for her, but desperate to comfort her somehow. Gently, he ran a hand down her long brown hair, trying to comfort her in the best way he could. "What's your name?" Seconds passed. He didn't think she'd answer but

eventually she spoke, her voice breaking twice as she forced her name out through clenched teeth.

"Liana Peterson."

"Well, Liana, I'm Ryan Morgan and we need to get out of here as soon as possible, but if you're hurt I can carry you."

Liana shook her head. "I'm an Empath. I feel whatever anyone nearby me feels. Pain, anger, joy, hatred... If you touch me now," she shook her head, not bothering to finish her sentence.

He understood all too well. "That's why you were trembling and holding yourself just a moment ago? You were feeling the attack, the fight, as well as our emotions?"

She nodded, struggling back to her feet. She kept her hands fisted at her sides, the knuckles white with tension. Her entire body seemed to be swaying as she tried to stand straight, but she was unable to manage it with the continual assault on her emotional senses. "Yes. On top of that, if I try to fight or attack another it, comes back tenfold on me. I cannot harm another without harming myself. Unfortunately, it makes me the Omega because I can't defend myself, no matter what I might *want* to do. I'm going to be a liability if you take me with you. You're better off leaving me here. Get away while you can."

"I can't leave you here. You know why I can't leave you here, Liana." No way would his beast

allow him to leave his mate behind, especially knowing that she would be defenseless without him. How had she been able to survive all these years? What must she have endured while she waited for a mate—for him?

He shuddered, just thinking about all the torment she probably suffered at the hands of others. No. She would no longer stand alone. She'd have someone to fight her battles for her, a champion to stand by her side and defend her. He just hoped that as an Empath, she could help him heal from his own trauma at the hands of the Black Rose without suffering right alongside him when the nightmares seemed all too real.

Liana nodded. "I know, but I had to try. I don't want you hurt because of me."

Ryan looked around the lab, knowing their time was quickly running out. "Is there anything you need to bring with you from here? Anything you have to have to continue your research while we're on the run?"

Liana's eyes widened. Obviously, she hadn't thought about her research. But if the Black Rose was desperate to stop it now, before she could finish the tests she was currently running, then there must be a damned good reason. That meant she had all the more motivation to keep working on it. "I need that box," she said pointing toward the box of slides on the lab table. "My research

notes which are in an encrypted file on my personal *compu-pad*, and we need a ship with a fully functional medical unit or lab.”

“If we can get through the palace undetected by the palace spies, a ship won’t be a problem. Gather what you need. We’ll leave here in two minutes. Are there any clean uniforms in here? As it stands, what I’m wearing definitely doesn’t blend in with everyone else—not with all the blood it anyway.”

While gathering the materials needed to complete her research, Liana pointed toward the wall of cabinets to her right. “Over there. There should be several uniforms in a variety of sizes. One of them should fit you. There’s even an ion shower in the bathroom if you want to clean up, if you think there’s time.”

Ryan thought it over, but they were pushing things it as it was. Staying even five minutes longer so he could shower would put them in more danger than he could justify. Changing clothes would have to be enough for now. While his mate finished packing up, he headed over to the appropriate cabinet, searched through the shelves and found a uniform that would fit him.

It took only a minute to switch out his torn and dirty uniform for a clean one. When he turned around, Liana was ready to go, her research stored in a backpack sitting at her feet. Her gaze settled somewhere to the left of his shoulder and her

cheeks were bright pink. If their situation weren't so dire, he'd laugh at his mate's apparent embarrassment. She must have peeked while he'd stripped or she wouldn't be looking as though she'd been caught doing something she shouldn't have—not that looking at your mate's body without permission was wrong. He had major plans of his own once he and Liana were alone and safe—or as safe as he could make them anyway.

“I'm ready whenever you are.”

Shouldering the backpack, Ryan reached for his mate's hand and pulled her toward the door. After making sure the hallway was clear, they eased out, all of his senses alert for danger. He'd take no chances with his mate's life—not now that he'd finally found her, not when they were surrounded by possible enemies. Until they knew whom they could trust, they could trust no one. With a weapon in one hand and his mate's hand in the other, Ryan left the lab. They were all too aware that they were a long way from the landing pad and safety.

CHAPTER THREE

With her hand firmly clasped in Ryan's, Liana concentrated on putting one foot in front of the other so she wouldn't slow them down. All the while, she tried to shield her exhausted mind from the hundreds of minds battering against hers, screaming at her, their emotions seeking a way in, Ryan's most of all. It took all her strength to keep Ryan from knowing how sick and weak she'd become, what the emotions of the others in the palace were doing to her even though they weren't nearby. Soon, she wouldn't be able to hide the signs of trouble from her mate no matter how desperately she might want to.

She didn't know how much longer she could go on before she'd collapse from the strain. Once again she swallowed bile, sweat beaded up on her skin. Her stomach twisted and cramped. She would not get sick. She would keep going, keep moving. Keep vertical until they reached the ship.

She just had to keep telling herself that. Once they were off the planet and safe, well, then she could collapse. Then it would be safe to let the emotions have her, but not until then. Not. Until. Then.

Biting her bottom lip to keep from whimpering, Liana trudged forward down the long, seemingly endless hallway. Her knees trembled, making it more difficult to support her weight. Soon she wouldn't even be able to stand, never mind walk. What had she come close to discovering that the Black Rose desperately wanted kept quiet? What was so critical that she'd tried to have Liana and Ryan kidnapped in the middle of the afternoon right from the *Chantrean* palace? Whatever it was was so crucial that the Black Rose needed to keep it hidden, so vital that she would try to use Liana's Empathic abilities against her by overwhelming her with the pain of an attack—a brutal and vicious gang rape—to wipe out her mind completely. She had no idea what it was, and she couldn't wait to find out. But first, she had to find some way to survive getting off this planet, before she ended up getting them both killed.

When her vision blurred and her knees buckled, Liana knew that she'd have to take her stand here. There was one person she knew she could trust to help her mate get out of the palace safely, Ryan's sister, Amy Shi'Lan, the next High Queen of *Chantrea* and Liana's only true and

trusted friend. Using the last of her Empathic energy, she reached out to the next High Queen.

Staggering, Liana dropped to her knees as she connected mentally to Ryan's sister. She needed to get help to them fast. Even if she had to sacrifice herself, she'd do it. Ryan had to survive. Her research had to survive. It could already be too late for her. Her mind had grown more and more sluggish just in the last few seconds, still she had to keep her mind focused long enough to connect with Amy. She had no other choice if Ryan were to survive. When she felt positive she'd done what she could, she allowed the darkness to overtake her, collapsing onto the cold marble floors. She didn't even have the energy to keep up a mental wall between her mind and Ryan's any longer, allowing him to feel every excruciating moment of her imminent death—something her every protective instinct toward her mate protested.

As soon as she hit the floor, she cried out in pain. Her mind's shield had shattered and everyone else's emotions were pouring in and destroying her faster than she imagined possible. Soon there wouldn't be anyone for the Black Rose to destroy. The work would have been done right here without anyone having to do anything to her at all. How ironic that in trying to escape the Black Rose, she'd in fact brought about her own demise. As the wave of darkness descended over her

mind, she had time for only one regret. *I would have liked to have kissed Ryan at least once before I died.*

* * * *

Amy Shi'Lan looked over at her mate, Hunter, and allowed a smile to spread across her face. It still amazed her that despite what she'd been through since her kidnapping from Earth at the hands of her mate's sister, the infamous and deadly Black Rose, that she had found such happiness in her new life. Just watching Hunter wrestle with taking down the *Shemoa Tree*—the closest *Chantrea* had to a Douglas fir back on Earth—so that she could celebrate the human holiday of Christmas, made her heart clench in joy. Even after five years with her mate, Amy still couldn't believe at times just how fortunate she was compared to most *Chantreans*.

Rubbing the swell of her tummy where their first child rested, she smiled with contentment. Their child would grow safe and protected, but what about all the other families that were still unable to conceive, even after years of trying, years of waiting for a cure? What about the *Chantrean* couples that desperately wanted a child of their own and had to watch others with humans as mates get pregnant? What of them? As Amy's

thoughts turned toward the desperate plight of their people, a sharp cry pierced her mind, making her gasp in pain and clutch at her head.

Searing agony continued to pierce Amy's mind so it took a moment before she realized what was happening to her. As soon as she did, she called out for Hunter, called out to the one person she could trust above all others to see to her brother's safety. "Hunter, hurry. Ryan's under attack. We have to hurry."

Dropping the Christmas tree where he stood, Hunter rushed to Amy's side. Doing her best to work through the pain to see what Liana wanted to show her, she gripped Hunter's arm and pulled him toward the entrance of their suite deep within the palace walls. As the link between her mind and Liana's grew weaker, Amy prayed to the Goddess Alana, prayed that her feet could grow wings. She didn't have to be told that her friend was very close to death.

"Hurry, faster, Hunter. They're in the East wing, heading toward the family landing pad." Though Liana hadn't told her their exact location, they headed toward her brother's ship. She knew that's where they'd go since Ryan usually landed there when he came to visit. She knew she was betting Ryan's safety on a guess, but with the link between her mind and Liana's growing weaker, she had no way to see her brother's location.

When the telepathic link abruptly severed, it took all Amy had not to collapse in fear. Only knowing her brother's life might depend on her kept her feet moving until she and her mate were running through the palace hallways. If only she could shift, but until she delivered her child, taking her Lioness form was out of the question.

"Go. Leave me. Shift. Hurry," she pleaded. "I just lost the link with Liana. It could already be too late if there are enemies in the palace." When her mate nodded and shifted on the run, Amy tried to pick up the pace, but she was almost full term with her pregnancy, making running full out impossible.

When it seemed like she'd never reach her brother, inspiration hit. Stopping right in the middle of the corridor, Amy lifted her head up and called out toward the sentient computer on Hunter's ship, *Vengeance*, which also ran most of the autonomic functions of the palace itself. "Julius, lock on to my brother and Liana Peterson's life signs and transport them directly onto Ryan's ship, *Retribution*. Then contact *Retribution* and have it engage the cloaking system and head out into space. Hunter and I will be arriving aboard *Vengeance* momentarily, so prepare to join *Retribution* in space."

"Acknowledged. Working, Princess Shi'Lan."

Knowing she'd done all she could for now,

Amy once again began running toward her brother, this time, at least the beginnings of a plan forming in her mind rather than just racing ahead in a blind panic. "Julius, you also need to contact our friends on *Manruvia* and let them know that they should be on alert for danger until we know more of what happened."

"Message encrypted and sent to the *Manruvian* ship, *Victory*." Several seconds passed, then the sentient computer aboard her mate's ship, *Vengeance*, reported on her brother's escape status. "Ryan Morgan and Liana Peterson are aboard the *Retribution*. Launch of *Retribution* in progress."

"Report on health conditions of Ryan and Liana, Julius."

"The female was transported directly to the medical bay aboard *Retribution*. Scans show an active brain bleed. *Retribution* is now healing several lesions in patient Peterson's brain. Healing session will continue for an additional ten minutes and thirteen seconds. Ryan Morgan suffered superficial knife wounds that have already begun to heal on their own. He is aboard *Retribution* in the Command Center and is preparing to Launch *Retribution* in ten seconds. Nine. Eight..."

Sighing in relief, Amy rounded the corner and continued her race toward the ships. Even knowing her brother wasn't in immediate danger anymore wasn't about to slow her down... Not

until his ship left *Chantrea* air space and there was no sign of any pursuit. "End report, Julius. I'm approaching *Vengeance* now. What is the location of Hunter Shi'Lan?"

"Hunter Shi'Lan is speaking to Palace Security Guardsmen Miguel Williams in the Transportation Command Tower."

As Amy approached the East Wing exit nearest the family Landing zone, she spied two guards standing at attention, their pulse rifles held in their arms and ready to fire, their faces lined with grim determination—at least that's how it appeared to her. The question though, was whether she could trust them or not. And she preferred knowing before she reached them. Slowing her steps now that she knew Ryan and Liana were relatively safe, she reached out to her mate through their mate bond. *Can I safely approach the two guards standing in front of the East exit?*

Calm reassurance and love flooded Amy's mind, making her lips quirk up in a smile. She could literally feel her mate's arms wrapped around her despite the physical distance between them. Ever since she'd told him of her pregnancy, Hunter had gone out of his way to keep her happy and calm. He'd probably try to reassure her all was well while in the middle of a life or death firefight as well. Hunter's next words confirmed in her mind that all wasn't as safe as his comforting

arms implied. *Julius is transporting me to your side.
Wait for me before you approach the guards.*

What's going on, Hunter?

CHAPTER FOUR

Grimacing in disgust, Hunter took one last look around the tarmac where Ryan had been ambushed. If he and his brother, Taliff, hadn't arrived when they had, the shy scientist and bold rescuer would be lying cold on the ground. Even now, Taliff was making the *Vengeance* ready for departure while he collected his mate. Speaking of... "Julius, transport me directly to Amy Shi'Lan's side."

Anxious being away from his mate's side, especially now that she carried the life they'd created together and was so close to her due date, Hunter wanted to kiss the ground at her feet when he found her safe. Her ragged and labored breathing sounded obscenely loud in the nearly empty hallway. Knowing she'd want to know how her brother was, he didn't waste any time letting her know what he'd learned already.

"Ryan said that he was attacked within seconds

of leaving the ship once he landed. He'd received a transmission that you'd gone in to premature labor and needed him home immediately. Unfortunately, he didn't verify the contents of the message, just raced home to comfort you. Once they subdued him—he remembers six attackers, though he eliminated and left two bodies here on the tarmac that have since disappeared—the others escorted him to the Science Laboratory where Liana was working on the genetic testing. They managed to escape, but just barely, which is when she called out for you."

Amy placed a hand over their unborn child, concern clearly written on her face. "Ryan's okay though? You swear it on the health of our baby, Hunter!"

"He's safe enough at the moment. He knows there are others working for the Black Rose in the palace, but hasn't a clue who they are or how many. The lack of bodies here is evidence of that, so he needs to leave the planet for now. Once we're safely away from here, we'll arrange to meet up with Ryan and try to figure out just what my evil bitch of a sister, Haeda, is up to."

With infinite gentleness, Hunter pulled his distressed mate into his arms, content to have her resting there, secure in his embrace. But they had spies in their midst and he'd much rather speak to Amy privately about what he'd learned this

morning rather than speaking aloud. Reaching out with every one of his senses, he couldn't detect any nearby life signs other than the two guards. Still, he wasn't about to take any more chances with Amy today. After one last glance around him, Hunter wrapped his mate in his arms completely, then requested transport. "Julius, lock on to my signal and transport two to the Command Deck of the *Vengeance*. Prepare to launch upon on arrival."

As they materialized in the Command Center on the star ship, *Vengeance*, Amy laid her head against Hunter's chest and he heard her words in his heart.

We won't meet up with Ryan right away, Hunter. Make me forget about Haeda, about the past, about what she has planned for my brother, for us, for just a few minutes, she ordered.

After first ensuring that no one appeared to be readying another ship for takeoff and then plotting the *Vengeance's* intercept course with the *Retribution*, Hunter lifted Amy into his arms and carried her to their quarters like a marauding pirate desperate to slake his desire for his virgin captive. He'd never grow tired of making love to his mate. Never.

* * * *

"What in the hell is taking so long, *Contessa*?" Ryan growled at the sentient computer aboard his Star Class Deep Space Reconnaissance ship *Retribution*. *I probably sound like a crazy person*. Not that he cared. Once again, his eyes locked on the still figure lying in the *medi-pair* chamber, the pink healing mist swirling and flowing around her, filling the glass-like compartment with its healing essence. A *transonomi* dome covered Liana while repairs continued on her body, making her look too much like Earth's story of Sleeping Beauty in her glass coffin to suit him. She'd come so close to dying, they both had. Even now, knowing that the *medi-pair* chamber was hard at work healing her, he couldn't get his heart rate to come down. What if he'd lost her? What if he still did? He'd known her for less than two hours and already he knew he wouldn't stay sane without her.

"Estimate of time remaining until healing of Liana Peterson is complete is three minutes, forty-five seconds, Commander Morgan."

"Thank you, *Contessa*. Set a course for the *Manruvian* moon, *Glendor*. We are to meet the ships *Victory* and *Vengeance* at the Allied Base on the moon's surface along with their Commanders upon our arrival."

"Course set, Commander Morgan."

"Engage course and notify both the *Victory* and the *Vengeance* of our estimated arrival time."

"Working, Commander." A few seconds passed, then the ship's voice once again filtered through the Medical Bay speakers. "Messages sent and received. Time until rendezvous with the *Victory* and the *Vengeance* is fifty-five minutes, fourteen seconds."

Ryan's heart actually hurt at seeing his new mate lying so still and helpless. When he'd seen her clutch her head and collapse, for one unending moment his whole world crashed down around him. In that single moment in time, he knew that this one small woman had become the center of his world and that he would kill, ruthlessly and without mercy, to keep her safe. Keeping her safe and happy was his priority now, the most important thing in his life, more so than even his thirst for vengeance for the crimes committed against him, or his need to seek out other victims and carry out their rescues. The *only* thing he could no longer live without was Liana. To know that she had the kind of power over him – without doing a thing but existing – scared Ryan all the way to his toes.

As the time for the healing wound down, Ryan found himself moving closer and closer to his mate, lying still and unconscious inside the healing chamber. She looked so fragile and vulnerable.

When the pink mist finally cleared, he got his

first real glance at the woman who would complete him. The beast he usually kept tightly chained inside him battered against the shield in his mind. It took all his control and strength to prevent his beast from shifting and taking control. It wanted out. It wanted its mate. Now. Ryan could hardly blame it.

She was a veritable feast for the senses. He wanted to lick her from one end to the other and everywhere in between. He wanted to wallow in her scent and mark her so thoroughly with his own that no other would dare approach her for fear of his retaliation. From the top of her head to the bottom of her feet, she probably only stood a couple inches over five feet tall. Not stick-figure skinny, she had sweet womanly curves that just begged a man to make her his, from her full hips to her lush breasts that could make a grown man thank all the gods and goddesses above for creating women in the first place. Rich, dark hair splayed around her, its thick length spilling down nearly to her hips, practically screaming for a man to run his hands through the mass of silken tresses. He couldn't help visualizing his hands fisted in her silky-smooth coffee-colored hair as he rode her from behind.

Ryan shuddered, then swallowed down the groan of desire trapped in his chest. As if that wasn't enough to lure a man to his doom, her

golden brown skin appeared to glow from within, seeming to beg for his touch alone. When her eyes snapped open and her gaze seemed to lock onto his, he swore all the universe's secrets could be found in her heated stare.

Ryan almost snorted. He must be losing it if his mind was practically spewing poetry just looking at his mate. And when she licked her lips as the silence between them lengthened, his cock grew thick and rigid beneath the fly of his pants in mere seconds. Never had he responded to a woman so quickly before, or so urgently. Despite the fact that minutes ago she laid near death, he could barely keep himself from charging over to her to drag off to his bed.

Gritting his teeth and fisting his hands at his sides, he raised his face toward the speakers set high into the walls of the ship, not that such a move would be necessary for the sentient computer to hear him. It was just habit. "*Contessa*, release Liana from the *medi-pair* chamber."

"Command acknowledged. Chamber released."

Almost immediately, the *transnومي* shimmered and vanished, allowing Liana freedom. She practically leapt off the table in her hurry.

"Are you claustrophobic?" he asked, concerned that being in the coffin-like box may have traumatized her despite its see through material.

Liana swallowed, then ran her hands down her

legs before shaking her head. “No. Well, not normally, but what about what happened today is normal, after all?”

More to keep from dragging her into his arms than anything else, Ryan walked to the far wall opposite her *medi-pair* bed, where a round *transonomi* window took up most of the wall, and stared out into the blackness of space. “We’ll be rendezvousing with Princes Shi’Lan, Taliff and Hunter, as well as Prince Mikel of *Manruvia* in less than an hour to discuss today’s events. Between us, hopefully we can figure out just what the Black Rose is up to and find some way to thwart her.”

Once again, Ryan clenched his hands together. Just thinking about the Black Rose sent his temper spiking. As a victim of her abuse and her experiments, he felt a bone-deep hatred for the woman, and a savage desire to rip her throat out over and over again with his own teeth and claws. If anything, the smell of his mate lessened the impact that thoughts of the Black Rose usually manifested both mentally and physically. For once, he was able to keep his claws sheathed after thinking about his abduction.

“Good. The bitch has to die. Did she get her hands on my backpack from the lab? I think I dropped it when I had my meltdown back at the palace. You should have done what I said and left me there.”

Shaking his head, Ryan turned to face his mate. He could see the light of battle in her eyes now. She didn't like the thought of his capture and death any more than he liked the thought of hers. "I couldn't just leave you."

When she would have protested, he held up his hand. "I didn't say wouldn't. I said *couldn't*. It would have been impossible to leave you, my mate, to that Bitch's mercy. Don't ask me to do that or you'll be disappointed every time," he vowed. He'd rather die himself than have Liana spend one minute of her time under the Black Rose's care. Shaking his head to dislodge such depressing thoughts, he pointed toward the viewport. "Would you like to go to the Command Deck? The view from there can seem like a holy experience, especially on days when the filth around us suffocates." When a small smile curled up at the corner of Liana's lush mouth, something inside him eased.

"I'd like that," she murmured. And from the twinkle in her eyes as she spoke, seeing the vastness of space around her really would please her.

At least he could give her this, one good memory for the day she'd met her mate. It could have been so much worse.

Again, shrugging off his depressing thoughts, he gave in to the urge he'd been fighting since she

regained consciousness and walked to her side. Slowly, so as to give her plenty of time to refuse if that were her wish, he reached for her hand and tugged her toward the exit. "Come. Let me show you some of the ship while we make our way to the Command Deck."

As they left the Medical Bay, his mate's hand firmly grasped in his, Ryan prayed to the Goddess Alana that nothing would harm his new mate because he hadn't had nearly enough time with her. A hundred lifetimes probably wouldn't be enough time with her, he thought, as he looked down into his mate's upturned face. She was his future and he couldn't wait to get started on building one with her at his side. Now if only he could keep his hands and lips to himself long enough for her to want the same thing.

CHAPTER FIVE

Looking for a safe topic, one that would help her get to know this new mate of hers and one that would distract her from the sheer maleness of Ryan, she reached for one topic most men, in her experience, enjoyed talking about—their toys. And this ship was definitely one high-tech toy if she'd ever seen one. "Do you spend a lot of your time on board this ship?"

Nodding, Ryan gave her hand a tentative squeeze. "I spend several months at a time on board, but with a new mate, well, that's something we can work through if you need to be planet side. Though for safety reasons, I'd rather we stay onboard *Retribution* until we figure out what exactly the Black Rose has planned."

"That makes sense." When she felt his surprise wash through her, she quirked her lips, as amused by his stunned expression as his honest surprise that she'd agree with him without argument. "Did

you expect me to argue with you? Did you not miss the whole brain bleed episode on the planet's surface? I hide in my lab for a reason. Too much emotion can kill me if I'm tired or stressed. Even with the shielding the lab is surrounded with, it doesn't completely block others' emotions. You've seen that for yourself—though I believe the dampening field in the lab was turned off prior to today's attempt on our lives. Having a place away from the majority of others where I can work and live in relative isolation is my idea of heaven."

"Not too isolated though?" he asked, his voice turning husky as a wave of intense desire poured out of him and over her.

How was she supposed to deal with her own overwhelming attraction for her new mate when she could feel his as well? She might as well just hop in the sack with him now at the rate she was going. Just walking next to him, smelling his musky male scent had her itching to explore his body, every centimeter. She wanted to lick him from head to toe, back to front, and every inch in between.

She cleared her throat and tried to concentrate on answering his question. "No, not too isolated." She could feel the blush spread across her face as she thought about what might happen with just the two of them on the ship, alone for hours and days on end.

Looking at her mate from the corner of her eye, she allowed herself the freedom to enjoy the reactions he stirred in her. Though he wore his hair shorter than most *Lionese* men she'd seen, it did in no way detract from his overall beauty. Made up of different shades of brown, red and even darker blacks, his hair practically shimmered beneath the ship's lighting. Ryan's warm eyes were the exact same color as hers, one of the most obvious physical signs that you've met your perfect match, the True Mate of your soul. Ryan had a rugged beauty that drew her as no other before him. His sharp cheekbones and full lips made her itch to trace the contours of his face with her fingertips. Would his skin feel as good beneath her hands as she imagined?

Beneath the scrub shirt he still wore, she could see the muscles in his chest flex and bunch with his every movement. As her gaze drifted lower, down over the ripped abdomen and flexing thighs, she couldn't help but focus on the thick cock pressing against his pants. She could see the shape and size of him through the thin material of the pants and it made her womb spasm in need. Her heart sped up and her hands began to tremble as wanton need, hungry and savage tore through her. Her clit twitched, and her aching and empty pussy clenched in unadulterated desire, a need so pure she would surely combust if she didn't do

something about it.

When Ryan's nostrils flared and his heated gaze snapped to hers, she knew he could smell the slick cream spilling from her pussy. Liana could feel the blush steal across her cheeks and knew that even though he wasn't Empath, he could sense her embarrassment because he suddenly pulled her to a stop, then cupped her cheek.

You honor me, moya.

For one moment, she stared blankly as his sincerity poured through their bond. He honestly felt honored that she was attracted to him, that his scent aroused her. Being an Omega *Lionese* female, she'd never felt worthy of any man's attention. It was monumental that this hero to their people, one who'd gone into battle to rescue the Black Rose's victims again and again, felt honored to be with her. In that moment, she knew it would take very little effort to fall completely and irrevocably in love with this man, and though she knew there were valid reasons why she should avoid an intimate relationship with him given her Empathic abilities, she couldn't think of a single one. He was her mate, designed for her alone out of all the other woman in all the known universes. Who was she to turn away such a precious gift? Liana licked her lower lip in anticipation.

Ryan groaned. "Hold that thought, little one. We're almost at the meeting place so we'll have to

explore the heated looks you're throwing at me after our meeting." *Though, how I'm going to keep my hands off you that long, I can't imagine. You've blasted through whatever will to resist I may have had when your pussy starting spilling out such a luscious and beguiling scent. It's mouthwatering, and my beast wants to wallow, to bathe himself in it.*

Liana's entire body quivered in reaction to his words, to his emotions. She could feel his beast rubbing up against his human skin, anxious to touch and be touched. She could sense Ryan's struggle to give her the space and time she'd need to come to terms with having a mate. She could feel his body's demand that he claim her now, before something happened to tear them apart before ever experiencing the bonding of one mate to another. She could also feel his absolute conviction that she was his and that he would fight to the death to keep her and any children they may have safe from the Black Rose. He would never allow anyone to harm her. Ever. His loyalty to the *Chantrean* people, to the faceless victims waiting for rescue, had swung her way completely in the course of one afternoon, when he'd thought he'd lost her before ever getting to know her.

"Then today, after the others leave, before we do one thing more for our people, let's claim each other. I don't want to wait, Ryan."

“Are you sure, *moya*? I can wait. There’s no hurry so long as we’re near. I can hold out until you’re comfortable with us, with the depth of our bond. I understand being Empathic complicates this for you.”

Shaking her head, Liana reached up and cupped her mate’s cheek, felt the stubble of his beard’s shadow rasp against her palm. “That’s just it. Being Empathic is a help in this case, not a hindrance. I can *feel* exactly how you feel about me, what I mean to you, and my qualms are nothing in the face of what I’ll gain by joining my life with yours. I need you just as much as you need me, *moyo*.”

When Ryan’s eyes actually glittered with heat and his heart sped up in response to her words, she knew she’d made the right decision. They were right for each other and she’d not lose her chance at having a mate of her own from fear of the unknown. She didn’t need the *Manruvian* Mate Bonds to know for sure they were destined mates, but she’d honor her new mate, their new people and their new goddess, by performing the ceremony as soon as she could arrange it. She supposed she should ask Ryan first before just going ahead and making plans for them—even if they were made only in her mind at this point. Swallowing down her nervousness, Liana looked into her mate’s eyes, felt warmed by the heated

longing in his intense gaze. "Will you wear the *Manruvian* Mate Bonds and complete the mating ceremony with me if we can make the arrangements to do so while meeting the others?"

After a brief flare of surprise, Ryan's lips curved up into a wicked smile—one that made her think of sweaty, exhausting sex and wicked, sensuality leading to endless pleasure. "I'd be honored if you claimed me as your mate. *We'll* arrange for the ceremony for as soon as possible. In the meantime," he whispered, that wicked glint back in his golden brown eyes, "why don't we seal our impending mating with a kiss?"

Liana's heart stuttered in her chest, then sprinted ahead. Gah! She couldn't wait to taste his lips, to let his flavor mix with hers and seep into her system. As though reading her thoughts, Ryan slowly lowered his head as she lifted to her tippy toes. Their mouths met in the middle, merged, nipped and retreated, caressed and soothed, coming together gently, sweetly before the tenuous control they'd kept on their passion snapped.

She didn't know when she'd lifted her arms and wrapped them around his neck, but suddenly, she fisted her hands in his hair, twisting the strands in her grasp as she tried to get closer. She wanted to sink into his very skin, merge completely with him as lips and tongues parried

and twined, suckled and stroked, tasting and exploring. Liana groaned. She couldn't help it. When Ryan's hands slid down her back, gripped her ass and lifted, Liana wrapped her legs around his waist and sank into the kiss, plastering herself against Ryan's chest. *By the Goddess*, she groaned.

"You feel so good, baby," he murmured. His lips trailed down the column of her neck, over her pulse point. When his cock met the notch of her pussy, they both moaned at the sensation. Grinding against the rigid length of his shaft, Liana rode her mate, needing to come like never before. With her fists still wrapped in his hair, she kissed him for all she was worth. Tongues dueled, mimicking the motions of their hips. They both gasped and moaned, their lungs labored, and sweat shimmered atop their skin as they both strove toward release.

When Ryan moved one hand from her hip to the front of her scrubs and pressed against her clit, Liana finally shattered, her climax rolling over and through her in waves. Whether it was the sudden movement, her thrashing or the sounds of her release that triggered it, Ryan followed her over the edge, shuddering as he bathed the front of his pants and hers with come.

"I can't believe we just did that, in the middle of the corridor for Goddess' sake," Liana muttered, hiding her face against Ryan's neck.

His low, husky chuckle sent another wave of lust barreling through her body. Pushing away from his chest and too embarrassed to look her mate in the eye, she stared over his left shoulder. "You better put me down. We should be coming up on *Glendor* pretty soon, don't you think?"

"There's no need for embarrassment, not between us. But you're right. I imagine we'll be approaching *Manruvian* Air Space very soon and should be at the Command Deck when that happens."

With great reluctance—she could feel just how much he regretted having to put her down—he allowed her body to slide down the length of his, pulling out another low moan from the both of them.

"Next time we come, we'll be naked, and somewhere where I can spend hours exploring your body," he vowed.

Liana didn't doubt that for a minute. She wanted him as much as he wanted her. Before her thoughts could continue down that avenue, an alarm sounded throughout the ship. "What's that?" she asked, though she had some small idea.

"Our proximity alarm," he confirmed. "Something—or someone—is coming up on us." Gripping her hand in his, Ryan took off at a jog, pulling her behind him. "*Contessa*, what is the nature of the alarm?" he asked, his voice now

grim and determined. Powerful. The Alpha Male protecting its mate and den as he prowled the length of his ship in search of an unseen enemy.

CHAPTER SIX

As they jogged down the corridor, Ryan smiled, forcing back a chuckle. His come and hers had left its wet evidence on their clothes for all to see — the first step in the claiming, technically, as they were both similarly marked. Looking back, he didn't feel any regret at all for having dry humped his mate in the hallway of his ship. Well, he did regret not being inside her when she came. Next time — he promised to himself — he would be.

When *Contessa's* synthesized voice sounded through the ship, Ryan once again focused on their current situation. "We've just reached *Manruvian* Air Space, Commander Morgan and both the *Victory* and *Vengeance* are approaching our orbiting position above *Glendor*."

"That's excellent news. Thank you, *Contessa*. Turn off the proximity alarm, then send word to the other ships that we'll be arriving directly at the Strategic Control Room within in the next quarter

hour.”

“Acknowledged. Working. Messages relayed to both the *Victory* and the *Vengeance*. The three princes and their mates will meet you at the Allied Base’s Strategic Control Center within the next quarter hour as per your request.”

By the time they reached the Command Deck from where they’d be able to transport directly to the moon below, Liana had her embarrassment under control...mostly. “Where can I change my clothes? I packed an extra set of scrubs and I think now might be the right time to change. I don’t think either one of us wants to meet the three princes wearing come-soaked clothing,” she added, her lips quirked up in a mischievous smile.

Ryan chuckled, squeezed the hand he still held from their mad dash down the hallways. “You do have a point there. I keep a wardrobe of clothes on board, but until we can arrange for some clothing for you, the scrubs you brought along will have to do, unfortunately.”

Liana nodded but he could tell her thoughts weren’t on her attire. He wasn’t sure exactly how he knew that, but he was suddenly sure her thoughts were on the upcoming meeting and not something as trivial as her wardrobe. Perhaps the mental bond between them was stronger, he mused, because of his mate’s Empathic abilities.

As far as he understood it, the mate bond

usually allowed the couple to know each other's general feelings—whether they were happy and sad—and could help locate a mate over long distances. The bond also established a telepathic connection between the pair. Yet no one had mentioned being able to read their mate's mind because of the bond. When he had more time, they'd have to explore the possibilities, but that time wasn't now. They had a meeting to attend. *Everything will be fine, moya, beloved. I'll guard you with my life and so would everyone we're about to meet down below.*

Liana raised her fear-filled gaze. *Are you sure?*

Absolutely positive, baby. He watched as Liana's forehead puckered in thought, then lost himself in a storm of heat as his mate began undressing. He needed to readjust himself in his trows, but he doubted she'd miss such an obvious move.

Within minutes, he and Liana had changed their clothes. They were ready to transport to the surface, and thence to the underground bunker that the *Chantreans* and *Manruvians* trained in. It was now used as a jump off point while searching for the Black Rose and her rebel bases. After giving his mate a comforting squeeze, he called out to the ship's computer.

"Are you ready?" he asked, wanting Liana to be comfortable. If she needed more time, well she could have it. She'd almost died today and the

others would have to understand.

Though he could feel her nervousness, Liana nodded. "I'm ready."

"*Contessa*, transport us to the Allied Base. The Strategic Control Center, please."

"As you command. Working..."

By the time they entered the conference room in the Allied Base, the others were already there and waiting for them. If he hadn't spent the last five years working loosely with these three princes—Hunter Shi'Lan, the crown prince of *Chantrea*, Prince Taliff Shi'Lan and High Prince Mikel of *Manruvia*—he might have been embarrassed at keeping them waiting. Instead, he wanted to get all the facts laid out calmly and efficiently, so they could put some sort of protection plan in place on his mate. He would not lose her, not now that he'd finally found her.

With his palm pressed against Liana's lower back, he guided her into the Officer's Lounge—what passed for a conference room when organizing rescue missions—where the three princes and their mates were waiting. He could hear them talking and laughing in the background. What he wouldn't give to be able to be sharing laughter with his mate right now. He could feel the nervous tension running through her body, trembling slightly against his palm, and he wanted to wrap his arms around her to offer

her what comfort he could. At least she hadn't shrugged off his touch. It wasn't enough to soothe his beast completely, but it went a long way to keeping it calm when so many males were near his female, when danger surrounded her and he'd yet to claim her, mark her as his. Perhaps once the mating ritual was complete he'd be able to bear a bit of separation from her, but looking down into her worried gaze, he didn't see that happening anytime soon.

As he quickly scanned the room, he tried to picture it as though seeing it for the first time. At least as head scientist researching the fertility problems facing their people, Liana had become friends with Amy, Ryan's sister, and knew Eve because she was Liana's original pride leader when she was kidnapped from Earth. Also, as they were raised on Earth like she was, Amy and Eve probably felt like home. Only Mikel and Maryann would perhaps be strangers to her, and he wasn't even sure of that. Until Hunter had arrived in the Landing Pad, he had no idea that either his sister or her mate knew Liana, not until Hunter cried out her name in a gasp.

"Good evening everyone." Hugging his mate to his side, Ryan led her to one of the love seats and pulled her down next to him. Rather than crowd around the conference table in one corner of the lounge, Ryan had purposely chosen to sit in the

oversized furniture at the other end of the room, something the women could lounge in. The topic they were here to discuss would be stressful enough on them—and on himself—that sitting in uncomfortable chairs to discuss it was unnecessary. “I think most of you know my mate, Liana Peterson.”

“She’s the head scientist in charge of discovering the cure to our fertility problems on *Chantrea*,” Amy clarified because Mikel obviously knew nothing about her. His face had showed no signs of recognition, not even when Ryan had told them her name.

Even Eve shook her head. “Before leaving Earth, Liana was considered by most of the world as a prodigy. A genius who’d graduated college with a doctorate before her twelfth birthday. Taliff couldn’t have chosen better for what our planet’s needed most when he took her off world and brought her out here,” Eve admitted.

When Eve began to recite his mate’s education, at first Ryan felt nothing but pride that she’d accomplished so much when being near people at all was an almost unbearable trial. But as the degree of her intelligence sunk in, his stomach grew tense, uneasy. What would she want with a mate who’d not even completed his high school education? He was so not worthy of her, of her love. How could the Goddess Alana whom the

Chantreans revered so much, match him with her? There must have been some sort of mistake. Liana could never be happy with him in the long-term.

Ryan wanted to whimper when the sense of loss washed through him. She'd never be happy with him.

Ryan, you make me immensely happy. I want no one but you. I'll accept no one but you. You complete me. You, and you alone, make me feel safe and cherished. How could I want anyone else when you give me everything I've ever dreamed of just by feeling about me the way you do?

Leaning down, Ryan pressed a kiss to her forehead. *I don't deserve you, but by the Goddess, I'm not going to give you up either.*

Like I would have let you. Liana cleared her throat. "Should I bow or shake hands? How does one greet *Manruvian* Royalty?" she asked.

No regrets. Actually, he did have one regret—that he hadn't had time to make love to her before leaving the ship, thoroughly ravish her so she wouldn't remember what it felt like not to have him deep inside her, all around her. He wanted to show her how much he cherished and adored her just as she was so she'd never doubt her appeal again, never feel like an unlovable Omega again—just as she felt when she thought about how isolated she'd been as a child genius. Again, he could practically see her childhood behind his

eyes, feel the very emotions she felt growing up.

Dammit! You're going to make me cry. No one's cared how I felt being an Empath, and I can't handle that now on top of my nervous stomach. Focus, moyo.

Lost in his morose thoughts, he'd expected to be called out for staring off into space, but only a mere second or two must have lapsed because Mikel and Maryann and the others didn't seem to notice they weren't paying attention.

Mikel and Maryann shook their heads and chuckled. "I put my pants on the same as Hunter and Taliff do. If you can find a way to thwart that bitch, Haeda—otherwise known as the Black Rose—and find a cure for our fertility problems you can greet me any way you'd like," he admitted. "That's a solemn vow." When she let out another soft chuckle, he knew they'd pass their first crisis—together.

"Good. Then let's try and figure out just what's going on," she murmured.

Right that moment, he fell in love. He knew how frightened she'd been earlier and how terrified she remained as they went up against the known universe's most ruthless criminal. Her willingness to discuss her near-death experience and then to jump right back into the muck that nearly killed her, sent him hurling over the precipice he'd been walking along, tumbling head long into love. A great wave of it washed through

him, making his heart stutter in his chest for just a moment before kick starting into a steady gallop. What surprised him most wasn't that he'd love his mate, but that loving her didn't scare him to death. It felt perfectly right to love her.

Startled brown-gold colored-eyes stared into his. Liana must have felt the moment as clearly as he did. Hmm...her empathic ability could be convenient when finding the words that were harder to come by and nearly impossible to do so when expressing his feelings. Though he knew she'd need to hear the words, too, but this wasn't the time for that.

You're right. Not the best moment for such an epiphany. How are we supposed to get anything done when you're giving us both heart attacks? she teased. Sensing he also needed the words, she put all the feeling she could behind them. *How could I not love you when despite what you've suffered, what you've surely earned, you've not only survived but have chosen to rescue those that need it most despite the bounty on your head? You are more than worthy of my love, and whoever doubts that will have to go through me until they're set right. Together, together we'll get through everything thrown at us. Now let's make some plans so that we can officially join our lives together this rising, my love.*

* * * *

Hunter watched the arrival of the newly matched pair as they entered the Officer's Lounge—better known as Strategic Command Central—of the Allied Base headquarters. They were deep within the bowels of the moon, and surface scans would show nothing but dense, nearly impenetrable rock, which satellites could not even breach. In reality, the base on Glendor had been operational for nearly five years, since shortly after Ryan's own escape from the Black Rose. He'd been instrumental in not only gathering their army of volunteers but in the planning and rescue of hundreds, perhaps thousands, of men and women used to breed more broodmare slaves.

Just in the few hours since they'd met, Liana'd had such a profound and positive effect on his friend. Before, Hunter swore one could see Ryan's soul turn cold at each meeting. More and more of what made Ryan who he was, a defender of those weaker than himself, a man with his own demons looking for penance by helping others, had been lost over the years of battling the Black Rose. Now, he had a reason to live besides guilt, and she stood just up to Ryan's chest. And when the pair shared a warm intimate smile like those Hunter and his mate, Amy, shared, he knew that Ryan would be all right with the little doctor at his side.

Deciding it was time, Hunter cleared his throat. At once, he had everyone's attention. "I'm sure

we'd all like to know just what happened today. If war is coming again, we need to prepare our peoples." His stark voice seemed to echo in the silent chamber as if the room itself waited to hear what they'd say.

He watched Ryan squeeze his mate's hand, then whisper that she had the floor. Sitting back, Hunter forced himself to listen. If the Black Rose had something else up her sleeves for his people, she'd not find an eager audience inside this chamber. In that, he felt absolute positive.

CHAPTER SEVEN

“For the last five years, I’ve made it my mission to try to find not only the root cause of the fertility problems but find a cure for these fertility problems as well. I believe I’ve come close to solving the mystery—possibly closer than I imagined. I discovered today that my lab assistant has been falsifying my recent lab tests, planting false test results so that my research had seemingly gone nowhere. Before discovering his treachery, I received visitors. Four visitors, three determined to make my mate kill me, or at least appear that he killed me. The Black Rose is cleaning up loose ends and the only reason I can see she’s doing it now is because I was close to a solution, without realizing it.”

“If you believe you’ve come close to solving the mystery, then what do you believe caused the change? Is this something natural, are we evolving into something, or was this decline in female

births manmade. And if so, who would do such a thing?"

"First of all, I believe the root cause of this illness is manmade, or should I say, alien made. As you know, five years ago, I took a blood sample from everyone willing to give me one, trying to isolate the gene that is diseased. I completed the final test the subject's DNA sequencing two days ago."

Liana grimaced then ran a hand through her hair. She was so weary and the tests had been conclusive as to how long ago *Chantreans* were infected. Too long ago for the *Chantreans* themselves to be solely responsible. "Two generations ago, one pair of chromosomes on every *Chantrean* alive—who agreed to the testing—mutated. There is nothing natural that could or would cause this to happen to every living being on a planet, simultaneously.

"As far as why?" Liana shrugged. It hadn't taken her long to come up with her reasoning but would the others agree with her? There was only one way to find out. "Why go to war with a planet if you can take it over without ever stepping foot on the planet? If you can poison them, ensuring that you can bloodlessly claim a planet, its technology, its cities, without firing a single weapon, why wouldn't you? As the creators of the—I'm calling it poison for now—they'd know

exactly how long it would be after its initial infection before the planet would be safe for habitation. Or more than likely the virus that altered our genes is something these conquerors would have in excess, and have some sort of immunity to.

“Who would do this? That I don’t have the answer to...yet. But I’ve been going through several Ally species and their histories looking for other planets, other peoples that have simply died out much too quickly to be normal. If the Black Rose could profit from of your people’s miseries and help destroy several planets at the same time, well, she’d do it. And if she’d somehow discovered for herself who did this to *Chantrea*, to Earth, to *Manruvia* and others, then she’d make a deal with the devil herself if it would allow her to live while everyone else died.”

Shocked gasps around the table turned into cries of outrage as understanding dawned. They had another enemy out there. A faceless one who’d declared war nearly a century ago. “But the question remains—what happened nearly one hundred years ago that affected every living thing on the planets?” Eve Shi’Lan, Taliff’s mate, mused aloud, her thoughts running along the same vein as everyone else’s.

When Ryan reached over and held Liana’s hand in full view of everyone, silently offering his

support, something in her chest eased. She wasn't sure how the others would react to her news, but she shouldn't have worried. The princes and their mates wouldn't bully her, just because they didn't like to hear something. She should have had more faith.

"Well, now that we know what to look for, or I should say when, that gives the rest of us something to focus on. We'll begin searching for planets like you described, as well as try to figure out what happened on our own planets that would be considered a global event," Mikel offered.

Beside him, Maryann leaned her head against her mate's shoulder. "While we're looking through long lost histories, Liana, will you be working on a cure, now that you have a general idea what happened?"

"Yes. I'm going to see what I can do to synthesize a type of gene replacement therapy. Now that I know which genes are affected, I'm hoping that a single antidote will be all it takes to cure our people and all peoples affected. But that won't rid us of the problem all together."

"The ones that created this insidious people-killer are still out there, their identities masked, their home world hidden from us," Taliff answered as if by saying it aloud it might make the news more palatable. "They're biding their

time, but they'll show up soon and we don't have a clue what they look like."

"For all we know, they could already be here, waiting for their chance as they watch the political unrest, or they could be helping the Black Rose with her abductions from within," Amy speculated.

"Let us all get some sleep. Tomorrow, we'll meet again in the morning to determine the best immediate course of action," Ryan suggested. As one, they all stood, preparing to leave for their prospective ships. "If it's alright with you, Prince Mikel, I'd like to cloak my ship and leave it orbiting the planet."

"Absolutely. You can stay here as long as you need for your mate to run her experiments, if it comes to that. She won't be undefended while she works, you have my word on that, whether she works aboard your ship, or another," Mikel vowed.

Ryan nodded, then turned toward Hunter and Amy, before asking his next favor, this one from his brother-in-law. "Would it be alright if we stayed aboard your ship tonight, Hunter? We'd like to visit the Mating Chamber on the *Vengeance*. We don't want to waste any of our time together."

Amy smiled, then stepped forward and wrapped Liana in her arms. "Welcome to the family, sister."

"I guess there's your answer, brother. We'd be happy to have you aboard the *Vengeance*. We'll even arrange a suite for you to sleep in, just in case someone tracks your ship to *Glendor*. If something happened to it, you wouldn't be there. No reason to make it too easy on your enemies. They know what ship you call your own, so they'll be prepared for your eventual escape. You always have before."

"That's a worry for tomorrow. Tonight's my mating night and it's time to celebrate our happiness."

"Once we're past this and things are settled, Amy and I would be honored if you'd allow us to throw you a reception."

Liana smiled, then leaned forward and gave her new brother-in-law a hug. She couldn't remember the last time she'd been this happy, despite the shit-storm she could feel getting ready to head their way. Tonight though, tonight was for them and the memories they were going to make. "That would be wonderful, especially if chocolate cake is involved."

CHAPTER EIGHT

No sooner had they transported aboard the *Vengeance*, than Ryan snatched her up and tossed her over his shoulder like a conquest. She wanted to laugh aloud with the sheer joy that infused her very soul. Even though they could be attacked by their enemies at any time, she wouldn't change one thing that had led her to this minute, with this man.

With her heart and mind completely awash in happiness, she relaxed into her mate's hold and laid her head against his back as he carted her off to the Mating Chamber. *Are we there yet?*

His chuckle sent waves of heat and desire rippling through her. She could feel his desire as if it were her own. Her need fed his, which in turn ramped hers up even higher. Somehow, they'd established a feedback loop, enhancing what the other felt and sensed, making the trip down the corridors and lifts an extended session of foreplay.

She'd never survive it.

Draped over his shoulder, she could feel the rapid pounding of his heart against her tummy, could smell his musky male scent wafting from his skin. His scent made her think of sin and sex, of hot sweaty nights spent on cool satin sheets and a lover that wanted nothing more than her pleasure. She couldn't wait to take a bite out of him.

Without missing a step, he pulled her off his shoulder and cradled her against his chest. With her head pressed against his heart and his arms wrapped securely around her, she knew that she'd be able to get through anything with him by her side. Anything at all. When his lips pressed a tender kiss against the top of her head, her heart rate sped up, seem to flutter as fast as a hummingbird's wings. And when his breath bathed her temple, she shivered in reaction. Everything felt so much more intense than she'd imagined it would. Apparently, with the right person, Empathic ability could make lovemaking even better. Who knew?

When Ryan's thumb flicked across her pebble-hard nipple, Liana gasped, arched her back in his embrace, and shivered as a pulse of heat winged its way from her nipple straight to her clit. Her thoughts scattered.

When Ryan's nostrils flared and his hold tightened, Liana could feel the heat in her cheeks

as her blush spread across her face and down her neck. Obviously he could smell her pussy, the slick cream that even now coated her inner thighs, proof of her desire and desperation to claim her mate.

"There's no need to be embarrassed. I love the scent of your arousal. It's intoxicating."

"Gah! What do I say when you say stuff like that to me?"

His breath teased her ear as he chuckled. "I will try my best not to embarrass you, Liana. But I can't help but tell you how much you turn me on."

"Ugh... Okay, time for the kitty to change the subject, please?"

"Anything for you, *moya*, especially today."

Are you going to explain how this ritual works, Ryan? Even though I've been living in Chantrea for years, this isn't something I've ever studied or asked about. It seemed too personal to broach with any of my mated colleagues, or even with your sister, Amy.

"The mating bonds will unite our souls. What you feel, so will I. When you're worried or unhappy, sad or lonely, I'll always know it. In that way, our people can strive to give each other what they need to remain happy. They'll also tie our life forces together. When one dies, the other will follow. Their souls are forever joined as one."

After a few minutes of tension-filled silence, Liana looked up and met Ryan's heated stare. She

swallowed when she saw the desperate need there. He wasn't trying to hide it from her, and that in itself made her pulse beat faster, her blood thicken and pool. Her nipples grew even harder, rasping against her shirt sending shards of pleasure-pain straight to her aching clit.

She hadn't even realized they'd stopped, as lost as she was in just feeling, until Ryan spoke. "Here we are!"

"And where exactly are we?"

His chest vibrated beneath her ear and she knew he was trying not to laugh at her impatience. Even she could hear how desperate she'd become. "You're so impatient, Liana."

Before she could come up with a suitable reply, he pressed his security code into the keypad and allowed the facial recognition program to scan the iris of his eyes. The door whooshed open almost immediately. She gasped, shocked surprise bringing a spontaneous smile to her face.

"Do you like it?"

"It's stunning. But what is this place?"

"It's the conservatory. Others call it the Mating Garden or Mating Chamber. When the *Chantrean Space Exploration and Defense Agency* deploys ships for any length of time, homesickness sets in, and with it, morale lowers. Having low morale while in deep space is not a good idea. The scientists discovered—quite by accident—a chemical

compound excreted by the native *Chantrean* plants into the soil that created a sense of well-being amongst our people. By putting an indoor garden on all our battleships and deep space explorers, our soldiers and scientists don't forget the paradise they left behind. Instead, they get to take a bit of home with them wherever they are sent."

And just as he explained, a calmness and warmth swept over her as she stared at the beautiful garden. No. It was more than that. It was a feeling of coming home, of belonging to something greater. Whether again her Empathic abilities were growing or perhaps even evolving into what they should have been all along, she felt almost complete. She could feel the mate bond in the back of her mind, not yet forging the permanent link that would join her soul to Ryan's. Soon. Soon.

As her gaze skittered across the amazing chamber, a small part of her wondered what exactly Ryan was doing. She could see him doing something to the statuary out of the corner of her eye and it made her lips quirk up in amusement. Did she even want to know what he was doing to the marble statue?

Flowers, more gorgeous and exotic than she ever could have imagined, hung from every available surface. The ceiling had what looked like buttresses built beneath it. Vines and flowers were

wrapped around the framework, spreading down the walls in a blanket of vibrant blooms. Having lived on *Chantrea* for over five years now, she knew quite a bit about the native flora on her adopted planet. Out of the corner of one eye, she caught a flash deep purple, a *Tupa* – one of her favorite colors for that particular plant. Her eyes widened yet again when she spotted a gorgeous bright pink *Aseda*, the *Chantrean* bloom for fertility. She let out a surprised squeal. The flowers were similar to Earth's daisies, except the color was all wrong. Yet the *Aseda* was the one flower that always brought a smile to her lips and made her heart feel lighter, at peace. She could honestly believe the *Chantrean* flora excreted a mood-enhancing chemical because she always felt better when messing around with her window garden in her suite.

Allowing the sense of calm to wash through her, Liana's gaze settled on her mate. His slow amble caught her attention, kept her focused on the one part of him she was dying to feel stretching her. And of course, as she stared, his cock grew thick and long in front of her eyes. She was so focused on the one part of him, she didn't even notice what was in his hands until he threaded his fingers with hers just before one end of the silken material wrapped around her wrist seemingly of its own accord. How did it do that?

Heart pounding, her eyes widened even further when she watched the other end of the material slide over their clasped fingers and wrap itself around Ryan's wrist. If *that* hadn't been bizarre enough, the material tightened then began to shimmer, before it started to sink into her skin. It didn't hurt, in fact it she only felt a warm, tingling hum, like mild electric current, as the material bonded with her own flesh, becoming one with her. Then, a roaring wave of emotion rolled over and through her, overwhelming the barriers she'd built to protect herself, as lifelong Empath from other's emotions overwriting her own.

She felt so inadequate in comparison to what she could feel coming from his soul. What she wouldn't give for something sexy to wear right now, something to make her feel beautiful enough to deserve to be with him.

Baby, you're perfect just the way you are.

What? "How are you doing that?"

That's the *Manruvian* Mate Bond at work. Not only can we communicate with each other. Just think what you want to say and I'll hear you unless I'm unconscious, then you might have to keep trying. The material is sentient and blends with our DNA, building a bridge between our souls and our minds, joining us on a much deeper level than humans develop even after decades of living together. What one knows and feels, so does

the other. I've been told that those who share a true mate bond—the sentient material wouldn't have reacted at all had we not already been soul mates—find it impossible to cheat on their spouses or to do anything purposely to cause harm to their mate.

Liana nodded, then reached forward and cupped his cheek in her palm. His stubble scraped the inside of her palm sending shivers of awareness surging through her body again. Goddess, if she didn't fuck him soon, she might just implode.

"You don't need to convince me. Remember, I wanted to become your mate before the freaky dissolving material bound us together."

Liana's skin began to itch, her nipples were so hard and sensitive she could probably come just by breathing on them. What the hell was happening to her? She'd never been this aroused, this needy for a deep, long fuck in her life. As she stood there, one hand still clasped with Ryan's, her palm cradling his jaw, she couldn't help but imagine using her tongue to stroke along the length of his cock, swirling around the crown, until he was so hard for her that one swallow of his length down her throat would have him flooding her mouth with his seed.

With constant thoughts of sex running through her mind like a bad porno, she couldn't help but

wonder if she'd finally lost her mind as well as control over her gifts. Had she finally slipped over the edge of sanity? She didn't think so, but if he didn't take her soon or do whatever it is they needed to do to become mates officially, she might just have to attack him herself. She'd never attempted that before, and she didn't want to have to do that this time. She wanted – no, needed – him to take charge.

Nervous now, because duh, she just realized he could hear every thought she'd been thinking and how embarrassing is that, she nibbled her bottom lip unsure of what to do, what to say, and most of all how to proceed, having never actually made love with another before.

When he grew tenser, she became even more nervous. Almost simultaneously, their breathing rhythm changed, became grunting pants. Sweat pooled on their foreheads and their eyes began to dilate as the tension in the room grew so thick you could probably cut it with a medical grade laser scalpel.

Before her eyes, his cock grew even thicker, longer beneath his pants. How would he ever manage to fit that inside her and *holy hell*, she gulped, wouldn't it hurt?

Ryan gave a pained chuckle. *Yes, it hurts and yes, it will fit. We were made for each other, so don't let that worry you. Now come here...I've been waiting for*

Ryan's Hope

*you all my life and don't want to wait a moment longer
to be yours and make you mine.*

CHAPTER NINE

Beneath the confines of his pants, Ryan's cock grew thicker and longer than he ever thought possible. Shards of frustrated pain tore down through his shaft and seemed to wrap around his balls. Goddess, he wanted to mount his mate so bad, he practically shook from it. But beyond even the pain of sexual frustration was the desperate need he had to show Liana that he cared for her. He wanted to wrap his arms around her and just comfort her. More than the sex, he wanted to protect her from everything and everyone that ever thought about harming her, because he didn't back down either. And no one would ever harm his mate and live. No one.

Although less than a foot separated them, he knew that if he got any closer, they'd be making love right here, right now, and the ceremony they had their hearts set on wouldn't happen. So, taking a deep breath and gathering up his

remaining control, he stepped back, allowing more breathing room between them. By the Goddess, he needed to get inside her and he needed to do it soon.

Shuddering, Ryan took another step back. Instincts as old time urged him to retreat further, but this time he held out his hand for her—and only his hand, because if he pressed against her in any way he'd lose what little control he had. It didn't help that because of the bond between them, he could feel and hear everything she did. How did she cope, listening to everyone else's emotions every day? How did she cope without getting completely overwhelmed?

When she smiled at him, his whole world lit up. He wanted to crush her to his chest, and cradle her next to his heart. At least now that he'd finally found her, now that they would finally be bound, he wouldn't ever have to give her up, even if one of them moved from this life to the next, they'd be together forever. One soul, reunited.

As gently as he could, he traced the side of her face with the sweep of his thumb. If he lost her now, he'd never survive the loss, nor would he want to. That he knew absolutely. There were so many fantasies he wanted to fulfill with Liana, so many ways he wanted to love her, to touch her, but for here in this room, only one would do. Stepping back, he held out his hand.

"Will you be my mate, Liana? Will you claim me as I claim you?"

Without hesitating, she placed her hands in his. "I will. Forever and Always. I'll spend forever and always with you, Ryan."

Letting out the breath he hadn't realized he'd held in anticipation of her answer, he laced their fingers together and led her through the flora, deeper into the Mating Chamber, and toward the one place they needed to be to get what they both wanted — each other.

Looking his mate in the eye, he spoke of the ritual they'd soon perform. *All the mating rituals that take place on the Vengeance take place here in the center of the conservatory, a place of worship and peace that it's said the Goddess Alana herself has blessed.* Turning his head, he spotted the bathing pool where impurities would be washed from the body. The basin filled with Alana's tears sat on a pedestal near the bathing pool. *It's said that to drink the Mother Goddess of Chantrea's tears purifies the Lionese soul. And finally, the flowering Garden where they'd make love represented their people's respect for nature and all living things.*

It's said that the couples that speak their vows in this clearing, to lie in it with your lover the first time you come together as mates, is the highest honor you can bestow upon the Mother Goddess of Chantrea, Alana, and that in return she'll bless your mating herself. Whether that last part was truth or not

didn't factor into it. The *Lionese* of *Chantrea* had taken him in, their Goddess had whispered to him, giving him the strength he'd needed to escape the Black Rose's clutches. He'd honor his new people, his Goddess, and his mate by taking the most solemn of his vows here where so many had chosen to complete their mating before.

Swallowing past his fears, and gathering his courage around him, Ryan dropped Liana's hand and stepped back, praying to the Goddess that his mate would begin the claiming, that she'd need and want him as much as he did her.

* * * *

Although she didn't know many details of the *Chantrea* Mating Ritual, she did know that the woman must be the one to initiate it thanks to some comments Amy had let slip over the years, so when Ryan stepped back, she didn't assume he was rejecting her. She did have to admit, the location the *Chantreans* used to complete their ceremonies was breathtaking. She couldn't stop looking this way and that, trying to take it all in, so when she took this memory out over the years none of the details would have faded.

She quickly took in everything around her from the tiny pond to the benches and statuary placed casually around the center. Flowers sprang up

from the grass like a mystical meadow, and such a feeling of peace and serenity emanated from here that she knew the Goddess Alana herself must have blessed this ceremonial lea. She could think of no greater place or time to claim her mate than here, than now.

Again, the shimmering pool of turquoise water dominating the center of the meadow drew Liana's gaze. Following her instincts, something Amy had stressed to do if she ever had a chance to claim her mate, Liana stopped at the edge of the water, then looking over her shoulder, she called out to her mate. "Ryan, will you join me in the water? I'd like to bathe you, please."

A moment of panic raced through her when Ryan didn't immediately answer, but a quick glance over her shoulder showed him stripping out of his clothes so fast one would think they were on fire. While she waited for Ryan to join her, she glanced around the meadow again, enjoying the whimsy of the flowering bushes and the classical beauty of the statues, as well as the practicality of the benches. It all came together to make a beautiful whole.

"Will you allow me to take care of you tonight?" Liana asked, her heart suddenly beating too fast, as though her body just now realized how much was at stake, how much she could lose if this didn't work out the way she wanted it to. Not

waiting for his answer—she'd drag him into the water if she had to—she lifted her top over her head and tossed it onto the nearest marble bench. After turning to face her mate, she undid the front clasp of her bra and let it gape open, hoping to entice him, perhaps tease him just a little. Hell, tease them both.

"Of course I will, *moya*, my love."

With his warm gaze locked with hers, she swallowed the lump in her throat as she waited for him to come to her. She was stunned as more and more of his body was revealed to her. When Ryan's pants joined the pile containing his shirt and shoes, she had to gulp. Holy Mother, she'd never seen a better body on a man! And that would be all hers? Thank the Goddess she hadn't known what he'd looked like naked. She might have screwed everything up and jumped him early, had she known.

She would have enjoyed seeing the shiny material fall to the ground in a heap, but she couldn't say the view of his chest wasn't just as mouth-watering as the rest of him. Following her instincts, Liana stepped forward and took Ryan by the hand, leading him into the inviting turquoise water. She wanted—no, needed—to bathe him with her own hands, to wash him clean while exploring his rippling muscles. She wanted to feel them flex beneath her fingertips and know that his

strength would be there to protect and shelter her, as she would shelter and protect him. She also wanted to see the water run down his hard body in rivulets, and chase them down with the tip of her tongue.

So, what was stopping her from doing what she needed, what her instincts were telling her to do? Amy said to follow her instincts if she ever mated and that's exactly what she planned to do—starting right now.

She'd never made love before. Being an Empath had made it nearly impossible to be physically close to a person, and being an Omega meant no one respected her. She could never be with someone who wouldn't respect her. Instead, she'd chosen to remain alone, but now, she'd chosen to claim her mate. Lack of experience didn't mean she couldn't figure out how to go about it, did it? How hard could it be?

She'd seen enough women with seduction on their minds to know that his cock wouldn't be standing at attention if he didn't want her as badly as she wanted him. Besides, she could *feel* how much he wanted her, desired her, which desire was only overshadowed by the desperate way he adored her. He was everything she'd dared not hope she'd ever have for herself.

By the time Liana kicked off her pants, Ryan stood just in front of her gloriously nude, all

golden skin glowing with perspiration, and almost as desperate to be touched as she was to touch and explore him. Again, their needs built off one another, feeding off each other, creating an unending loop of hunger and need, desperation and wanton desire. It only took a few steps for her to reach his side, and when she did, she took his hand in hers and led him to the water.

As she led him into the pool, she allowed her instincts to take over completely. This wasn't just about her, or about him, but what they were going to build together, the life they'd share together from this day forward. She knew just what she had to do next. First, she would lead him to the center of the pool and after she made sure to wet his skin thoroughly, she'd trace every droplet with her tongue. By the time she finished, she hoped his every nerve shrieked with intense sensation and he wouldn't notice any of the uncertainty and downright panic she'd no doubt feel at doing something she'd never done before, or even researched how to do. She just had to keep reminding herself that women had been pleasuring men for as long as people roamed the earth, and vice versa. She could—no, *would*—figure it out, too.

CHAPTER TEN

Elation. Excitement. Heady desire. They all warred inside him as his mate prepared to start the Mating. Even though he'd heard that a human raised *Chantrean* did have the instincts necessary to claim a mate, he wasn't positive, not until she actually started listening to the needs warring inside her and screaming to be heard. He still could not believe that the Goddess Alana had felt him worthy of Liana. Hell, he'd never understood why she'd chosen him to speak to while the Black Rose had kept him prisoner.

Do you not know? Truly? There is a pure heart inside you, Ryan. A soul so precious and rare that to leave you wandering alone, always searching yet never finding, would be a sacrilege. You deserve this and every happiness that comes your way.

Ryan's eyes widened when he realized the Mother Goddess had chosen now to speak to him after so many years of silence. Her voice had not filled his mind since his escape from the Black

Rose five years prior. *I may not think I deserve Liana but I won't turn away from her either. She needs me almost as much as I know I need her and together we'll do great things for your people, my Goddess. This is our vow to you, Mother Goddess. Once we rid the world of the Black Rose, we'll turn our sights to discovering our true enemy, so that we can give your people back the gift of life.*

I know you will. You and Liana were always destined to be. You two are the catalysts that will lead to my children's salvation. Liana's Empathic abilities are what you need to truly heal, and your love and loyalty are all the magic your mate needs to be what she's always been destined to be. Embrace your future, your destinies, together, as it was always meant.

As Liana made good on her promise to bathe him with first her hands and then her tongue, Ryan clenched his hands at his sides, doing naught to interrupt the delicious torture. When her small hand fisted around the length of his cock, Ryan's thoughts scattered. Her scent, rich and intoxicating, surrounded him, making more blood pool in his groin and yet more. Precum wept from the head of his cock but he made no move to hide it. Let her see exactly what her touch, her scent, did to him. Closing his eyes, he let the water lap at his waist, let her tongue lap at his body, and submerged himself in the experience, let himself be seduced.

Inhaling her rich scent, he opened his eyes to

find her looking up at him through half lowered lashes. When she nibbled her lower lip in a totally provocative move, his breath hitched and blood surged through his shaft, making it bob against his stomach.

"Please, Ryan. Kneel down so that I can reach all of you. I need to wash you. Every inch of you."

"Anything your heart desires, *moya*. You've only to ask and it's yours for the taking."

At the first tentative touch of her hands as they caressed his shoulders, at her heartfelt sigh of appreciation, he let out a shuddering gasp. His every nerve ending felt alive with sensation. Nothing could have prepared him for the sensitivity her touch would elicit. It felt like she had a direct link to his central nervous system and was stroking him from the inside out. His eyelids snapped open. He had to watch her face, see her expressions as she bathed him in the ritual way, as she cared for him. The symbolism wasn't lost on him, nor on her, he imagined. His emotions were so overwhelming he wasn't about to try and sense hers as well, not right now. The Mating Ritual would only happen once in his lifetime and he didn't want to miss a single moment of the experience.

As she lifted the water in her cupped hands and poured it over his skin, letting it run in rivulets down his chest, he watched her, fascinated by the

enjoyment bathing him brought to her. When a wave of water splashed the head of his cock, he jerked in reaction. By the Goddess, how was he ever going to last without coming, until he could make love to her?

Long minutes passed as she continued to bathe him, with only the sounds of lapping water and rasping moans disturbing the moment of intimacy between them. And when she leaned forward and pressed her nose against his pulse where neck and shoulder met, and swirled her tongue over the throbbing vein, they both moaned with suppressed desire. Contentment, quiet joy, and peace in the moment, all filled him as she leaned forward and tilted her head back, allowing the water to soothe his shattered nerves. Goddess, he'd never needed a person more than he needed Liana right now, not just physically because he was hard as stone and desperately wanted to come inside his mate, but he needed her emotionally too, to complete him.

When Liana finally lifted her hands from his throbbing flesh, he thought he'd get that reprieve he desperately needed. Instead, she had him turn around, lavishing as much attention on his back as she did on his front. He was a quivering mess when she finished rinsing him off, one stroke away from coming. Thankfully, she had mercy on him and had him stand so she could finish bathing

him, carefully avoiding his *hot spots* as she did.

Rather than draw out his bath, Liana quickly washed his legs and feet with gentle caring. Only when the rest of him was clean did she reach out with her hands and cup his sex. Almost reverently, she stroked the length of his shaft and ran her finger gently down the crack of his ass before rolling his testicles in her hand with exquisite care, as though she found his shaft utterly fascinating. When she pressed a chaste kiss against the head of his cock, he almost erupted.

Liana must have decided that she'd finally gotten him clean enough, or that she'd driven him insane enough, because she scooted back and rested her ass on her heels and looked up at his face. Her gaze shot to his, nervous and expectant. After one deep breath, she let it out and lowered her head in submission.

"I offer my life and love to you, to do with as you wish. I pledge to worship your body and offer up my own to you to worship and command. I in turn accept the same from you. Only to you do I offer my heart and my soul for you to protect or deny. I give all that I am and all that I will ever be to you. Do you accept me and all that I offer, my *moyo*, my mate?"

When the vow he'd been waiting for finally slid past Liana's lips, fierce elation tore through him at hearing the words he'd never thought to hear. The

compulsion to repeat the vows grabbed him by the balls and wouldn't let go. With trembling hands, Ryan reached for the other half of his soul, he reached for Liana and pulled her to her feet with incredible ease and tenderness.

"I accept all that you are and all that you offer me, *moya*. I offer my life and love to you, to do with as you wish. I pledge to worship your body and offer up my own to you to worship and command. I in turn accept the same from you. Only to you do I offer my heart and my soul for you to protect or deny. I give all that I am and all that I will ever be to you. Do you accept me and all that I offer, my *moya*, my mate?"

When Liana gave him an enthusiastic nod and practically threw herself in his arms to hug him, Ryan noticed her eyes were filled with tears. He knew through the bond they were happy tears so he wasn't worried. He had to admit that the mate bond could be a convenient thing if you had a mate that could shift moods at a drop of a hat. Not that he'd admit that aloud. He wasn't stupid.

After a few moments of contented silence, Liana dropped her gaze but didn't release his hands. After clearing her throat, she lifted her head and pulled on his hands. "Follow me," she whispered and began to lead him out of the water. He trailed behind her, one of his big hands intertwined with hers as she led him up the steps

and over to one of the marble benches.

“Sit, please.”

* * * *

As Liana continued to follow her instincts, she didn't bother trying to make sense of things. Perhaps the Goddess Alana guided her hand, helping her say and do the right things so that she'd know that their mating had been blessed by the Mother Goddess herself. Then again, it could be a fanciful dream, her imagination running amuck in an attempt to explain the unexplainable.

As her eyes once again scanned the meadow, a sense of leaving something incomplete invaded her mind. It took only a moment to realize she wasn't yet done with the ritual part of the ceremony, and only a few seconds more before she knew exactly what she hadn't yet done. Scanning the statuary, she spotted the golden cup clasped in the marble hands of the Mother Goddess. Liana swore she heard a voice in her head, whispering for her to approach the sculpture. When the voice beseeched her to accept the offering, as water overflowed the cup in a waterfall to the basin at the sculpture's feet, she didn't question that request either. She knew the Goddess of *Chantrea* was a benevolent Goddess and would do no harm to one of her children.

Liana could hear the musical sound of a woman's voice whisper through her mind much more clearly now, and knew it now to be Alana, the *Chantrean* Mother Goddess that had been directing her earlier actions. The tinkling of her words vibrated along Liana's spine, like a thousand bubbles stroking the smooth glass of a champagne bottle, fizzing and popping along the crystal edge. *Drink my tears and purify your hearts. Share my tears and purify your souls.*

Reaching up, she pulled the chalice from the Goddess' hands. She backed up a step before turning her back, and carried the golden cup to Ryan, who had dropped onto the bench as though his legs had been knocked out from beneath him.

When Liana reached her mate's side, she tried to give him an encouraging smile before she knelt between his legs and slowly lifted the cup to his lips. Biting her bottom lip nervously, she wiped one hand on her thigh, then the other before saying the words that the Goddess had provided her. "I beseech you to drink of the Goddess' golden chalice. Let her tears cleanse your heart and heal all your inner wounds."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Ryan didn't hesitate to wrap his hands around hers and tilt his head back, drinking the refreshing liquid in one long draught. Sighing in relief, Liana let herself breathe and her muscles relax, glad beyond belief that he'd accepted her offering and completed the next step in the ritual.

After drinking his share, he held the cup up against her lips. Staring straight into his eyes, she swallowed the cool, clear liquid as Ryan whispered, "I beseech you to drink of the Goddess' golden chalice. Let her tears cleanse your heart and heal all your inner wounds."

Almost immediately after the water passed her lips a flood of feeling and sensations bombarded her, some hers and some obviously Ryan's: love, lust, hunger, joy, passion, fear, worry, need, so many emotions—too many to accurately catch in so fleeting a moment. After the initial burst of information, it began to slow into a steady rhythm

before thoughts—Ryan's thoughts—began to overshadow the emotions she'd been receiving. When Ryan's pupils dilated and his body began to shudder, she started to worry, until his voice drowned out all other thoughts.

There's so much...so much she feels. It's overwhelming. I can feel her fear as my own. How can I set her at ease with us, with our future? Perhaps if she knew that she'll never have to face others undefended again, that I'd never leave her side when she's in need, she'd be more comfortable with our mating. I'd stand as her shield against any and everything that would do her harm, even her own abilities.

Liana blinked in surprise. She needed to share her tears by sharing her fears? That *must* be what the Goddess meant. She couldn't think of anything else she could have meant by that obscure statement. As though a door into her very soul opened, she knew something else. Empathy wasn't her only gift. She'd been born with prophecy as well—it just had needed to be unlocked—and now it had.

She needed to embrace the bond developing between her and her mate because if she didn't, she'd lose the best thing that would ever happen to her—with her new gift, she knew that would be the outcome if she foolishly kept her feelings to herself. She'd lose her soul mate. She'd lose the only person she'd ever love, and that would be a

tragedy.

After taking a deep breath, Liana closed her eyes and collected all her fears, her worries, and even her needs and desires, her anger and her hurts, and tried to channel them through the bond. She shared everything with him, everything she felt, everything she worried about and everything that terrified her. But that was okay, she believed that now, because he was the one person she trusted completely to help her through the struggles ahead.

When strong arms wrapped around her waist, Liana closed her eyes and sighed in blissful contentment, luxuriating in this one moment of utter perfection. With her head tucked beneath his chin and resting against his heart, she could hear it pounding against her ear, its rapid beat a perfect match to her own.

Liana wasn't sure how long they stood that way, Ryan's arms wrapped around her in the Goddess' garden, but she could sense her mate's arousal through their new bond, feel his cock lengthen and thicken yet again as it pressed against her belly. Her heart rate jumped in response and his raced to match hers. Without any outside stimulation, her nipples pebbled into tight nubs and pressed against the hair of his chest, sending bolts of pleasure-pain straight to her clit. She groaned in response, unable to keep silent, as

she felt not only her own emotions and tactile sensations, but Ryan's as well.

Ryan's hands clutched at her waist, his fingers digging into her hips as he ground his hips into her belly. Seconds later, he lifted her, placing his hands beneath her ass to hold her in place. "Put your legs around my waist, baby."

Liana didn't waste any time. She wanted to feel his body against hers, wanted to be held in his strong arms as though he'd never willingly let her go. Despite the Black Rose and her attempt to murder her and Ryan earlier in the day, Liana was determined to eke out every bit of enjoyment possible this eve. Tomorrow would be another day, but this one, this one was her one and only mating night, and nothing would ruin it.

With her legs wrapped around Ryan's waist as he'd demanded, she couldn't keep the growling purr building in her voice silent—didn't even want to, to tell the truth. With one of his big rough hands wrapped around the base of her neck and the other palming her ass, she felt completely secure in his hold, and just a little bit naughty as she could feel his cock pressing against the bundle of nerves at the apex of her pussy. If he just rubbed there just once, she knew she'd go off like a rocket. Yet, he didn't move, not one centimeter. Was he testing her? Was she supposed to do or say something? Her woeful lack of experience

made her extremely anxious, despite her desire to mate with her chosen one.

* * * *

When he awoke this morning, Ryan had no idea just where the day would lead. If someone had told him he'd meet his mate and claim her, he'd have laughed at him or her for such foolish beliefs, because who would bless Ryan with a mate after all he'd done in the name of retribution?

Now he had his arms full of the most luscious woman he'd ever crossed, and before the day ended she'd belong to him completely, heart, body, mind, and soul—properly paired the way *Chantreans* were always supposed to be. When Liana's legs tightened around his hips and her fingers dug into his hair, scratching gently at his scalp, all thought of what was and what would be disappeared from his mind. His entire being focused on the armful of golden-brown woman just begging for proper attention. Smiling inward, Ryan couldn't wait to give her as much attention as she could possibly imagine, even more than she could possibly handle. Starting. Right. Now.

Squeeze me tighter, baby, while I look for some place nearby to make love to you.

Liana reached up and nibbled his right ear before whispering, "You can take me anyway you

want me. Up against the statuary or along the length of the marble benches, or even on all fours on the wonderful grass. Just fuck me already!" she implored.

Ryan chuckled. With an invitation like that, how could he possibly refuse? With his arms full of luscious woman, he quickly glanced around the meadow. He smiled when he spotted a bed, its coverlets turned down, sitting in the middle of the meadow surrounding the natural pool. Either someone onboard *Vengeance* had instructed the ship's computer to place it there, or the *Lady Goddess Alana* herself had presented them with a mating bed.

With purposeful steps, he headed straight for the bed, thankful as always for the many blessings and gifts bestowed upon him since his escape from the Black Rose's nefarious clutches five years earlier. The closer he moved toward the bed, the more awe-inspiring it became. The four-poster bed had a gossamer canopy of white tulle lying artfully across the top. Flowers draped around and down each leg, some from Earth, like baby roses and freesia, and others indigenous only to *Chantrea*, like the purple *Tupa* and bright pink *Aseda*. Someone spread thousands of silky white and vibrant red and pink petals across the red coverlet, lending it a sensual air. And at the foot of the bed stood a chest. If the rumors he heard were

true, it would be full of toys meant for tonight's lovemaking. He couldn't wait to find out for himself, but that was for later.

Who had prepared their mating bed on such short notice? Ryan snorted. He couldn't believe that someone had even gotten past him to scatter flowers there, unseen. His mind, honed by suspicion and suffering, wondered briefly if there was another way into and out of the mating chamber, one that he, and possibly the others, were unaware of. And if so, where was it, why was it secret, and who knew of it?

But those were questions for another time. He had his beautiful mate lying sprawled out in front of him, her hair a wild mess of dark curls practically begging for his fingers to rake through. Looking her body up and down, he didn't know where to start. He wanted to do to so much for and with her. As he reached over to run the back of his hand down the length of her chin, his hand trembled. So many emotions he'd kept locked inside him. Would she be able to handle his demons if he let them go, even unconsciously? He hoped so, he truly did or they'd both be doomed.

Liana reached up and placed her palm against Ryan's stubble-roughened cheek. *Why such a dark face, moyo?*

I'm just thinking about the future. The Black Rose isn't going to make it easy on us over the next few

weeks to complete that cure of yours.

I agree with you, but for tonight, we're just going to think about the two of us, and building a lasting bond between us – something our enemy can never sever.

Ryan ran the back of his hand down Liana's throat, down along her collarbone until she shivered. *You're right, my love. Absolutely right. I think it's about time we lock the Black Rose out of our thoughts and we get down to the serious business of exploring each other's bodies.* The touch of her bronzed skin against the lighter shade of his brought a lump into his throat.

Ryan couldn't help but stare at all her magnificence now that he had her right where he wanted her, naked and waiting for him to claim her. But he wanted so much more than a claiming. He wanted to make love to her, to hear her sigh out her happiness, groan out her pleas for him and beg him to take her.

Ryan had to grip his shaft in hand to keep himself from coming all over her before he ever got a chance to even touch her. That would have been an embarrassment, and not something he's want Liana to remember about their first time together, that was for sure.

Liana licked her lips and stretched her arms up above her, clasping the slats in the *Vaasa* wood headboard while spreading her legs, leaving her dripping pussy open to his view. "Are you

planning on just staring at me all night or are you going to come here and show me what making love is supposed to feel like?"

CHAPTER TWELVE

As Liana waited for Ryan to close the distance between them, she lifted her legs, wrapping them around his hips, desperate to hold him to her. She'd never thought she could experience lovemaking at all, and to have someone who made her feel safe and cherished on top of that, as Ryan did—it was more than she could have ever imagined for herself.

Finally! Finally! He lowered himself to the foot of the bed and started to stalk her like prey. She dropped her legs, had no choice really when he ran his nose up along the length of one thigh before sitting back and doing the same with the other.

Don't tease me, moyo! She begged, desperate now for his touch, any touch at all.

When he lowered his body against hers, she wanted to weep for the joy of it. Never had she been able to touch another this way in all her

years. To have the luxury to explore his body, to discover all the dips and curves of his form was an aphrodisiac all its own. Somehow, Ryan was keeping his feelings to himself, allowing her this time to feel only her own emotions and sensations—a gift a thousand times more wonderful than anything she could have asked for.

With just a gentle push against his shoulder, Ryan rolled over, allowing her to look and explore to her heart's content. She couldn't wait. When she sat upon his lap, his cock pressed to the front of her clit, she couldn't stop the purring groan from escaping her throat.

"That's it, baby. Go ahead and touch me. Let me know when you want me to drop the shield between our minds so we can experience the full effect of our Empathic lovemaking." Ryan took a deep breath. *By the Goddess Alana, you are one stunning woman, my Liana.*

Moyo, you are one strong, gorgeous man. One I'd never imagined could belong to me. As she ran her fingers down his torso, wrapping them around his nipples before moving down to the line of hair covering his muscular abdomen, she made another confession. I used to watch you when you'd land in the Royal Compound. I'd watch you greet your sister – take her into your arms – and feel an irrational jealousy. If only I'd gotten close enough I would have

known you were mine and my self-imposed suffering from a distance would have ended.

Gripping Liana's hips, Ryan sat up against the headboard and pulled his mate onto his lap until she faced him, groin to groin. *Never again will you have to watch from a distance, Liana. You can touch me whenever, however you want to. That's my vow to you. I can't imagine what it must have been like to live your whole life isolated from everyone and everything for fear of feeling and knowing too much of others. You'll never be alone in your isolation again, this I promise, beloved Liana.*

Every nerve came alive where skin met skin. Even half-hard, she knew that his cock would be a formidable size when it was fully engorged. Before she could even begin to worry about it, her thoughts drifted away when he palmed her right breast and brought it to his mouth to suckle. He pulled on her nipple while his other hand slipped from her hip to dip between her thighs, pressing against the hard little nub of her clit. Liana couldn't stay still, couldn't think beyond what Ryan was making her feel. When her right nipple began to feel just a tad sore, he moved to the left, giving it equal treatment. Each strong pull on her nipple made her clit twitch, as if the sensations were playing a loop in her body. Soon, all coherent thought disappeared. There was but the two of them, pressing against each other, perspiration beading on their skin, groin grinding

against groin

With a muffled oath, Ryan grabbed her by the hips and rolled them over, until she was lying entirely beneath him. When his wiry chest hairs brushed against her sensitive nipples a streak of lightning buzzed her already throbbing clit. Partially shifting her hands, she allowed her nails to grow so she could knead along Ryan's abdomen, his torso, leaving shallow scratches along his skin—her mark for all others to see.

Beneath her, Ryan grew still. She could hear a rumbling purr building up in his chest, a sound every female *Chantrean* knew signaled a well-contented mate. She couldn't wait to see if she could actually get him to purr aloud, rather than just in his chest. After what he'd suffered at the hands of the Black Rose, it wouldn't be easy for Ryan to voice his pleasure, to show his absolute trust and faith in such a way. Until he could, a rumbling growl in his chest was more than enough for her.

Liana arched up, pressing her breasts against Ryan's muscular torso, wanting her scent covering him everywhere their skin touched. Weaving her fingers into the long golden-brown strands of her mate's hair, she pulled his mouth down for a soul-searing kiss. Ryan didn't seem to need any urging, meeting each thrust and parry of her tongue with his own. What started out as a kiss of longing

ended up as a full conflagration, blazing completely out of control, until they were both left gasping, their lungs desperate for air.

With breasts heaving, Liana stared up at Ryan, positive he must see her surprise as clearly on her face as she could see on his. Ryan, however, looked shell-shocked. After only a moment's pause to take a deep breath, Liana pulled Ryan down by his hair again, locking her lips to his. Her fingers released his hair long enough to explore the rest of his body, from the strong muscles of his flexing back to the generous curves of his tight bottom.

Unwilling to break their kiss, Liana pushed her hands between their bodies just enough to slide a hand between their torsos. She desperately wanted to feel Ryan's cock, to hold it and explore it with her fingers, to feel the living strength inside it. She imagined running her thumb over the weeping slit at the head of his shaft and tasting his essence.

Just thinking thoughts like that had her heart practically beating out of her chest.

If you want to explore me, by all means, love, but this might be over before it even begins if you decide to go that route right now.

Liana snorted. *Hmm...I'll just have to explore the rest of you then. Roll over and let me touch your back, please, Ry.*

As if she weighed no more than a feather, Ryan picked her up by the waist and laid her on the bed then rolled onto his stomach, making good on his promise. Biting her lip, Liana let out a purr of satisfaction. There was so much golden skin available to touch, to explore. What would his skin taste like on her tongue? Would his muscles flex as she pressed the tips of her fingers against the long muscles of his back, or would he stay still and let her explore until she was satisfied?

She needed to get closer, skin-to-skin. Mounting his back, Liana sat on his bottom, rubbing her aching clit up and down as her fingers explored his shoulders before making their way down his spine. As she leaned forward to rub his tight shoulders, she pressed her breasts against his back. He shivered beneath her. She couldn't blame him. Only maintaining her concentration kept her from reaching between her thighs and pinching her clit, forcing her into her own orgasm. But that wouldn't be fair to either of them.

Sliding further down the length of his body so that she sat on his legs, she lightly massaged the cheeks of his bottom, kneading them. "Hmm... Roll over, *moyo*. Let me play with the other side now," she purred.

Finally, after what seemed hours instead of just the moments that passed, Ryan turned over from beneath her. Her woman's cream left a trail from

his bottom to his stomach. She should be embarrassed to show him proof of her arousal, she thought, but she wasn't — not in the least.

Scooting over to the side, Liana knelt next to Ryan atop the bed, so she could watch his every breath, could absorb his very essence if she chose. His cock grew impossibly thicker, and longer while she watched, it plummy head growing darker as seed began to seep from the slit.

Liana dragged her tongue over the thick head of his cock. She opened the empathic link, allowing herself to feel everything he did, and allowing him to feel the same if he so chose. Ryan's spine tingled from the pleasure, as the rough texture of her tongue swept over nerve endings in his cockhead he didn't know existed.

More pre-cum spilled forth and Liana lapped it up again and again, never taking his shaft into the depths of her mouth, but always giving him just enough pleasure that he was too reluctant to forgo it to force her to take him deeper.

Before long, Ryan's legs began to quiver, a sure signal that he was close to coming. He was close to losing control and she couldn't help but feel cheered by that. With extreme disappointment, Ryan rolled away and back to his side, keeping plenty of distance between her mouth and his shaft.

Liana mewled her disappointment, but she

knew he wasn't about to give in to her. Already his control hung in tatters and he didn't want to lose any more of it. He wanted to make them both work for their climaxes tonight, skin-to-skin, mouth-to-mouth and everywhere in between.

When the silence lasted, Liana squirmed under his intense gaze. His thoughts were seemingly blending into hers without effort. *You're beautiful, Liana. Know that. I'm going to take you places you've only imagined, places in your body where pleasure can become pain yet still leave you craving more, and that's when I will finally allow us the release we'll desperately need. In the meantime...let the naughty, sweaty, sex games begin.*

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Ryan let a few seconds pass and, when Liana started to fidget, rested against her on the bed once again. Truth be told, he'd needed those few inches of space just to get himself together.

When Liana went to reach for him, to grasp him in her strong, little hands, he shook his head. *No, keep your hands behind your back. Use your lips and tongue only.* Ryan watched as Liana lifted her gaze to his, expecting her to voice the question he could clearly see written across her face—*how am I supposed to suck you off without touching you*—but, surprisingly, she wet her lips and leaned forward, taking the head of his cock between her lush, wet lips.

Ever so slowly, Liana took his shaft all the way to the base and, instead of stroking him with her tongue or using her mouth to pull the come from his cock, let loose a slow steady purr, sending vibrations up and down his shaft. He could feel

every nerve in his cock tingle. So quickly, he was riding the fine line between pleasure and pain and his mate had only just started. The vibrations zipped through his shaft and straight to his balls. Oh, Goddess. If she kept this form of torture up, he'd never last as long as he wanted. Never.

Time to intervene. "Suck it, Liana. Please, *moya*, drink my seed."

Ryan could feel her reluctance, her aggravation at not being allowed to play with him at her own pace. He'd have to make it up to her some other way. Liana relented and began to work his dick in earnest. In and out, he thrust in her mouth. The combination of wet heat and steady suction continued to push him closer and closer to the edge of sanity, of reason. Reaching down he fisted his hands in the long brown strands of her hair, wrapping them around his hands as she continued to work him hard.

His hips jackhammered against her mouth. He knew he was being too rough, but he couldn't seem to help himself. Thank the Goddess for their healing abilities and their inborn strength. No human would be able to take him this way, nor would he ever look to another for loving. Liana was his, now and always, just as he was hers. No way could he slow down now that the mating rut was upon him.

Liana's breathing grew ragged and still he

didn't slow down, didn't ease off the pressure or tempo. All he could do was hope to make it up to her later. He needed to mark her with his come, and he needed to do it now. Some wild instinct insisted on it.

The pressure around his shaft increased and his balls drew taut against his body. Sharp tingles raced up his spine. His hands and thighs shook, and still he forced his cock even deeper into her mouth, wedging it further down her throat. Hearing his mate's purrs and husky moans of desire were all he needed to know that somehow he was pleasing her as well. That's all it took to send him over the edge of oblivion. Ryan groaned as he felt his come rip out of his balls and down the length of his cock.

The only warning he gave her that he was about to come was a grunt of savage pleasure, then his roar of satisfaction. "Swallow it, Liana. Every drop, baby, every drop, my love."

Ryan clasped her head tighter just as hot jets of semen spilled down her throat. Over and over, ropes of hot seed shot down the back of her throat and still he didn't let up his grip. Eons—or perhaps merely seconds later—he felt the last of his seed explode from his cock in one massive burst.

Yet, still he needed to rut on Liana like a bull in heat, as if he hadn't spent forever trying his best to

slacken that need in his mate's lush mouth. His climax had only lessened the pressure but not the all-consuming necessity driving his instinctual actions.

Liana continued to suck on his cock, but with leisurely pleasure rather than rapturous need. She lovingly laved it, making sure she gathered every drop of his seed. She was turning out to be just as sexually submissive as he'd always desired in a mate. Yet, outside the bedroom, in her own lab, she was just as strong and confident as he was — when she doing her testing, doing her thing.

"Enough, Liana."

Liana ignored his order. Her purrs of contentment vibrated along the length of his shaft, sending new waves of desire shooting to his groin.

"I said, enough."

Liana licked her lips that now glistened with his seed and smirked. He could feel the pleasure she found loving him with her mouth through their mate bond and his heart swelled with love for her.

Ryan could see the tension running through his mate's body, from her wobbly knees to the increased heart rate visible at her neck, even in the coating of perspiration covering her glorious caramel skin. She quivered with need. It wouldn't take much to send her over the edge.

Very good, Liana, my love, my moya. Feeling generous, he lifted his love into his arms and

gently placed her in the center of the bed, on her hands and knees so that she faced the headboard.

Liana's movements were wooden and stiff, her body protesting its need to change position. He'd have to remember to give her a full body massage later—she more than deserved one after the day she'd had, and the night wasn't over yet. A sheen of sweat glistened on her skin and he could smell her arousal as it perfumed the air. Thick cream coated the inside of her thighs, evidence of her desperate need for relief. His beast was dying for a taste of her essence, wanting to lick the sweet cream dripping from between her thighs. Oh, he was so going to enjoy the next few minutes while he attempted to drive his mate out of her mind with ecstasy. After they were through tonight, he wanted her to sleep the sleep of the exhausted, to sleep dreamlessly in preparation of the days to come.

Liana dug her fingers into the royal blue, silken coverings as the mattress dipped beneath his weight. He didn't want her to anticipate his actions, however, so he scooted back off the bed and rummaged through the chest at the foot of his sleeping platform, away from her sight.

Only the sound of her rasping breaths and the sharp clang of metal striking metal as he slammed the lid of the trunk closed broke the silence in the room.

"I don't want you to think right now, Liana. I only want you to feel the pleasure I'll be gifting you with. I'm going to cover your eyes so all your senses are narrowed to three—hearing, taste, and touch."

Tied to one bedpost was a sash from his uniform. How would anyone know that he'd planned to use that on his mating night? Only the Goddess Alana could have known such a thing, and seeing the bed here and his sash, his heart overflowed, knowing their Mother Goddess had blessed their union.

Liana gasped when the cool satin band of his uniform sash caressed her face. The Royal Blue sash symbolized his place of honor in the King's Special Services Guard—the men he sent out on missions to retrieve the lost and stolen women of the known universes—but tonight it would symbolize the honor Liana bestowed upon him by choosing him as her one and only. The honor and respect he wanted—no, needed desperately—to bestow upon her, for her acceptance of who and what he was, the killings he'd been forced to carry out to complete his mission.

"Close your eyes, *moya*," he whispered into her ear, as he placed the cloth over her face. "Listen to my voice as I make love to you with words. Feel my heart beat against the silken skin of your back. Smell the heavy scent of your arousal as your

cream spills down your thighs."

After a momentary pause, Ryan ran the tip of his index finger down the center of her back. Liana's body trembled in earnest. An urgent moan of need echoed throughout the room and Ryan groaned alongside her. When he knew the tension was at its most unbearable, he nipped her ear and slipped his fingers between her dripping wet pussy lips, running his thumb over the hard nub of her clit.

The evidence of her arousal coated his fingertips. He raised them to his mouth and licked them clean, closing his eyes as he savored the flavor of her passion—both sweet and tart. He would never get enough of her, not of her taste, not of her loving and generous spirit. Goddess, he was addicted to her already and it'd been mere hours since they met. "Oh, you are so wet for me, *moya*. Do you want to come, beloved?"

When an inarticulate cry was her only response, Ryan knew it wouldn't take much to send her into oblivion. He couldn't wait to hear her scream in pleasure. He wouldn't wait much longer, in fact. He desperately wanted to see her writhing in ecstasy atop their bed, lost to everything but what they were sharing—their hearts, souls, minds, and bodies.

Ryan gave a wicked chuckle and lowered his face toward her needy pussy. There was no doubt

in his mind that the smell of her passion was nature's own ambrosia, meant to drive him completely insane if he were ever to be away from her too long.

Her pussy lips were plump and pinkish tan, the perfect combination as far as he was concerned. With infinite tenderness, he spread her lips apart with his fingers and lowered his nose to her cunt so he could just inhale her natural essence. Finally, after a moments rest to memorize her scent, he stroked her pussy from asshole to clit with a gentle swipe of his rough tongue.

Liana groaned, her thighs flexed. "Please, Ryan."

Ryan turned his head and nipped her thigh. After another frustrated groan, Liana moaned in desperation. Even though her eyes were closed and her face pressed to the bed, he could feel her desire, her frustration through their bond, feel her every emotion in fact. It was such a heady sensation to be this bonded with another. He knew he wouldn't be able to tease her much longer, before the intense pleasure his touch caused would turn to pain—for the both of them, for what she felt, so did he. With that in mind, Ryan decided to forgo a long drawn out session of foreplay. She deserved to come now, especially after she gave him so much pleasure just minutes ago. There would be plenty of time later for an

extended bout of foreplay.

Straightening behind her, Ryan prepared to mount his mate. "Are you ready for me, *moya*?"

"Mmm... Oh, yeah, I am, *moyo*, my beloved."

"Tell me, *moya*. Do you want my cock?"

"Yes, damn you."

"Say it, *moya*. Tell me exactly what you want."

"Fuck me, Ryan. Please, fuck me. Please don't make me beg tonight. I just can't take it today. I need you so much. Please!"

"Oh, *moya*...my beloved Liana. How can I deny you anything your heart desires?"

Ryan leaned over her back and gripped the base of her neck with his fangs, as he prepared to enter her. If he didn't sink his unruly cock into her wet heat soon, he might pass out on top of her since all the blood that normally sent oxygen to his brain had lodged in his groin in anticipation of their lovemaking.

Several seconds passed while Ryan just inhaled the combined scents of their passion—his seed and her cream. After gaining control over his driving need to plunder, he wrapped his hand around the head of his shaft and placed it against her dripping sheath. With utmost care, Ryan entered the almost virgin hole, using his cock to stretch her slowly, so as not to abuse her tender opening.

"Please, Ryan. I need more. Please," Liana

begged, wriggling her hips, pushing back against his groin. Her voice cracked, her skin was slick with perspiration and her entire body vibrated with suppressed need. She pushed back against him again in an obvious effort to force him deeper into her.

No more than an inch of his cock was inside her tight entrance and already he was close to exploding. “By the Mother Goddess Alana,” he murmured, “she’s so blessedly tight.” She spread her thighs wider and raised her bottom to rest on his legs. Ryan surged forward before he slowly withdrew, then after a short pause, he finally, entered her once again. Goddess, she felt so amazing. This moment was perfect. Nothing could mar what had become the single most erotic and important night of his life.

Liana once again sat atop his thighs, wrapped her arms around his neck, and legs tighter around his waist. If he’d been human instead of a *Chantrean* – a male lion shape shifter – she would have crushed him with her new strength, drawing his own power from his muscles to her own through her Empathic abilities.

She groaned loud and low and the huskiness of the sound rippled through him like an electric current.

He knew he hadn’t hurt her despite his forceful entry, but he had to ask. “Are you okay, my

beloved?" She was definitely ready if her angry glare and mental cussing indicated just how fine she felt at that moment. Pure frustration filled her mental voice. In fact, his ears were most likely a blistering red from the mental slap to get his ass moving. Ryan chuckled. He so loved having awakened a strong, independent and forceful mate.

"Shit, Ry. If you don't fucking move right this damn minute, you'll be the one hurting," she vowed.

He chuckled again, he just couldn't help it. She sounded so fierce and intense, like a lioness defending her cubs. He could hear the frustrated growls rumbling in her chest and it turned him on even more, making his cock grow thicker, longer inside her sheath. He thought his heart would beat right out of his chest; the pleasure looping between them became that intense. He had to move and he had to move *now*!

He tried to ease out of her gently, but she wasn't having any of that and wrapped her legs around his waist even tighter, keeping him lodged deep inside her aching, clinging pussy. "Deeper, Ryan. Please, *moyo*."

"*Moya*, baby, hold on. You don't have to beg any more. I need you just as much as you need me."

His lungs labored and his pulse raced as he

pounded in and out of her cunt. In. Out. In. Out. Faster and faster. Deeper and deeper. His pace quickened yet again as the moans and whimpers coming from Liana grew louder. And when she purred, he knew without a doubt, she loved the hell out of every moment of their lovemaking.

Before long, they were heaving and sweating, writhing and grunting, trembling and petting each other. The force of his thrusts grew stronger, the penetration deeper and still they fucked and loved. Seconds later, he heard her scream out her climax through their bond just as her pussy clamped down on his cock. It nearly sent him over the edge with her. When her clenching pussy tightened around his cock yet again a mere second later, it milked him of rope after rope of scalding hot and sticky come.

Ryan sighed and murmured in awe, "By the Goddess Alana, I feel glorious and completely sated for the first time in my life."

"Gah!"

He could hear her panting beneath him and knew he should move off her. He had to be crushing the life out of her but he just didn't have the energy to move. Not yet.

Eons passed, or maybe just moments, before he had the vigor to roll off her and pull her into his arms. They lay like that, content, and, for just this perfect moment, safe and secure in their mating

bed.

Trouble would come soon enough. For now, he wanted to cuddle with his beautiful mate, feel her heart beat against his palm, and let the world of dreams take them away to a place where there were no enemies waiting for them to make a big enough mistake to take them down.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

As Liana lay in the fantastic bed someone had taken great pains to provide for their mating night, wrapped in her husband's arms, she just enjoyed the moment. Never in her life did she expect to take a mate, one she could both love and be proud of. To say that she was fortunate no matter their currently dire situation would be putting it mildly indeed. There was no woman in all the known universes luckier than she was at this very moment.

Except of course, last night when she closed her eyes, the dreams began. Explicit dreams that left her shaken and so incredibly aroused she feared she could barely function the next day. She couldn't sleep, not without dreaming of *him*, and those dreams were anything but tame. How was she going to solve the *Chantrean's* fertility problems when all she could think about was the next time she could make love to her mate?

Ryan tucked her closer to his side, anchored down into the bedding with his thigh, then slid a palm over her right breast, and idly flicked her nipple as he nuzzled her neck and whispered in her mind. *That time is now, love. There's no need to suffer. Once the bond settles into place you'll find it much easier to prioritize your duties, at least that's what I've heard. It's why the first week after a mating the new couple spends it in seclusion, until some of the overwhelming urgency passes.*

Liana sighed, then rolled over looking into Ryan's burnt amber eyes for the first time this new rising. *Why is it that though I've live among the Chantreans longer than you have, you seem to have adapted easier to their lifestyle, their teaching and beliefs?* Trailing a finger down the line of hair leading to his shaft, she contemplated this. *Do you think it's because you were a prisoner and feel more a part of the way Chantrea is supposed to be because of your captivity?* Liana bit her lip. She hoped she wasn't treading on memories that were too painful. She'd never purposely bring him pain if she could help it.

Don't worry, beloved. Nothing you ask me is out of bounds. You and I are one. It's not possible for there to be secrets between us, and I wouldn't want there to be. As far as why I'm closer to the Chantreans, perhaps part of the reason is my captivity, but another larger part is because of how things were for us on Earth. It was constant war everywhere you turned, from local

thugs and their gang wars to international wars between countries. With the exception of the Black Rose, Chantrea and its known neighbors are peace lovin, and only want to help each other. "Now that's enough talk of war. Kiss me, my mate. I've been waiting for you to wake up for hours without molesting your naked body once. I deserve a reward, Liana."

Chuckling, Liana reached forward and wrapped her arms around Ryan's neck, pulling him down for his good morning kiss. Just as their lips met, slid across each other in the gentlest of caresses, the ship's proximity alarms chimed throughout the ship. "Well, hell. I guess neither of us will get a good morning kiss today."

With that said, Liana threw off the covers on her side of the bed and stood, just as Ryan slid off his side. Chuckling, Liana looked over her shoulder, "Depending on what the emergency is, we might have just enough time to bathe, if we share resources. Would you like to bathe with me? I happened to notice last night that one end of the bathing pool has a small fresh-water pool basin where the two of us should just fit. If you're game that is?"

"Let's contact the others first. See what's going on in the real world while we've been celebrating our mating."

Ryan ran his palm down the length of Liana's

mahogany hair. He'd enjoyed disheveling it throughout the night. He gave it a quick tug before tucking a lock behind her right ear. "Great idea, *moya*. It shouldn't take but a few moments for *Contessa* on board our ship *Retribution* to contact Hunter's ship, *Vengeance*."

"Do you think *Contessa* can manufacture or rummage up some clean clothes and send them here? I'd like a quick dip in the pool, wash up a little before showing up at the control deck with the others, and I sure don't want to look like I did yesterday."

"That shouldn't be a problem. She can zap us up some from one end of the ship and send us, fully clothed, to the other in mere moments"

Liana snorted. *Does she do hair, too? I'm sure mine looks like a family of mice have moved in.*

Once again, Ryan ran his hand through the length of her hair, a small smile tilting up one corner of his mouth. *I think you look beautiful just as you are and to prove it...* He gently cupped her cheeks, stepped completely into her personal space, and pulled her into to a slow, thoroughly arousing, mind-numbing kiss. Several minutes passed before either thought to come up for air.

Liana blinked, looked up at Ryan through half-dazed, burnished, amber eyes. Of its own accord, her mind merged with his, picking up his thoughts, his emotions. *By the Goddess Alana, he*

loved putting that look on her face. He couldn't wait until he'd have the opportunity to do it again

Liana swallowed, filled with such awe and a sense of completeness she'd never would have imagined...not in a million years. In fact, she was sure—one hundred percent positive—that she could come up with the cure to their people's fertility problems. Somehow, she instinctively knew the knowledge sat in the back of her mind all along, percolating, waiting only for her to access it properly. Just waiting patiently, and now with Ryan by her side she could do that. She didn't have a doubt in her mind. Not anymore.

Reaching for her mate's hand, she gave it a quick squeeze before meeting his searching gaze. He'd obviously been feeling her emotions through the bond and was curious, if the small smile and arched brow were any indication. "Let's find out what's going on. I have work to do. Somehow, someday, I will find the cure, and then the danger will *really* begin."

"You're right. We've lots to do and once the cure is completed the danger will only increase until everyone is inoculated or given his or her dose. Speaking of which, what form of dosing are you thinking? Are you considering delivering via an aerosol, inoculation, or maybe adding it to the food and water supply, perhaps?"

Liana chuckled. It felt good to speak with

another about her work who somehow not only understood what she was speaking about, but instead of faking interest for his or her own personal gain, *actually was* interested in it, for no other reason than that she was. *That's a heady power, my love, to hand over. If I were some wily female, I could take advantage of that.*

I'm hoping you'll become extremely wily later and take every advantage over me, once we take care of whatever mess awaits us on our ship, Liana, because I intend to take full advantage of you – just fair warning and all that.

Consider me warned. Liana could feel the blush burning across her skin. She'd never actively flirted with anyone before. The concept of having an actual adult, committed relationship with Ryan exhilarated her instead of making her quake in terror. She knew deep in her gut that she and he were destined—had always been destined. Now they just had to kick the Black Rose's ass and anyone else who'll try to keep them apart—or worse yet, dead—because of her work.

By the time the pair stepped out of the meadow pool, two piles of clothing were waiting for them to change into. Liana raised her brows in surprise. *Contessa* takes her job seriously. Once dressed, Ryan took a hold of Liana's hand, raised it to his lips for a kiss, then while looking into his mate's captivating eyes, murmured, *Shoshoni,*

Thank the Shi'Lan's for hosting us last evening and the full use of Mating Chamber. Please transport Liana and Ryan Morgan to the Command Deck of *Retribution*, and open communication between all allied ships so that we can ascertain exactly what has set off the perimeter alarms."

"Message Sent. Transport in—Five. Four. Three. Two. One."

No sooner had Liana's feet settled down once again on solid form, than *Contessa*, the sentient computer aboard *Retribution*, had already started filling them in on what they'd missed. She'd have to learn to come out of transport more alert if she wanted to stay safe, hell if she wanted to keep her mate safe because he'd not leave her side during such a dangerous moment. Who knows what could have been lying in wait there for them. Once it was safe again, and time not so important, she'd practice transporting with *Contessa*. She did not want to cause either her or her mate injuries because of slow reaction times.

Ryan pulled Liana over to the Commander's chair and sat her on his lap as he pulled up some schematics that seemed to come alive right before her eyes. It didn't look like a projection screen, and like an idiot, she pushed her hand through the wall of information and her hand went right through. "Woah..."

While Ryan continued to read through the information screening across their eyes, Liana continued to scan the wide-open control room. There were several abandoned science stations, which she vaguely recognized from various times she's been forced to leave *Chantrea* to follow a lead in her research, but this she had no idea just what Ryan was reading and how *Contessa* seemed to have accessed it. But she wouldn't complain, especially if it helped them in the end. She just hated being the last to know something.

Within seconds, the *movie*, for want of a better name, ended, and she turned to Ryan, waiting for an explanation. Minutes passed and Ryan wouldn't meet her gaze. Little by little, feelings of disgust, hatred, and shame started working their way through their bond and when she looked up to ask him what was wrong, the look of utter hatred on his face made her heart clench. Why? Why? She wanted to shout. *How could he hate me when I've done nothing but love him?*

Feeling Ryan's loathing of having her near him, Liana stood as regal as she could and walked out of the room. She didn't look back. Through their bond he'd know where she went and what she'd be up to so she wasn't about to stick around. She didn't even know what had turned his love for her into hate so quickly. Should she have waited and heard whatever accusation he made? Liana shook

her head.

He didn't trust her, that was clear enough from the feelings shouting through their bond. She couldn't be in the same room with a man she loved whose love had turned to hatred. She just wasn't strong enough, emotionally—not as an Empath and certainly not as his mate. He had to work it out on his own or he'd never trust a word she'd ever say, but she'd really like to know what he'd been reading. Did that even matter, though, when even now she could feel his disgust at being her mate, his desire to sever their bond permanently?

Liana let the tears drip from her eyes, but she didn't utter a sound. She'd never felt so gutted in her entire life, not even when she's originally been stolen by Taliff Shi'Lan all those years ago. Lost and alone she wandered, and in her wandering, something inside her withered away and died.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Ryan couldn't believe what he'd read. Even after seeing the proof in front of his own eyes, reread it several times, his heart did not want to believe what the evidence was blatantly telling him. How could she have fooled him so completely? Not once had Ryan sensed any deceit or even evil intent in his mate, nothing but pure goodness, in fact and yet... Ryan shook his head, his heart weighing heavily in his chest. According to the report the *Manruvians* had sent this morning, Liana was personally responsible for killing or ordering the deaths of nearly three dozen high-level rebel operatives who supposedly came to close to discovering that she was the mole within the palace, the one feeding info to the Black Rose herself.

Ryan should have Liana confined to the brig, but he had *Contessa* watching her. He just couldn't bring himself to arrest her himself. He'll let Prince

Mikel of *Manruvia* do it when he arrived for their meeting this morning, though he was surprised that the report hadn't come from the Prince himself, but from his Security Chief. With charges as serious as the ones leveled against Liana, it should have been cause enough to warrant face-to-face meetings between the Commanders of every ship, but especially the *Manruvians* as they were the ones injured the most by Liana's crimes.

Something about the whole situation was beginning to feel off, he just didn't know what. "*Contessa*, contact the Princes Shi'Lan on their private codes and delay the meeting two hours. Then Contact High Prince Mikel of *Manruvia* and have him report to the Conference Room on the surface below immediately. There may be a security breach aboard the *Victory* so it might be wiser to have the meeting inside the rebel base where no one can overhear."

"Commander, what would you like done with your mate?"

Ryan swallowed past the tears that wanted to gather, and forced himself to remember every gory detail of the report he'd just read. "Liana Peterson is my mate no longer. Have it purged from our records immediately. Then send her to the brig. She's to get the normal rations of an enemy to the state and no more."

The sentient computer stayed silent for a few

seconds before replying, "As you ordered. I've contacted the palace and had the mating expunged. Ms. Peterson is walking in the general direction of her quarters. Would you like me to send her to the brig now?"

Ryan shook his head. "She'll have to wait. I don't have time to file criminal charges now. Keep her closely monitored and inform me if she tries anything to harm this ship or anyone else. I need to salvage some of the damage she managed to do the short time she was onboard *Retribution*, and save as many lives as possible. Just let me know when the divorce is finalized and where her trial will be. I want nothing more to do with her until then."

Closing his eyes, Ryan sought out the end of the mating bond glowing brilliant white in his mind, which led directly to hers. With vicious ruthlessness, he forced power through the end of the bond lodged in his mind and shattered their link completely. He would have dropped to his knees at the loss if he didn't have so many things to fix because of his so-called mating. Perhaps one day he'd let himself feel the loss. It would not be this day.

"Are you sure you're doing the right thing, Commander Morgan? It's not like you not to even verify a source of information before arbitrarily believing and acting on it with less than five

minutes of thought on a subject.”

“It hurts too much to think about it. It’s why I have Mikel meeting me inside the rebel base rather than here.”

“And in the meantime, if this report is a vicious lie, you’ve destroyed not only the best relationship you’ve ever had, but the woman, too. I hope you find that you’ve made the right decision, but something tells me, this morning events are going to haunt you for the rest of your very long life.”

With those final words, *Contessa* grew silent, and Ryan ran a hand through his disheveled hair. Walking past the Commander’s chair where his world went to hell, he returned to his private quarters and washed Liana’s scent from his skin the best he could. It may take years before the mating mark would fade completely, but by the Goddess, he’d start removing it today.

* * * *

Liana sat in stunned silence as she stared in her microscope, shuddering and quaking at the loss of the mating bond. It felt like someone gouged a huge hole through her mind, heart and soul, simultaneously. Well, at least something had come from this lousy day. She’d found the cure to the fertility problems. A simple set of inoculations would begin to even out the birth rate and finally

allow women to have children, female children, of their own.

Ryan wouldn't believe her if she tried to give him this data, would instead accuse her of setting up another biological weapon that would continue to kill off the *Chantreans*. There was no one and nothing left for her here. After picking up a pen, she drafted a quick note to Amy, letting the tears fall. It's all she had left of a relationship she thought, hoped, would last forever.

Dearest Amy,

Over the years, you have been the only true friend I have ever known, and it has been a privilege to get to know you and your family, to be considered a true friend to you and yours. You know how I was able to ensure your pregnancy, but now I've created a stable formula using my own antibodies as before, but on a much grander scale. You should have enough prepared formula in this box to inoculate everyone on your ship. I've also included instructions on how to make more. You must follow the directions precisely. Included in a third package inside this box are four units of my blood – which can be cloned into thousands more with the technology the Manruvians have on hand – to use to develop more formula. It shouldn't take but a few weeks to mass-produce enough to cure the populations on both Chantrea and Manruvia. Eventually, this cure should be put in an aerosol form and in food and water supplies, spread throughout as much as the galaxy as

possible to make all our planets healthy again, not just its people. I believe the Mother Goddess would approve of that plan, or at least I hope she will.

It was wonderful knowing you, even if only for a short time. I cannot feel the link to your brother any longer. I see he found no reason or desire to delay separating us as a couple. I won't defend myself, but if he could so easily see treachery in me without even asking me a single question, then he never loved me at all. I'll not live with a mate, nor fight to stay with one who can distrust so easily and hate me so quickly.

To me, you will always be my sister. I go to my Goddess now and shelter in her arms. I'm finally warm and cherished, Amy, so don't worry for me. My heart overflows with hope that with this, my final act, your people will become what they always should have been: Happy, Healthy, Fertile and Strong. All my love in this life and beyond... I'm too tired to write a separate letter to Hunter and Mikel. My time has come. Goodbye, my friend.

Forever Yours,

L

As she penned the note for Hunter and Amy Shi'Lan as well as Mikel of *Manruvia*, she continued to allow her blood to flow from her arms into the donation/plasma bags she discovered in the medical lab. Filling up the pints they'd need to reproduce the cure in enough quantities to heal the masses was her one last

mission. She may not have ended up with the love of her life, but in the end, her life could be worth something. She'd rather die giving the *Chantreans* and *Manruvians* a cure than hanging on the end of a traitor's hangman's noose where the antibodies in her blood could heal no one, help no one. At the time she realized her blood could be formulated into a stable cure, she'd pictured donating a pint of blood a week until they had enough to start cloning it, but with the glaring absence of her mating bond, she didn't have several weeks to accomplish her task. Already her life-force waned, slowly coming to a painful end as her body and soul mourned the loss of its mate.

Besides, she couldn't look Ryan Morgan in the eye while he ordered her death. That would shatter her completely—not that she was doing well just now. If she'd done nothing else in life, she'd helped saved two societies, and however pitifully sad her mating had turned out, she'd learned to love with her whole heart—something she'd never dared hope to experience. A miracle despite the loss she now felt.

Once finished filling the plasma bags with her life-saving blood, she put her package together, then Liana focused on Amy's face. Using all her strength, every bit of will she had left, she transported the package with the cure directly to Amy's bedside table—a gift that no one knew she

had, a gift that would never be discovered by another. Amy would just assume she'd used the *Retribution's* teleportation equipment and that would be the end of it. Her secret would go with her to her grave.

She could feel the lesions in her brains opening up, her head drowning in blood, and she just didn't care. Laying her head down atop her folded arms, she closed her eyes. She'd lost the one person who ever meant anything to her, through no fault of her own, but even in death she couldn't punish those that needed her the most. She did not regret speeding up her demise by sending the package telepathically.

With a small, sad smile tilting up her lips, Liana let the darkness take her, down, down, down into the warmth, and drifted ever so slowly away from the pain, finally finding a place of rest. Finally! No more pain. No more fear. No more disgust or hatred—just an empty bliss of pure nothingness. She couldn't ask for anything more.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Shaking her head at the stupidity happening below her, the Goddess Alana sighed, then opened her inner eye to more closely watch the scene playing out above the *Manruvian* moon. Though she had known this would happen, it did not make it easier seeing such sadness come to pass. She knew she would intervene—for the entire galaxy needed Liana—but would she allow the male to know what had happened so he could attempt to correct his mistake? Or should she let him believe that Liana was lost to him forever and take her away? In the end, she had more than just one relationship, one mating pair, to consider, she had an entire universe at the mercy of a disease she could not have prevented because the alternative would have been so much worse for her children.

The Mother Goddess Alana shook her head, still undecided, and flashed aboard the ship, ready

to intervene. All that really mattered at this particular moment was making sure that Liana lived through the next few minutes. Beyond that, she'd wait and take her cues from her daughter as to what to do with her frustrating male.

Even knowing what she'd find, the goddess' heart almost stopped when she spotted Liana sprawled on the medical bay floor. Her normally burnished gold skin had become almost white. Her lips had even begun to turn blue from lack of oxygen. If she didn't step in now, her daughter would be dead in moments. Kneeling on the floor next to Liana, she placed her hand on Liana's forehead and closed her eyes, concentrating as she sent a pulse of energy directly into the female's mind, healing the lesions as she also attempted to encourage her red blood cells to multiply.

What should have taken only a moment to heal was taking much longer because Liana had already given up—her will to live had disappeared with the devastating loss of the mate bond—something the goddess was sure Ryan Morgan hadn't thought about when he cruelly severed their bond. If he didn't reestablish the bond between him and his mate, they would both end up dying, regardless of what she did to save Liana now—unless she intervened on their behalf. Had he forgotten that once mated, losing your mate was a death sentence? Or had he thought

since he *severed* the bond and his mate still lived he'd avoid that outcome? Or had he not thought at all, and just reacted?

Even living as long as she had, knowing as much as she did about the way the universe worked, the Mother Goddess still did not completely understand the working of the male mind.

Shaking her head, she went back to healing Liana, and was still bent over her still form when the door to the medical bay opened with a low hiss. She didn't need to be a goddess to know who stood there. She could smell the male's panic, the scent of the female mixed with the male's, despite the odor of cleanser that coated his skin.

"What are you doing to her? Who are you and how did you get in here?" the male asked, his voice curiously husky as he knelt on the other side of his unconscious mate.

She didn't bother looking up or greeting him – nor would she until she felt satisfied Liana would live. Only when she knew with absolute certainty that Liana's body would continue the repairs on its own did she open her eyes and meet Ryan's angry brown gaze. What she saw in his protective posture and read in his worried thoughts gave Alana some hope for the future – more than she'd had just minutes ago. She'd wait and see what the male said – how Liana reacted to his plans before

deciding what to do about their future. She'd suffered enough in her young life and the Mother Goddess would not allow anyone to hurt her again – even unintentionally.

* * * *

Ryan stared out into the blackness of space, seeing nothing of the stark beauty that had never failed before to awe him with its vast majesty. He saw nothing beyond the pain in his mate's eyes as he'd rejected her. He felt naught but the agonizing sense of loss and emptiness where Liana's presence, her warmth, used to reside in his heart. He felt empty – scraped raw from the inside out.

As he waited for the appointed time to meet High Prince Mikel Logann of *Manruvia* on the moon below, he thought back over the last two hours, to that moment when his entire world seemed to crash down around him. Again, he thought of the expression in Liana's eyes as he'd read the missive from the *Manruvia's* security chief, as he let the words sink into his psyche. His mind paused on the moments before she walked out of the Command Deck, *her* feelings of betrayal at his rejection of her and their bond, and finally her stoic departure as glistening tears trailed down her cheek and the doors slid closed behind her.

With time and distance giving him a better prospective, he finally began to doubt what he'd read, to take the time to actually analyze recent events. He'd been connected to Liana—mind to mind, heart to heart, soul to soul, as hokey as that sounded—and though he hadn't known her long, in the short time he'd been a part of her and she of him, at no time had he doubted her absolute sincerity in helping the *Chantrean* people. He'd thought, in fact, that he'd never met a person as giving and truly compassionate as she. Could she really be as cruel and downright evil as the missive reported, and hide those personality traits from her own mate?

Ryan shook his head and started to pace the confines of his quarters. Back and forth. Back and forth. As the minutes passed, one after another, a sense of shame and guilt crept into his mind, his heart.

Dropping onto the end of the bed, Ryan lowered his head into his hands and admitted to himself a truth he could no longer deny. He'd let his past—his distrust of women in general because of his captivity by the Black Rose—taint his present. He could blame no one but himself for the destruction of the most important thing in his life—the relationship with his one true mate. How could he ever make this right again? He couldn't even blame Mikel's Security Chief—though he

would have to investigate the false report—because he should have trusted his mate. He should have talked to her about it rather than arbitrarily believing the report so instantaneously. How could she ever forgive him for screwing up so completely? If the situation were reversed, he didn't know if he could do the same. Would Liana's empathic abilities help or hinder reconciliation between them? He just didn't know.

Even now, the aching sense of loss and despondency continued to dig and claw its way through his soul, spreading like a malignant cancer, leaving crippling pain in its wake. His heart actually hurt as it throbbed in his chest. The longer he stayed away from Liana, the more he hurt and the more desperate he became to see her, touch her. He had to know that she was safe.

More than that, he had to earn back her trust. Somehow. Despite not knowing exactly how he'd make things right, he couldn't sit here alone in his bachelor quarters a minute longer without seeing her.

Taking a deep breath, he straightened his spine and looked up toward the speakers hidden near the ceiling, seamlessly blending into the décor of the crown molding. "*Contessa*, where is Liana Peterson?"

"She's in the Medical Bay. The Quarantine Protocol is currently in effect, but Dr. Peterson

hasn't accessed any of the ship's critical systems. As *Retribution* is in no danger and she is unable to transport from her location, I have not overridden the security protocols currently running."

Ryan jumped to his feet and ran to the door, racing toward the medical bay and his woman. "Why did she implement the Quarantine Protocol, *Contessa*?" he asked, his voice breathless as he sprinted toward the lift that would carry him to the deck where the Medical Bay was located.

"I apologize, Commander Morgan. Without more data, I cannot answer your inquiry."

"Then make an educated guess," he demanded as he punched the wall of the lift in frustration and worry. Ryan closed his eyes and prayed the lift would descend faster. He needed to get to the Medical Bay and he needed to be there now.

"Perhaps she wanted to grieve where she could not be disturbed. As an Empath, even without the Mate Bond, she could feel everything you did. Probabilities are high the loss of the bond could be debilitating with her abilities."

Ryan winced, hung his head in despair. By the Goddess, how could he have hurt his own mate in such a way? She was the other half of his soul.

Once the lift stopped, he leapt through the door before it fully opened, an irrational sense of urgency spurring him on. Irrational because without the Mate Bond connecting them, he

should not be able to sense Liana at all and yet...somehow, he knew without a doubt that something had gone desperately wrong inside that locked room. Something life-altering. How he felt certain of that, he didn't know and didn't have time to analyze it.

He increased his pace yet again, until could run no faster in his human form. Within moments, he skidded to a stop at the entrance to the Medical Bay. When he pressed his palm against the security pad, nothing happened. The door didn't open. Apparently, the Quarantine Protocol locked him out as well, despite being ship's Commander, keeping *Retribution's* Medical Bay in lock-down.

"Contessa, override security protocol QUA-Alpha, authorization code 47932765Omega3."

"Authorization approved. Releasing door now."

Ryan breathed a sigh of relief as the doors hissed, indicating the seals had been broken. When the door slid open, his heart stuttered to a stop before kick starting into a thundering pace. Panic overwhelmed him as he spied his mate sprawled across the floor, a woman—an intruder—crouched over her.

"Who are you? What are you doing in here?" Despite his need to get to Liana, to ensure she still lived, he could not seem to make his feet move. Frozen in the doorway, he could not take a single

step toward his woman. Why? Why couldn't he move?

He needed to get to Liana. Who knew what the stranger was doing to her. He had to protect his mate. No matter what he'd done earlier, no matter their Mate Bond no longer existed, she was still his mate whether she accepted him back or not, and he'd do whatever he must to ensure her safety. Somehow, someway, he'd earn her trust back, he'd convince her that he couldn't live without her—didn't want to live without her. But first, he had to get to her. Somehow.

Suddenly, he body became his own again, allowing him to approach his mate and the woman still crouched over her. Smelling blood, Ryan's eyes widened as he saw for the first time the sluggishly bleeding punctures in both her wrists, the discarded, bloody tubing lying next to Liana's prone body.

Kneeling next to his unconscious mate, he ran his trembling fingers through her long brown hair. Her breathing was too shallow, erratic and choppy. He could hear her sputtering heart throbbing painfully slow in her chest. What had gone on in here? What had happened to his woman?

As he watched, the stranger's hands began to glow as they pressed against the open wounds on Liana's wrists. Amazed, Ryan watched the

wounds heal, faster even than they normally did for their kind.

“Who are you?” he repeated to the beautiful redheaded intruder, thankful for her assistance despite her uninvited presence aboard his ship.

The woman continued to ignore him and his questions, keeping her head bent over Liana, her hands now hovering one over her chest, the other his mate’s head. As he watched, worry and grief gnawed relentlessly at his gut. Liana’s color slowly improved, losing the pale, corpse-like sheen until she glowed with warmth and vitality again. Even her breathing and heart rate drastically improved so she appeared to be taking a nap. If he hadn’t seen it himself, he never would have believed there had ever been anything wrong with his mate. But he *had* witnessed this miracle and that demanded answers.

Finally, finally, the woman raised her head, meeting Ryan’s gaze for the first time. He gasped, awed and humbled, thankful beyond measure. He knew her. Well, he knew her face anyway. Who didn’t? It graced the statue in the Mating Chamber aboard *Vengeance* and just about every other Transport ship in the *Chantrean* fleet. What was the Mother Goddess Alana doing on *Retribution*? Not that he wasn’t grateful beyond measure that she arrived when she had, that she intervened when she did. He had no doubt that without her

aid, he would have arrived too late to save Liana from whatever she'd done to harm herself.

"Thank you, Mother, for saving my mate, for keeping Liana alive for me."

The mother goddess quirked her eyebrows. "Have you forgotten that you severed the Mate Bond between the two of you? My daughter is no longer your mate — by your own hand."

Ryan winced, but the goddess was not finished.

"And I did not save her for you. She is integral to the salvation of your race. Beyond that, she has suffered enough and I would not see her die, alone when she'd done naught but give of herself, sacrificing her own happiness to ensure my children would thrive in the years to come. Once she awakens, I will take her far from here, where she will have time to heal emotionally from what was wrought here. She deserves that and so much more."

Again, Ryan's heart stuttered in his chest. No, she couldn't take Liana away. How could he stop her though? She was the Mother Goddess of the *Chantran* people, the creator of their species according to all their known oral and written histories.

With his hand still buried in his mate's hair, he bent down and pressed a light kiss to Liana's forehead, breathing in her scent. Raising his head, he met the Mother Goddess' penetrating gaze yet

again. "Please," he begged. "Please, don't take her away from me. I know I screwed up... No one knows that better than I how terribly I screwed up, but I swear, on the lives of my sister and her unborn child which you know I honor above everyone but your own, I *will* make this right."

Ryan swallowed past the fear clogging his throat and continued his impassioned speech. "I love her. Without Liana, I'm only half-alive. She is the best part of me and without her, there is no meaning to anything. Please, please don't take her away from me. Give me the chance to convince her to stay with me, to bond with me again. I swear I will never doubt her or our bond again."

When the Mother Goddess Alana remained quiet, Ryan bowed his head, closed his eyes and allowed his tears to flow unchecked down his cheeks, heartbroken...just broken all around.

How could he live without her? Until the bond between them disappeared—because of his own stupidity, he admitted—he had not truly known how integral Liana was to his own happiness, his own survival, in fact. He couldn't—wouldn't—live without her. If he lost Liana, his life meant nothing to him. Why had he only realized this now, when it was too late to do anything about it? Why?

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Gut-wrenching pain washed over and through Liana, dragging her from the sweet bliss of nothingness into the harsh reality awaiting her aboard *Retribution*. She knew she was alive simply because she couldn't imagine the pain of loss and the repercussions of using too much of her own energy to send the package to Amy would follow her into the afterlife. What she couldn't figure out was how she was still alive.

She'd known that she was dying as she faded into unconsciousness, had actively embraced it, in fact. Keeping her eyes closed, she tried to focus on what was happening around her. She could feel Ryan's remorse, his guilt, even his fear, so she knew he stood nearby. Not that she needed her Empathic abilities for that because she could smell him. Despite knowing he didn't trust her, didn't want her as his mate, her heartbeat sped up just knowing he was close. He wasn't alone, however.

She could smell another—a stranger—yet she could sense nothing of the other person's emotions, and that left her wary. Her gift for knowing others' emotions had never failed her before. That they did so now, when she was already dealing with too much after Ryan's abandonment, left her panic-stricken.

Should she continue to feign sleep and try to overhear their conversation, or miraculously wake up and face the unknown situation head on? Tired of looking weak and cowardly, Liana opened her eyes. She'd face Ryan and the stranger head-on. She'd spent her entire life looking weak because of her *gift*. She'd not continue to do so—not if she could help it.

What Liana hadn't been prepared for were the tears running down Ryan's face as he knelt at her side, nor the ravishing beauty of the woman who hovered over where she still lay on the floor. Uncomfortable in the extreme, Liana scrambled up and off the floor, moving much quicker than she thought should be possible considering she'd practically bled out not too long ago. She shouldn't be alive, never mind be moving around as if she'd just taken a refreshing nap and had energy to spare.

She'd have to figure that out later. Discovering the identity of the woman in the medical bay and the reason Ryan was on his knees seemed much

more important to her suddenly very aware mind—a mind that no longer hurt as if it were being ripped open from the inside out. What had happened once she'd passed out? Something must have!

Wary and confused, she scooted away from the beautiful blond woman and the kneeling male she once called mate. She had dozens of questions rambling around her mind and had no idea where to start, especially when Ryan's feelings were constantly bombarding her. His fears, his worries, his sadness, his loneliness, his desperation—and all of it centered on his loss of her and their mate bond. If she weren't so upset with him herself, she might be moved by it, but she just couldn't think about it, not right now.

Turning toward the beautiful stranger who had hovered over her as she'd woken, Liana tried to figure out where she had seen her before. Her face was so familiar to her, yet she swore she'd never seen her before—not in person anyway.

You know me, child. You've always known me.

Liana's eyes widened. She knew that voice and had heard it in her mind many, many times before, in fact. It could only belong to the voice of the mother Goddess Alana, the original creator of the *Chantrean* people. "What has brought you here, my Goddess? You honor us by visiting, don't get me wrong. But I am curious as to what has

brought you out here when so many others need you right now."

"But none more important than you, my child."

Liana shook her head as she backed up toward the desk, collapsing into the chair. "I don't understand," she whispered.

"You, of all of my children, must live. You are the most important of my children. From you all the others will have the future I have foreseen. Without you, eventually my children will die out, in less than two more generations. I cannot allow that to happen, even if that means making sure you live when you would rather not."

Liana swallowed bile. The Goddess was right. After Ryan had broken their mate bond, she didn't want to live, would rather have faded into the darkness and gone into the next life with her conscious clear. Across the room, Ryan still knelt on the floor. He gasped, a raw keening sound of agony that pierced Liana's heart. Did he not realize what his callousness had made her feel? Did he care what consequences his one determined act wrought beyond the obvious, or had he not thought beyond the fact that he didn't want to feel the bond anymore? Hell, did he even think about what the absence of the bond would even do to him over time, or did he even care about that?

Liana continued to shake her head. "I don't

understand. I've done what I needed. I found your cure. You don't need me anymore."

"Little one, the cure was only the beginning of the work you must do yet. There is much that you are yet to discover, much yet for you to do before my children are truly safe."

"What to do you mean?"

The mother goddess shook her head.

"More, I am forbidden to say, my child. In truth, I have already spoken more than I should. Now, do I take you away from here to a place of peace or leave you here with the male who hurt you? I see no reason to leave you here with him if it is your wish to leave him. I can promise that you will not suffer the mourning loss of a mate that would normally happen at the breaking of a mate bond."

Liana's heart skipped a beat at the offer. "You can do that?"

"Of course. It will be as if the mating never happened at all. However neither of you may ever find another mate in this lifetime again. It truly is a once in a lifetime occurrence, usually. To find another mate when one passes is truly a miracle and not something that even I can manipulate. I will leave the decision up to you but you must make it quickly. We only have a few more minutes left before I must move on, taking you with me, if that is your decision. Decide, Liana."

Liana had avoided looking at Ryan the entire time since she'd woken, afraid to see into his eyes. But now, she had a decision to make, a life-altering and permanent one. She couldn't avoid looking at him now, not with his emotions pounding at the barriers of her mind, all but beating at a way through the walls shielding her. He'd hurt her so damn badly earlier and she still didn't know why. She didn't know if she wanted to face him, face the man she thought loved her, when he could turn on her so quickly after telling her he loved her, hell, showing her so thoroughly he loved her. How could she ever trust him again? He had taken someone else's word—at least that's what she assumed he'd done—over hers and turned away from her, ripping the mating bond right out of her mind, brutally, cruelly. How?

"How could you have done that to us, Ryan? Without one word to me? Without asking even one question? You believed a communiqué that can be hacked over a mind-bond that allows you to see into my soul and allows me to see into yours? How could you doubt me so easily, so quickly? Did you not love me at all, not even the tiniest bit? Or did you not care that ripping the bond out of my mind like that would kill me?"

Tears continued to trail down Ryan's cheeks, but he made no move to stand, instead remaining on his knees as she'd seen several *Lionese* women

during acts of submission throughout her stay at the palace on *Chantrea*. “Why are you kneeling, Ryan? You’re an Alpha Male. You don’t kneel to anyone.” Liana’s eyes widened when he bowed his head and lowered it to the floor at her feet.

“I do when I’ve done a great injustice. I let my past cloud my future. I didn’t trust what was right in front of me and it almost cost me more than I could imagine losing. It almost cost me you. It still cost me you. I don’t know what I’ll do if I lose you, Liana. You’re the best part of me. You’re my compassion, my heart, the gentleness I’ll need to be a good person and a compassionate leader. Without you, I’m nobody. Worth nothing. I’m begging you, Liana, read me. See inside me and see if you can find me worthy again. See if I’ll ever make the same mistakes again. Please, I’m begging you on my knees. Please, just search inside my soul. You don’t have to bond with me right away, just give me another chance.”

Liana swallowed, closed her eyes as his impassioned plea battered against her soul. She could feel his honest intent. He truly meant what he was saying—for now anyway. He wanted to get back with her. He honestly didn’t want to live without her, missed her, loved her, didn’t want to sleep in his bed without her. But that didn’t mean she was ready to take him into her arms, either. He harmed her more deeply than she could have

ever imagined and it would take time to heal properly from that.

But could she just walk away? Walk away from the best thing she'd ever known, even if it had only lasted a few hours? No, she couldn't do that either. What was left then? "I will stay with you, but there will be safeguards set up. This time I want to take time getting to know you before we bond again—if we bond again, Ryan."

"Okay. Anything you want, Liana. I'll do whatever you want."

"Then I want us to stay with Amy and Hunter. I'll feel safer there. Besides, with the Black Rose still out there, someone had to set us up, it's better to be amongst their guards until we know who wanted us apart to begin with. I'd feel safer staying with your sister."

If Liana thought Ryan would argue with that condition, she couldn't have been more wrong. He quickly stood, wrapped his arms around her waist and gave her a very long hug, placed a gentle kiss on Liana's forehead and whispered, "Whatever you need to feel safe, love. Whatever you need." Then Ryan quietly walked out of the medical lab, leaving the woman he once called mate alone with the Mother Goddess Alana.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Ryan stared into the viewport, which looked into his sister Amy's throne room on the *Chantrean* Home World. "I fucked up, Amy. But I have a chance to win Liana back. It's risky coming back there. But you yourself said that Liana sent the cure to you. The Goddess Alana said it's only the first step, though. We must keep Liana safe and she won't rebuild the mate bond with me until she can trust me again. She wants to be with you. She trusts you. Please help me, sis. I know if I can spend time with her in a secure area, where we can spend time together as a family, the love we feel for each other will bring us back together again. We just need that time—I know that's all we need. Please. I'm begging you, sis."

"My Alpha Brother is begging his little sister for help with a girl?"

"Not just any girl, Amy. *The* girl. This is my mate, Amy. The one I want to—no," he said,

shaking his head, "I need — to spend the rest of my life with. The one I'd already be spending the rest of my life with if I hadn't totally fucked up. I'm begging here. Do I need to get on my knees with you as I did with Liana? I will. There's nothing I won't do for her. Nothing."

"No. I believe you. We'll see you soon and have your room ready in the family wing. Good luck, brother."

Ryan snorted. "I'm going to need it."

"If there is anything I can do to help ease things between you and your mate, you've only to ask, you know that, don't you, Ryan?"

Nodding, Ryan smiled at his older sister. "I know. Thank you. For everything, but mostly for being a friend to Liana before she even met me. I take it she doesn't have many friends outside that lab of hers. I'm glad she has you."

"I'm the lucky one."

"On that note, we should be there sometime tomorrow if all goes well."

"Hunter and I will expect to see the *Retribution* in the Family Landing Pad sometime tomorrow.

"We'll be there."

"Don't be surprised if you find yourself surrounded by several ships of the royal guard on your way in. You're carrying the lead scientist with important discoveries and immediate families to the heirs to the throne. Your deaths

won't be kept quiet on our watch. Not this time. And doesn't that sound bad."

Ryan snorted. "I know what you meant, baby girl," he said, smiling.

"I haven't been a baby girl for a long time, Ry," Amy complained good-naturedly.

"Even your mate would agree that you're his baby girl. Wouldn't you, Hunter?"

Amy turned, looking over her shoulder where Hunter came into the room behind her. Ryan's heart squeezed in his chest when Hunter casually wrapped his arms around Amy's waist and placed a tender kiss on the tip of her nose. He wanted to be able to do the same thing with Liana. He wanted to share the same simple loving moments as the two so often did. When Hunter placed his large hand over the mound of her belly where Ryan's niece or nephew was growing, his heart clenched. It was such a loving and possessive gesture. In that single moment, he wanted so much to be holding Liana in that same way, to know that she was carrying his child, his hand guarding it from all danger. He wanted that with a passion he'd never thought possible. He was shaking with it.

"*Contessa*, Change our heading. Make our way to *Chantrea* with all due haste. Arrange with Hunter and Amy Shi'Lan's Security Forces for additional security for the *Retribution* during our

return trip. I'll be in Medical Bay or with Liana Peterson if there is an Emergency and you need to reach me."

In a hurry to speak with Liana, Ryan didn't even remember how exactly he had said goodbye to his sister, or what he said to Hunter, or even how or when he had left the command deck. Before he knew it, he found himself once again inside the medical bay, not even remembering the trip there.

He had to speak to Liana and he had to speak to her now. They had so much to settle, so many things he needed to make right between them and so little time to do it in. He felt like there was this little clock ticking down in his head and if it reached zero before they got everything cleared up, it would be too late...if it weren't already too late. He had royally fucked up—he could acknowledge that much on his own, at least.

After making sure his jeans were zipped and his shirt was neat and straight, Ryan knocked on the Med Lab door. He should have asked the computer if Liana had gone to her room but he figured she'd be holed up where she felt most comfortable, and of all places on the ship, the medical bay would be that place for her still—at least he believed it would be so for her.

"Come in, Ryan," Liana answered.

Her voice was just as calm as he remembered,

soothing. Peaceful even. He thought they both could use a little peace right now. He just hoped that he didn't completely blow this conversation with Liana. How could he possibly explain to her what happened when he didn't really understand it himself? He was such an ass. He wouldn't even blame her if she didn't take him back. By the Goddess, what was he going to do? How could he possibly explain why he'd treated her so wretchedly before, why he lost faith in her when she'd done nothing to deserve it?

You could start from the beginning, with the missive, the Goddess suggested, speaking directly into his mind, once again showing him just how powerful she was, and just how close to the situation she had remained.

"Liana, I have so much to apologize to you for and I'm not sure where to even start from," Ryan whispered, as he ran his hair through his already mussed brown hair.

Leaning back in the patient's chair in front of the physician's desk, Liana gripped the arms of the chair and nodded at Ryan. "You could start by telling me what happened up at the Command Center earlier. What were you reading that made you hate me so quickly when only minutes earlier you were in love with me, or at least you thought you were?"

"I received a missive from Mikel Logann's

Head of Security. He liaisons with me concerning the Rebel Army I lead. He investigates all possible new recruits or new relatives of high-ranking recruits. It's part of his ongoing duties, Liana."

"Let me guess. He investigated me. What did he find? Did he discover that I didn't return a library book when I was in high school when I was eight, or that I skipped school when I attended Cornell University at the age of thirteen?"

"This isn't a laughing matter, Liana. He found a bit more than that. He discovered proof that you were witnessed having meetings with the Black Rose on several occasions since you started working in the Palace, as well as several off-planet meetings on *Manruvia*."

"That's impossible. I've never left *Manruvia*. Ever. And any meeting I've ever held outside the lab, I've been accompanied by your sister, Amy. Always. And on top of that, I've always carried a camera and a listening device on my person whenever I've left the laboratory in case something in the environment contributed to our fertility problems and I happened to discover it on my rambles. I'm never out of the office without some form of auditory or video recording machinery equipment running, and no one I'm with would be aware of that. So you tell me when these so-called meetings took place and I can

refute them, immediately. All the information is right here on my laptop here on your ship in your medlab. *Contessa* can access it without my interference to verify that everything I've said is true."

Slowly, Ryan approached his mate, knelt between her knees, spreading them with his hands so that he could get closer to her. "I don't need *Contessa* to listen to the recordings, Liana. I know that you're telling me the truth. Deep down, I knew the truth yesterday even as I destroyed our bond. I let the evil bitch that had victimized me in the past victimize me again, and in doing so, she allowed me to destroy our future. Tell me I didn't permanently destroy us, please, baby. I can't live without you. I can't. I need you in my life. I need you in my bed. And, baby, I desperately need you in my head. Please love, please bond with me again. I need you in my mind, helping me make the right decisions, lending me your strength, feeding me your emotions, your compassion and your faith and goodness. You make me a better man, Liana. You just make me so much more. I don't want to live another moment without you, and I swear, I'll try never to make such a bone-headed mistake like that again—at least not without talking it out with you first."

Ryan held his breath and prayed as he never prayed before. He wrapped his hands over hers,

which still gripped the arms of the office chair. What would he do if she turned him down? He didn't know, but it probably would include some more begging. He could almost guarantee it. Looking deep into Liana's eyes, he waited for answer. What would it be? Would she mate with him or wouldn't she?

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Liana so much wanted to believe Ryan. Sincerity flowed like a river, pouring from his heart and soul. His every word spoken was truth. He could not lie to her. His soul was open to her, holding nothing back. But how long would that last? Right now, he seemed so absolutely sincere in everything he said, but could he be swayed from his path? Using her gift as a guide, she'd have to say no, he wouldn't have, but could she still trust in her gift after what she'd just gone through? In the end though it came to one simple fact—she remembered what it felt like to be bonded to this man, to feel his love wrapped around her, to feel the absolute warmth of his love and caring surround every inch of her as he cherished everything about her. Ryan was right, she couldn't live another day, another moment with being bound to him either. Together they would discover just who had set them up, who had done

their best to rip their worlds apart. And that person would learn one very important fact. Revenge is best served cold and...together.

With calm determination, Liana turned both her hands over, clasping both Ryan's hands in her own. She felt more than heard his startled gasp and his exalted joy. A quiver of excitement raced through his body, almost at the same time as a rush of pure love and astonishment, followed quickly by amazement. It became nearly impossible to keep up with the rush of emotions flowing so fast and furiously through the large male's trembling body. He truly felt overwhelmed that she'd accepted him back. And she hadn't even told him all that entailed. From the looks of things—er, the feel of things, she should say—she didn't think that that really mattered to him at the moment.

For now, they'd work on rebuilding the trust she'd taken for granted. And they would work together to destroy the vile person, and her accomplices, who had tried to tear them apart—the Black Rose.

When they were finished with her she'd be nothing but an inky smear in *Chantrea's* History Books. Besides, the Black Rose didn't start the fertility problems amongst the *Chantreans* and the rest of the allies in the known universes, someone else did. She just took advantage of it. That unknown mastermind was their true enemy. It

was that person that she and Ryan must truly defeat. The Black Rose was just a speed bump along the way. A practice run as it were.

She wondered what he'd say when he found out just what kind of battle lay ahead of them. She guessed she'd find out soon enough. But not tonight. Tonight was for reconciliation, and hopefully for a little lovemaking before all hell broke loose again. Because Ryan certainly wasn't going to like it when he found out all the information she'd discovered in the last several weeks concerning the origins of the *Chantreans* and *Manruvians'* fertility problems as well as those on *Earth*, their own home planet.

"Make love to me, Ryan Morgan. We must forge the Mate Bond between us. I don't want you to hold off any longer. I swear it feels like half of me is missing and there is a gaping hole in my heart and soul—in my mind—where you should be. I can't take it anymore, Ryan."

"Oh Goddess, Oh Goddess, I thought I'd have to be the one begging on my hands and knees on all night long, begging you for the bonding again." Ryan didn't bother to wipe the tears that ran unchecked down his cheeks from sheer happiness, nor did he try to conceal his smile or hide his joy. Instead, he pressed closer to Liana and gently wrapped his arms around his woman, and squeezed her, somehow both tenderly and

possessively.

Liana smiled. For now, that was enough. It was definitely enough for now. They'd work out the rest later. Leaning forward, she pressed her lips against Ryan's ear, gently bit the bottom of his right ear lobe and whispered, "Aren't you going to take me to bed?"

* * * *

Ryan grasped Liana's fingers in his own, gently lifting the tips to his lips, kissing each of her fingers in reverence. He'd never take her or their relationship for granted again. Never. Again. Sweeping Liana into his arms, he raised his face towards the bulkhead. "*Contessa*, lock-on to the biorhythms of Liana Peterson and myself and transport us directly to my chambers. You have control of the ship. Contact us in case of an emergency."

"Understood. Transportation working. May I say, Congratulations, again, Ms. Peterson and that I hope you're here to stay this time? The Commander needs someone to keep him in line from time to time, and there only so much *Contessa* can do."

Liana laughed. "Why thank you, *Contessa*. I'll keep that in mind. I'll step outside while he finishes the proper security protocol with you."

"Do so. Once we are finished, I'll leave you to become reacquainted and remain on radio silence until we meet up with your security detail, or until such time as something requires your immediate attention."

"Thanks again, *Contessa*. We'll announce when to remove the door locks and free the locks on the isolation stores."

As Liana left Command Deck to allow the Commander to give *Contessa* the new security codes, to prevent further hacking and false missives such as the one that been fabricated to discredit her, she found herself surrounded and soon in the arms of Amy and Hunter Shi'Lan, Mikel and MaryAnn Logann and Taliff and Eve Shi'Lan.

Literally picked up, hugged and passed from one set of arms to another before finally finding her feet again, Liana was surprised at the homecoming, feeling like a guest of honor when not too long ago she'd been treated as a traitor instead.

When Amy wrapped her in her arms and told her to never act so foolishly again, she kept her mouth shut, because of course she wouldn't. That didn't mean she would sit on her ass either. She'd instead make some very thorough, thought-out plans using old maps and city systems to ensure that when they attacked the Black Rose, she'd

never see it coming. Liana would make sure not one innocent civilian would be in harm's way either. Not this time. The Black Rose's Days were numbered. Finally.

As soon as the greetings were over, Amy pulled Liana aside and began to scold her in the most loving way. "How could you do what you did, Liana? Did you not think for even one minute what losing you would mean to us?"

Liana wrinkled up her brow, looked around to make sure the others weren't listening but of course they were. "I made sure you had plenty of blood to clone. I didn't leave you in the lurch."

Amy gasped then slapped Liana across her arm. "Are you crazy? Leave us in the lurch? You would have left us without you? You are more are more important than your job, or what you can contribute to our society, or even what you can contribute to our gene pool. You make us all better people, Liana, and without you, this world would be a poorer place to live. Don't ever doubt that you're loved just for you ever again. And I mean ever again, Liana because that's just plain crazy talk!"

Liana closed her eyes and gave a slow wistful shake of her head. "Not everyone we love can love us back no matter how much we might wish they would."

"And some can make utter jackasses of

themselves because they don't believe in the love they do feel because it comes on so fast and is so completely overwhelming," Ryan said.

Liana wasn't sure what shocked her more, seeing Ryan down on his knees, his hands outstretched, begging for forgiveness as his friends looked on—some of the most powerful people in the Universe—as he again apologized by calling himself a jackass and apparently meaning it. Or doing all that in a submissive position, something no *Chantrean* Alpha from Earth would ever do, not even on his deathbed, so that he might have a chance to earn his mate's trust back.

A small smile curled up the corner of Liana's lip as she watched the wariness and doubt creep into his submissive posture, but he didn't waver, remained on his knees, hands held out, head bowed and waited for her decision. "Ryan Morgan, would you like to join me for the evening meal tonight? I think we have a lot to repair, and our marriage is only the beginning. I found out some horrible news in the last two days and I must bring you up to speed on it that ASAP as you're the Rebel Leader—if you still hold that role, that is," she mumbled.

"If I still hold that role?"

"You have been nearly completely incommunicado the last couple days and the Goddess could not reach you. She did not have the

same problem with me. You can have the role again if that's is acceptable to her, *moyo*."

Ryan gasped.

Liana jumped up and squeezed Ryan's hand, running her hand over his forehead, down his chest. Looking around to make sure they weren't under some silent attack, Liana used her own body to protect as much of Ryan's kneeling body as she could. "What's wrong?" she whispered.

"That's the first time you called me that since I broke the bond with you."

"Oh, I thought it appropriate," she said, blushing.

Lifting his hand, Ryan traced the curve of her cheekbone, the line of her jaw, the fullness of her quivering bottom lip. "When we're alone, I'll really like to get back to those plans we'd been making earlier before all this company interrupted us."

Liana could feel the blush spreading across her skin. Thank the Goddess her darker skin tone tended to hide her blush more easily than those with paler complexions. "I'd like that, too," she admitted.

Clearing her throat, Amy elbowed her mate, Hunter and winked at the others. "We've all seen that Liana is healthy for ourselves, so let's leave them alone to spend some time together. We'll all meet up again tomorrow on *Chantrea* and try and

figure out how you were deceived, Ryan. Someone had to go through several layers of security to pull that off. In the meantime, enjoy your night off, and we'll all do the same."

Liana watched as within seconds, each of the couples had called their individual ships and had transported from the *Retribution's* medical lab. Even the Mother Goddess Alana had disappeared. Oddly, Liana couldn't remember exactly when she'd left, compared to when the others had arrived, with all the other chaos going on around her. She should feel a bit more guilty about that than she did, shouldn't she?

A happy giggle sounded in her ear and she knew she was forgiven.

Of course you are, my child. As I said, you have much yet to accomplish and much of that you can't do without your mate. You've already decided to take him back in your mind, it's now up to your heart, your soul and your body to follow through with that decision, and I'm sure you don't want me here witnessing it.

Liana tried her best to contain her blush so Ryan wouldn't know she was speaking such intimate thoughts to the Goddess. Thank goodness, the Mate Bond wasn't working anymore. *It isn't, is it?* she asked, wanting clarification on that point. She'd be completely embarrassed if he'd overheard some of her most recent thoughts since she'd woken.

No, my daughter, only you can reinitiate the bond between you. When you're ready, just think about building a bridge between your minds of the hardest material you can think of and that should do it. It should only take seconds to work if you're absolutely positive it's the right decision for you to make.

Thank you for answering my questions, Mother, now I guess I should let him get off his knees. "As good as you look down there kneeling at my feet, I don't want your submission, Ryan. I never have."

"Then what do you want?" he asked, squeezing and rubbing her thighs as he continued to look up deep into her eyes.

"I just wanted your trust. To be your partner, and your lover. Was that so much to ask?"

"Then I'm begging you, let's put the past in the past where it belongs and start over, tonight. Start fresh, like today's the first day of the rest of our lives. The first day of our forever."

Liana's body burned like the Fire Rivers from *Chantrea's* Volcanic Moon of *Valgus*, hotter in her wet core than on the surface. What was it about this man? Whenever he was near, passion overtook her, as hot as lava and as fierce as... Yes, as fierce as an Ancient Lionese Warrior.

Looking at Ryan now, she could almost forget the hurt he caused her, could almost ignore the painful hours she passed, knowing just how much those hours hurt him as well. Would punishing

him further help either of them, when he knew that as an Empath she could feel his very real remorse at his actions and his very true desire to do whatever she asked of him in order to take her as a mate again? She couldn't let what others thought she should do influence this decision, or what would make her look weak or strong—an Omega to others rather and an equal, an Alpha to match her mate. It was her future, Ryan's, and no one else's.

Wrapping her arms tightly around her mate, she looked up toward the ceiling as she'd seen all the others do when speaking to their sentient computer systems. "*Contessa*, take us to the Master Bedchamber meant for the highest ranking mated family member on the *Retribution*, please. We'll need all of our belongings moved to that location over the next few days as well. Please inform all necessary parties of the housing relocation."

"As you ordered, Liana Peterson. Transportation begins in three seconds. Two. One. Transportation Complete. I will begin sending over your luggage and personal belongings in approximately three hours, and a small meal in two. Will that be all?"

Ryan chuckled, shaking his head. "You might want to make the meal closer to three hours and start sending our belongings in four. I believe that we have a lot of catching up to do, *Contessa*."

“As you say, Commander Morgan. *Contessa* Out.”

Liana reached forward, gripped Ryan’s hands harder and pulled Ryan into a standing position. “I like that idea. Take me to bed, Ryan and let’s start on making our forever.”

Ryan’s smile could have powered the *Chantrean* Palace for a month, it was so wide and bright. Like he’d been given all his birthday and Christmas gifts for a century in a single night. Maybe they could make this work after all. She couldn’t wait to find out.

CHAPTER TWENTY

When she tried to lead Ryan to the bed, he swung her up and over his shoulders with surprising strength and speed. She never even saw the move coming. Slung over his shoulder, her face just an inch shy of his luscious ass, she watched it bunch and sway while he made his way across the room.

"Dammit, Ryan. Put me down. I thought we were going to start this off the right way."

"We are. I'm not going to hold back who I am really am from you. I know you can handle me, in bed and out of it. You are strong enough, love—strong enough to take on anyone one, even the Black Rose. You can certainly handle a dominant lover," he murmured, as he gently slapped her bottom then followed it up with a cherishing caress.

Liana didn't know whether to laugh, cry, or purr, she was so sexually confused. One thing she

did know, her panties were soaked and she could smell her own arousal. Even without their mate bond intact, she could tell what her arousal was doing to Ryan's own. To say he was simply turned on was to say that Earth's Grand Canyon was only a small crack.

Only when they were at the foot of the bed did he let her slip to her feet, and then only for a second as he tipped her onto the mattress. Out of his pocket he pulled several thin long pieces of black leather cording and quickly tied one end to each of her legs before sliding her legs onto the bed. He accomplished all this in just a few short seconds. Liana didn't know whether to be amazed or pissed, his speed and proficiency spoke of an excessive amount of experience in tying women up. Before she could open her mouth to chastise or even question him, he spread her legs wide open, first tying one, then the other to the end posters of the four-poster bed.

"I take it, when all is said and done I won't be able to move either my arms or my legs?"

Ryan chuckled and gave Liana a lazy grin. "Well now, how did you guess?" he asked, as he straddled her body and made quick work of tying her arms the same as he did her ankles, this time making sure to add some padding between the wrists and the cording.

"Where are you pulling all of your supplies

from? Do you have a magician's hat or something in here somewhere? You certainly didn't have any luggage with you when we transported in here, and you didn't know ahead of time I'd ask for this room."

Again Ryan laughed. "I have a confession to make. In case a miracle might happen—and you would agree to mate with me again—I made a promise to myself that I wouldn't hide anything from you again. That included what I liked sexually, so I left standing orders that *Contessa* would send a pre-packed bag full of bedroom toys and whatnots to wherever we would end up staying for the night, as well as a specific menu for our meals for tonight and tomorrow morning.

"I want to show you that I can not only take care of you in a fire fight, but in bed and domestically as well. I can be everything you need, take care of you every way you need taking care of, if you'll just give me that chance. I don't want to lose you again. I don't want to live through those minutes again where I thought I'd already lost you. They were the absolutely, most horrible moments I'd ever experienced in my life. There are no words to describe adequately what I felt when I thought you were gone from my life forever, and I never want to experience it again, so I'll do whatever I must to stay by your side. You just say the word, and it's done."

"Oh, Ryan, don't you know, I'd do the same for you. You're my everything as well, *moyo*. When you turned me away, you gutted me. You destroyed me, absolutely and thoroughly killed something inside me but I know we can make this work. Now stop with all the serious talking. We have years for serious talk and only tonight to be alone, completely and probably only a few hours before the escort arrives if we're lucky. So, let's make the most of it, okay?"

Ryan bent down, nipped at her lips with his, nibbling and sucking at them hungrily. It seemed like forever since he'd had a taste of her, not less than twenty-four hours. How could he have been so foolish? He'd almost lost his only love? And why? Because he didn't trust in his own happiness...well, never again. "I want you like hell, Liana. I burn for you. Only for you."

"That's a good thing, considering I won't share you."

Ryan chuckled, then nuzzled his nose where her neck and shoulder met, "Yes it is a very good thing. You smell absolutely divine right here," he whispered against her throat, having taken a detour to place a mark at the juncture so everyone who saw her would know just who she belonged to. Of course, once they mated again, and their scents mixed, it would be obvious, but he wanted some other physical sign as to who she belonged

to as a warning to others to keep away.

"Are you finished marking your territory, Lion-O?" she giggled.

Chuckling, Ryan shook his head. "I doubt it. There's a lot of territory I haven't covered yet. Who knows where I'll want to remark my boundary lines." As he made his way down her collar, he reached over to the nightstand where he left a small decorative dagger. Liana gasped when she saw it. "Are you afraid I'll hurt you with this?" Ryan asked. He'd stop if she did. He never do *anything* to hurt her again, but she had to know that deep down this was about something else if she were going to get any enjoyment out of this game.

"No. I'm not afraid. I don't think you'll stab me with it. It's just so gorgeous. It's in the shape of a lion, the body looks like it's made of pure gold, and the eyes like they're oval emeralds. Even the blade itself looks to be made of some sort of liquid steel almost, absolutely unique, and priceless, too. Where did you get such a treasure?" she asked Ryan.

He shrugged. "Honestly, I do not know its origins. It came with the ship. There are many such items aboard *Retribution* that we're uncertain how yet to use. But lucky for you, this one I do know what to do with," he smirked bringing the conversation back on topic. "And yet, to me, your

beauty far outshines the beauty of this single dagger. Don't ever doubt that."

Lifting the center of her shirt up just an inch away from her skin, Ryan slid the dagger tip below the top edge and slid the knifepoint downward, even catching the front clasp of the bra. With barely any pressure, Liana's shirt parted like hot butter, leaving her entire front bare to the waist.

Ryan bit his bottom lip as he revealed his prize. He knew the knife was sharp, and even he was surprised at how easily it had parted Liana's clothing, but nothing was as beautiful as Liana bare. Certainly not the golden dagger that he'd found aboard the ship several months ago. Seeing her breasts quiver as her limbs fought against the restraints in an attempt to cover them made his cock jerk inside his pants.

He wanted to bury himself inside her pussy so badly, the wait was sheer torture, but drawing this out was as much for her as it was for him. So he'd wait, for as long as they could both stand it before succumbing to their needs.

Again, Ryan bent down, this time suckling the skin above her breast, then down toward her nipples, nibbling and sucking. Heat spiraled between them like steam rising off the hot pavement. Ever so slowly, he cupped one breast, dragging his thumb over her nipple over and over,

until it became a hard point. When she was gasping and writhing on the bed, he moved to her other side and began the same treatment of her other breast, leaving her a quivering mess moments later.

“Ryan, please, kiss me, Ryan. Kiss me.”

Ryan knew if he didn't hurry to get Liana out of her pants, he himself would be too far gone, and it would be too late for either of them. He'd never needed to make love to a woman as badly as he needed to make love to Liana right now. He sought her mouth again and again, settling his lips over hers, tasting her unique taste. His tongue dueled alongside hers in an intoxicating battle, as his fingers went to work untying the string belt of the medical pants she still wore from the medical. When he still couldn't get the knot undone and his cock felt like it would explode, he once again reached for the dagger. This time he cut through the knot at the waist, panties and all, before tossing the golden knife onto the nightstand and yanking the pants off her legs and tossing the whole lot onto the floor.

When she surged up from the bed, trying to get closer to him, Ryan groaned, just as desperate as she. “Please, Ryan, please, I can't take it anymore. Don't make me wait. Make love to me.”

“Then initiate the bond. Mate with me. Take a chance on me. I'll never let you own on you again.

Never.”

Liana looked into his eyes for a few seconds, bit her bottom lip, then nodded a slow nod before closing her eyes. Less than a minute later, a ferocious whip of desire rushed through him, then compassion, fear, sincerity, love, honesty, and so many other emotions it was hard to name them all, never mind contain them. Only now could he truly see how difficult every moment of every day must be for his mate, to have to live in such an environment continuously must be hell. Well, she wasn't alone anymore and he'd do what he could to ease some of her burden from her where he could.

Easing away, Ryan stood and undressed, dropping his clothes on the floor where he stood. He too was back on the bed, lying next to his mate within seconds, feeling as though they'd separated so much longer than that. As soon as flesh pressed against flesh, it felt like a heated electrical current pressed between them as he nipped his way down her throat, her shoulders, between her breasts and down, down her tummy to circle her navel.

Ryan's hands ghosted down her sides in a whisper light caress, before moving up in a caress so soft and gentle it left goose bumps in its wake. Her skin pebbled at his touch and her nipples tightened when he leaned over and breathed on them. He gave a low throaty chuckle. *I love how*

your body responds to mine, moya. Cupping one breast and kneading the other, he then flicked his thumb over the already hard nub, sending pleasure-pain along her nerve endings seemingly straight from her nipple to her clit, which he could already see filling with blood but had yet to touch. Leaning over, he kissed her abused nipple, while speaking to her using their newly reformed mental bond. One day, I'd like to see you wear some weights on your nipples while we make love. It would make the experience that much more intense for you, my love.

I'm not so sure I can handle more, Ryan. I've about reached my limit already and we've barely started.

You just need to build up some tolerance, love. No worries. We won't rush with everything today. As a matter of fact, I'm going to untie you, because you've been tied up long enough for your first time. But you did wonderful, moya. Just wonderful.

Th-Thank you, Liana stuttered.

Ryan couldn't help but chuckle at the small moment of normalcy when this was a not-so-normal moment for either of them. When he finally sucked her nipple into his mouth, she arched her back, coming off the bed the most she could with the ties still holding her down. "Ryan, I thought you were going to cut me loose."

"Oh yeah. One second, love," he murmured.

Again, he reached over, this time partially shifting his hand into claws and ripping the

leather straps until they were dangling around the arms of the bed. He did it to all four posters of the four-poster bed before returning to his sprawled position atop Liana. When she just gaped at him, he scrunched up his brows and wondered aloud, "What?"

"Well, why didn't you just do that in the first place with my clothes?"

Chuckling, Ryan answered, "Because the dagger is prettier and I thought you'd be less frightened of it than my claws."

"Why would you think that when I have claws of my own, you idiot?" Liana asked, laughing as she showed him her own impressive set.

"Um, good point. Maybe we should get back to the kissing and lovemaking before we're interrupted by the royal guard's arrival."

Liana nodded. "Another good point. So, where were we?"

We were right about here, he mentally whispered as he swirled his tongue around Liana's other nipple, bringing it to a hard nub to match its sister.

Reaching up, Liana threaded her fingers through Ryan's silky brown hair, holding him to her breast. "By the Goddess," Ryan groaned, "another minute of that and I wouldn't have lasted long enough to even get inside you love. Who knew my hair was an erogenous zone all its own," he joked.

He should have remembered though that as an Empath she could tell when something was truly turning him on and not tried to make light of it, because she immediately sank her fingers back into the silky thickness. *Apparently, I'm going to have to distract you, moya.*

Again, he rolled them over, this time gathering her hands in one of his, so that she couldn't reach out and touch. "I could just eat you up, love. But first..."

Reaching down, he used his other hand to cup her sex, stroking the outer lips before delving between the folds to find her clit. When she gasped, sucking in a deep breath, Ryan smiled. As he stroked over the sensitive bud very gently, he inhaled the intoxicating scent of her arousal as it continued to thicken the air. Soon, his baby would be more than ready to take him again. Very soon.

"Now, Ryan, Please." *Make love to me, my moya, please.*

Of course, I will, Moya. Of course, I will. I love you, moya. I will always love you.

Shifting slightly, Ryan slid his cock along her gate, moaning when he met the silky wetness, the proof of her arousal, as he pushed himself inside of her. The feel of her tight flesh squeezing his shaft as it enveloped him ever so slowly—too slowly—sent waves of pure pleasure whipping through his system, down through the mate bond

and back again on a feedback loop. Even though they'd only been without the bond a day, he'd forgotten how glorious lovemaking could be while bonded. There was nothing like it. Nothing at all.

By the Goddess, Ryan, so amazing. So amazing.

They were both slick with sweat, as they surged together, thrusting to meet, each other, pressing deeper, harder, faster, needing to get that much closer to the other.

You're so tight, moya. So tight, my love.

Oh Goddess, so good. So right, Ryan.

Her sex clenched tightly around his cock at his words, quivered and spasmed as it milked pre-come from him. Ryan's heart rate jacked upwards and hers did the same as their bodies took on the same rhythms. He had to get closer, just another inch deeper. *It has never been this good. Never.*

For me either, Ryan. For me either.

Without warning, she tensed all over; her body arching off the bed so only her head remained on the pillow as her orgasm completely overwhelmed her. As she collapsed on the bed, she continued to clamp down and milk his cock. Panting for breath, gasping and wheezing, he dug his toes into the bed and forged his way deeper, finally reaching his own peak, which sent Liana into another mini-orgasm. Relief, profound and draining, went through them when their bodies finally ceased to convulse. Panting and gasping for air, he dropped

his head to his pillow, before collapsing completely on his side, and dragging Liana into his arms.

Looking toward his mate, he was relieved to see that she was already blissfully asleep, a smile on her face. That was good because tomorrow they'd have to talk about the future, and about what to do about the past, and neither of them would be smiling during that conversation.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Liana woke feeling oddly refreshed, her mind a tranquil pool. The normal chaos of emotional bombardment upon waking appeared absent this morning. She would have been terrified of this new development if not for the large arm wrapped snugly around her waist, the obviously male knee wedged between her spread thighs, and the very large hand holding her breast. It all served to remind her that a lot had changed in the last few hours, and the mental quiet was the very least of it.

When Ryan's thumb began to lightly stroke over her right nipple, she smiled into her pillow. Apparently, she wasn't the only one awake and enjoying the early morning quiet.

I'm enjoying the cuddle more, my love.

Liana's brows rose. She'd forgotten all about the bond that would allow him access to her thoughts as well as her feelings. That could get

embarrassing.

The bed jostled as Ryan, spooned behind her and chuckled at her last thought. Once he had himself back under control, he leaned forward, and reached for Liana's chin, turning her face toward his. "Do you regret taking me as your mate again, after everything you suffered because of me?"

Liana shook her head and smiled as she looked deep into his eyes. Reaching up, she cupped his cheek. "I know, deep in my heart and soul, you are where my future lies. Everything else, all the other crap, it's just stuff to get through, and we'll do that...together."

Ryan smiled, leaned down and pressed a tiny kiss to the corner of Liana's mouth. "You absolutely amaze me, *moya*. Now as much as I want to stay here in bed and celebrate our mating...again...we have to figure out who the traitor is inside the rebel army, and remove him. Immediately."

"Or her."

Or her

"Why do you men automatically assume it's a man when you think *traitor*, well, except when you broke our bonding, but usually you say *him*. Women can be just as treacherous you know — think about the Black Rose and your own history with her."

Ryan smiled, not even bothered anymore about his history with the Black Rose. Somehow, during the night and via his bonding with Liana, her Empathic ability, her compassion, helped ease the worst of the pain of his past. *That's an argument for another time, but you're right*, he whispered into Liana's mind using their Mate Bond. Slowly, he continued to lavish small kisses and nibbles down the column of her neck and shoulder, leaving red marks of passion in his wake.

Liana rolled over, facing Ryan, and slipped her hands into his hair, looked deep into his chocolate brown eyes and gave him a slow, sultry smile. Ryan's heart skipped a beat in response. He could feel warmth and joy, happiness and love pouring through their bond and it made him feel complete for the first time in his life.

Leaning down, he whispered a kiss across her lips once, twice, three times, before sinking into a tongue-thrusting scorch of a good morning kiss that had every nerve ending in his and her body singing. All he wanted to do was stay in bed and make love to her for the next thirty-six hours but they had a job to do—a very dangerous job. They had to smoke out a traitor, track down the Black Rose and somehow, shut down her entire breeding operation. Which, if rumors were true, would be nearly impossible because over the last couple of years he'd heard through several

sources that she wasn't the head of the snake, just the public face of it.

You know how much I want to continue kissing you, but it's time for us to get ready to meet the others. Ryan wrapped his arms around her waist, squeezing her as tight as he dared. If only he could keep her wrapped in his arms under his protection until they eliminated the Black Rose and her cohorts, but Liana's skills would be essential in determining who and where their enemies were.

I know, but I didn't want to start the day without starting it out right, without showing you how much I love you, with what little time we had. Liana sighed and pulled away, slipping out of the bed, not bothering to even take the covers with her. She had nothing to hide from her mate. Besides, he'd seen everything throughout the night, why cover up now?

"Why indeed?" he groaned, looking down at his erect cock as he followed her into the bathing facilities.

Ten minutes later the pair left their quarters and headed for the command deck, prepared to check on the status of their arrival time in *Chantrean* airspace. Based on their calculations, it shouldn't be much longer. As they stood in the lift, hand in hand, Ryan lifted his head toward the ceiling—out of habit, again. "*Contessa*, has the Royal fleet arrived to accompany us safely to

Chantrea?"

"There's been a change in plans, Commander Morgan, sir. High King Brantiff Shi'Lan has arranged to have the *Chantrean Royal Fleet* accompany your ship as well as the ships of both of his sons, Princes Taliff and Hunter, and their wives, to an allied Planet called *Vestria*. There Prince Logann and his wife and their *Manruvian Personal Guard* will meet you, along with several other high-ranking allied members in the *Born Free Rebel Alliance*."

"Why the last minute change, *Contessa*?" Liana asked.

"With known spies in both the *Chantrean* Palace and the *Manruvian* Security Forces, the Kings of *Chantrea* and *Manruvia* felt this was the best alternative. Neither wants to lose any children, and apparently they consider you and Ryan their adopted children—Ryan for crash-landing on his planet and agreeing to lead the Rebel Forces in his name and Liana for seeking to find a cure on behalf of all *Chantrean* and *Manruvian* Citizens—and are taking threats to the both of you very seriously."

"Thank you for such a concise report, *Contessa*. How far are we now from the rendezvous point? And has our escort already arrived to accompany us?" Ryan enquired.

"The *Chantrean Royal Fleet* joined us

approximately three hours ago and we're less than two hours away from *Vestria* as we speak."

Ryan raised his eyebrows, more in shock than disbelief. *Contessa* had never outright disobeyed a direct order before and he remembered distinctly ordering the sentient computer to awaken him when the Fleet joined them on route to the rendezvous location. "And why weren't we notified when our destination changed, nor were we told when the guard joined us as I specifically ordered."

"That's correct."

"Under whose authority were my orders disregarded?" Ryan demanded.

"Under mine," Brantiff Shi'Lan announced, appearing suddenly before them, and crossing his arms.

"Oh, excuse me, Your Highness, we weren't informed you'd come aboard the *Retribution*."

"That's because I told *Contessa* to let you sleep in. You had things to work out and I'm not so old I've forgotten how to fly a bird like this one.

Liana chuckled. "Of course you haven't, Sir. Besides, you're having the time of your life joining your sons on this mission. Being there when your daughter is captured will also give you the closure that you and Luna desperately need."

Brantiff nodded, and then cleared his throat before turning toward Ryan. "You have a smart

mate there. Don't do anything to lose her—again—son."

Ryan pulled Liana under his right shoulder and kissed the top of her head, inhaling her scent that had blended completely with his during the night—they were well and truly mated now. "Believe me, sir. I've learned my lesson well. She's the most important part of my life. I'm not ever going to forget that ,after almost losing her like I did."

The High King shook his head. "Why is it we always wait until it's almost too late to take our heads out of our asses?" he mumbled.

He may have meant the question to be rhetorical, but Liana was quick to jump in with an answer. "Because you're afraid that if you let your walls down and let someone weaker than yourself in, others will think you look weak. If you happen to hold a position of power, then it makes such a decision very difficult for you to make, virtually tearing your soul apart until circumstances force you to choose which is more important... Power or Love?"

Chuckling, the king once again shook his head and clapped Ryan on his back before pointing toward Liana. "I could have used her on my council twenty-five years ago, when I was trying to choose between my duties and my mate, before Haeda tossed me in my own dungeon. It would

have been so much simpler to make the right decision with her standing behind my chair as my counselor."

"But now you have Eve and she does a phenomenal job. I'd never be able to handle being around all those strong personalities. I'm where I'm supposed to be, doing the work where I'll be the most beneficial, but thank you for such an amazing compliment, Your Highness."

"No need to call me by my title. If you must, call me Brantiff, but we'd prefer you at least call us papa and mama since your parents are lost to you, Liana. It would mean so much to us. You are the daughter we so wish we would have had, the daughter we want to lavish gifts upon and throw a mating ceremony for. And we won't hear a word against it. That's a done deal. You promised Luna and me three years ago that if you found a mate, we could throw a celebration and I'm holding you to your word. Besides, Luna would be heartbroken."

Ryan watched the entire conversation unfold around him, shocked at how much the royal family honestly considered Liana a daughter. When *Contessa* mentioned it earlier, he hadn't realized the depth of the bond she'd developed with the royal couple. What if they didn't approve of him, or didn't think he was good enough for her? What would he do then? His gut clenched?

Misery threatened to overwhelm him.

Relax, moyo. If they didn't approve, Brantiff probably would have pulled you out of bed by transporting you directly into a running cold shower. He's not exactly subtle. Besides, how many times has he said not to screw up again, meaning you have his approval for now, just don't fuck up again or you'll lose it. Don't worry, they're marshmallows when it comes to me and what I love. After Haeda's betrayal, they tend to go overboard trying to make me happy for whatever reason. I just can't figure out why they picked me out of all the women brought here from Earth or rescued from their daughter's camps.

Ryan's thoughts answered hers. *Time to change the subject or I'll freak. I had no idea the High King and his wife would practically be in-laws. If I'm going to pull off this meeting in a couple hours, I need to focus on something other than worrying him pounding on me for sleeping with you and having carnal thoughts at inappropriate times – like when he's in the room with us.*

"So, sir, where's your lovely wife, Luna, this morning? Is she aboard *The Retribution* as well or back on *Chantrea*?"

"Actually, she's on board the *Adventurer* with Taliff and Eve. Hunter and Amy decided to hitch a ride with Mikel and Maryann on the *Victory*. If you look out the viewport, we could practically walk from one ship to the other, with two royal fleets guarding the two main vessels. We should

arrive on *Vestria* without any trouble. No one is going to bother a space armada nearly thirty ships strong."

Just as those words passed the High King Brantiff Shi'Lan's lips, one explosion after another lit up the sky outside the viewport, as one ship after another seemed to come under attack.

"Who's firing, *Contessa*?" Ryan yelled.

"Processing."

"Process faster, Gods Dammit!"

"Unable to determine the means, or the types and amount of weapons used."

"How is that possible?"

Even as Ryan asked, three more explosions lit up the dark sky, allowing those on the command deck to see the debris floating aimlessly in the dead of space, and more flying missiles just as capable of causing deadly damage as any weapon out there.

"*Contessa*, contact all remaining ships. Engage cloaks and hyper drives. Get us to the rendezvous location as quickly as possible. If our way is blocked, head to Glendor instead, we'll meet there, again under full cloak. Any ship that's damaged, leaking fluids or chemicals and can be traced, needs to be abandoned and their crews added to the other ships. We can't chance them finding out where we're heading. Send the messages highly encrypted and send them now,

Contessa."

"Encoding messages. Processing. Messages sent now. Scanning one million kilometers in every direction. We're virtually surrounded. They knew where we're going and know of our retreat plans. I've located nearly a dozen ships blocking the way toward *Chantrea*, *Manruvia*, and our allies at *Vestria* each. What location should we head for, Commander?"

"How many ships did we lose all together in this attack so far?"

"If you count the ones that are leaking fuels or other substances that our enemies can trace, we've lost thirteen ships out of the twenty-nine we started with."

"Dammit." Ryan turned to the High King. "Sir, King Shi'Lan, you have a lot more experience than I do. This is your family out there as well as your allies. Is there a location you know of, a person you can call that we don't have access to that may be able to get our asses out of this fire, sir?"

Another blast rocked the ship, sending everyone sprawling across computer consoles, chairs and even the decking. The High King managed to stay solidly on his feet along with Ryan. "As a matter of fact, there might be someone. *Contessa*, I need to make a very long distance communication..."

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Liana wiped her scraped palms on her leather pants, wincing at the bleeding scratches there. It wouldn't take long to heal but because of her Empathic abilities, the pain of a minor scratch would feel many times worse than it actually was—just another annoyance thanks to her *gift* that she'd always have to deal with.

As she scrambled to buckle herself into one of the navigation seats, she focused on Papa Brantiff. There was something definitely odd about the way he was feeling. He seemed almost excited by this turn of events, as if he'd known ahead of time he'd be called in to request help from his allies,. And yet, he was also oddly subdued, as though he'd hoped he wouldn't have to make the call, despite knowing the possibilities. But how would he have known that?

"Contessa, please contact the planet of Hyria. I must speak with The Goddess Queen Hermione. She

is the widow of their planet's water god, with great powers of her own. She may be able to help us as both *Vestria* and *Manruvia* are mostly covered in water."

"Processing the request. It will take a moment. I have to extend our long-range sensors. Message will be sent in three...two...one...message delivered."

Liana shook her head. "But how will that help, Papa Brantiff?"

"When her husband died, he gave the power she gifted him with when they mated back to his widow, and combined with her own over wind and Earth, she has more than enough strength to defend us all. A goddess powerful enough to do some serious damage to the Black Rose and her allies and one strong enough to get us where we need to go."

Ryan held up his hand. "That's all well and good, but how will she get here?" he interrupted.

The High King Shi'Lan just chuckled and shook his head. "You young kits. You think you have everything figured out, but you've just scratched the surface."

Before Ryan could ask him what he meant, a bright flash of light appeared in the middle of the Command Deck. Ryan immediately reached for his weapon but before he could even lift it from its holster, the female intruder had it in her hand and

started disassembling it before quickly reassembling it right in front of his eyes.

"So, what's the emergency that had you calling for an SOS? I've never known you not to be able to talk yourself out of any situation peacefully, Brantiff."

"Queen Hermione, thank you from the bottom of my heart and my mate's heart for arriving so quickly. If it weren't for the lives of my children and my grandchildren in danger, I'd never ask you to put yourself in harm's way. You're the last of your people's deities, and to risk you seems like such a wrong to me, but I see no other way out for us."

"Then tell me what the situation is so that maybe together we can come up with a plan that will keep everyone safe who should be, and eliminate as much of the danger to the rest of us as possible. Hmmm?"

"I knew you'd see it my way?"

"Just like old times eh? By the way, where is Luna? I expected her to be here in the thick of things."

"She's aboard the *Adventurer* trying to keep the grandchildren calm while we strategize over here. Taliff, Hunter, and Mikel from *Manruvia* and their respective mates should be transporting here shortly under cloaked ships unless you can do it safer. Then we can get started."

In less than five minutes, the Command Deck was full of those needing to attend the meeting, including those who were waiting on *Vestria*. The meeting was moved to the war room two decks down. As the meeting progressed, the Goddess Queen of Hyria not only cloaked the ships, but also repaired them and transported them inside the allied base on Glendor. No one could track them there because no emissions of any kind were left behind, as the engines did not run at all. It must be nice to be a Goddess, Liana thought as she took a seat at the conference table, awed and amazed at this strong woman. No one would ever call her weak or treat her as an Omega.

Liana. You have found the cure for a disease that has stumped every scientist and God and Goddess on the side of good for ten thousand millennia – yet has only been in our own universe little under one hundred years. Don't ever belittle yourself for your gift. That gift will help you win this war. Remember that. Remember to leave yourself open to the feelings of those around you at all times, to the things around you, because it's not only people that feel, everything, organic and non-organic feels something. The ground beneath your feet. A sunflower raising its face toward the sky. A bloody sword upon someone's back. Remember. Remember...

Liana shook her head and blinked. She was almost positive that someone had spoken to her, but even as she was confident and turned to look

for the speaker, the words had already started to fade away into her subconscious like a very pleasant dream. Perhaps she'd remember them later, because they sounded important.

After a couple of hours of dialogue—in other words, yelling back and forth—the group broke off for dinner. The Queen Goddess excused herself to contact some of her fellow gods and goddess to see if she could collect any intelligence regarding where the Black Rose could be hiding. Anxious to take on her own piece of business, Liana signaled Ryan that it was time to meet with Mikel and Maryann about their Security Chief.

Taking Ryan's hand for encouragement, they headed toward the quarters assigned to Mikel and Maryann inside the Glendor base. They hadn't even finished knocking on the door when it was quickly opened by a distraught Maryann. She was literally clenching her hands together, tears pooling in her eyes. "Maryann, whatever could be the matter," Liana whispered, pulling the now sobbing woman into her arms.

"Our Security Chief confessed an hour ago to forwarding a falsified security report against you to your mate. He was sure after reading it, that Ryan would disown you, and you would be too sick to show up for the talks, so you couldn't use your ability to tell who was lying, who was a traitor. But when you appeared healthy on the

ship today, they had to attack to prevent you from showing up. This is all my fault."

Just then Mikel came out of the bathroom. "Maryann, this isn't your fault. He had no way of knowing that his plan worked perfectly, but these two were determined to see past the lies. They figured things out for themselves. He has no real clue what a true mate bond is like. He's only seen what a forced breeding bond is, so he'll never truly understand the depth of emotion there. Why are you so emotionally distraught over this? You can see for yourself, they're all right now. It was only a bad twenty-four hours, nothing more."

Liana smiled. She of course knew exactly why Maryann was acting the way she was. "Ryan, Mikel, can we have a moment of girl talk. I need to ask Maryann a mating question and she's been mated longer. I feel more comfortable asking her than Ryan, no offense, *moyo*." *She's pregnant and I don't think she knows. I need to explain the mood swings, baby. Get Mikel out of here, please.*

Oh, oh. Yeah, okay. Is ten minutes enough do you think?

More than. Five will be plenty. I know she'll want to share this with him right away, she suspects but is afraid to get her hopes up.

Okay. Five minutes it is.

"Let's go try and calm that mob down then maybe that powerful crazy-ass goddess has come

up with something for us."

"Maybe."

"Maryann, what are you and Mikel using for Birth Control?"

Liana giggled when Maryann ducked her head and a bright pink blushed spread across her cheeks and down her neck. "Nothing," she mumbled.

"Is there a particular reason why?"

"We want to have a baby, that's why. Mikel is a lot older than he looks. He's waited a long time to find a mate and I want to give him a family as soon as I can."

"Well, then I'm happy to report you can stop trying. You've got a couple little bundles of joy nestling quite happily in there right now."

Maryann squeaked, then jumped, then shouted, before jumping up and down before collapsing in her chair holding her crotch. "I shouldn't have done that. Now I have to pee. I can't wait to tell him. Wait. I don't have to wait."

When Maryann closed her eyes, and smiled and heard an answering shout out in the hall, it was obvious daddy was just as excited as mom about being new parents. Now, to get rid of the threats hanging over everyone's heads, and all would be right in the known universes.

After a two-hour break, the meeting restarted.

This time the Goddess Queen sat at the head of the table. "After talking with several of my colleagues from several known universes and dimensions, we've figured out exactly where your Black Rose is hiding. The problem is that even if we eliminate her, it is as we suspect. She is only the public face of your enemy. The *Iblis* – commonly called *Dark Princes* among themselves – *are* your true enemy. They are the ones who have systematically polluted, poisoned, and corrupted your planets and your DNA so that eventually they can invade your worlds. They now live on a planet they've named *The Dark Moon*. Star Charts of course call it *Ibliston Five*. In the meantime, they are profiteering off your misery and feeding off your breeding slaves, once they are too old or too worn out to breed for you."

One of the delegates from *Vestria* raised her hand. A tiny sprite like creature with green skin and hair, she was eerily beautiful. "What are these *Iblis*?"

"Humans throughout history have called them Vampires, my people have always called them *iblisors*, some have called them bloodsuckers, others *vampyrs*, others ostrys, and many other names. It all means the same. They survive on drinking the blood of their victim," the Goddess Queen replied.

Liana couldn't help but think that they were

dealing with a much larger situation than they had originally planned going into this thing. What would she do if something happened to Ryan? How would she go on if he didn't come home to her? The others, they had children to help them cope, a piece of their mate to cling to, tell remind them of the time they'd spent together, but she'd had so little time with Ryan, certainly not enough time to make a little person to carry on if something were to happen to either of them.

And why was this hitting her now, just mere hours before they were theoretically going into battle? He could feel what she was feeling. She needed to be stronger than this. She would not be weak any longer. She'd be a strong mate for her man. She'd be by his side, protecting his back. She didn't know how, but she knew that she needed to be by his side today because something she saw, or something she did, was going to save his life, despite not being able to physically harm another during an actual attack.

It will be okay, Liana. I trust you to guard my back. To tell me when to duck, when to turn and stab, when to run like hell. Your job isn't to fight, it's to tell us when an enemy is approaching, and the safest way toward our target and the safest, quickest way out of the enemy lair. Just keep that in the forefront of your mind and you'll do great. We'll work on making those babies when we get back. A whole ship full if you want.

You'd really have children with me, even with my

curse?

Baby, it's not a curse. It's a beautiful gift. Your compassion healed me of the poison the Black Rose infected me with during my capture, the hate and fear, the disgust and fifth that plagued me. You make me clean again. That can never be called a curse but a gift straight from the gods themselves, love.

Now, it's time to suit up. I want weapons grade leather armor on you. If you have to shift, tear through the material, don't worry about modesty. If we're somehow separated, you have a better chance escaping on foot as Lioness than as a woman when you can't fight back. You promise me. If we get separated, then you shift, no questions asked.

Liana sighed. *I promise.* She wasn't stupid. She certainly didn't want to die. She'd rather run around the planet as a lion. Shift once she reached the safety of the ship, and be nude the few seconds it'd take to cover up once inside, rather than stand around all human. It was better than being chopped in half by someone with a laser weapon just because her empathic abilities didn't allow her to fight back even when her own life was in danger.

Within fifteen minutes, the battle teams assembled in the transport room and made ready to depart. Only Brantiff, Luna and the Goddess Queen were staying on board the *Retribution* so they could direct movements from the images the ship was picking up from each of the away

members. The goddess would do all she could to help, and she said she'd called in a few favors, but the majority of the work was up to those on the ground. Hand in hand, Brantiff and Luna attached their ear microphones, while the Queen Goddess Hermione closed her eyes. With his voice gruff with worry, Brantiff gave the order, "All teams move in."

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Ryan Morgan stepped onto the transport pad with his mate, Liana Morgan wrapped securely in his arms.

I don't think I'll ever tire of hearing that, even in your thoughts. Ryan shook his head, let out a low chuckle and pulled her in closer until he pressed her body completely against him, so that not even a single piece of paper could slide between them.

This isn't really acceptable for polite company.

We're newly mated. They can deal with it. Not too long ago, our people stayed naked the first twenty-four hours after mating.

Thank the Goddess Eve did something about that atrocious law. The clothing for us women back then was a step below whorish.

I think we need to focus on the matter at hand about now – that is, taking out the Black Rose and her minions so we can set up house on the Retribution and begin a family of our own.

You really meant that, then.

Ryan leaned down and pressed a kiss to Liana's lush lips. He could never seem to get enough of kissing her. *Yes, love, I really meant it. I can't wait to see a little girl with your golden brown skin and long brown hair running through the ship, causing all sorts of hell as she drives Contessa and her daddy up the wall.*

Liana reached up, pulled Ryan down by the ears and placed a soft kiss on his lips just as the transporter began transporting their molecules to the suspected hideout of the infamous Black Rose. Ryan swore he could still hear Liana whisper through his mind that it could still be a boy. He almost cringed at that idea. He'd been a very naughty boy as a child.

When the groups reappeared, they were in groups of four as agreed, a mated pair and two armed guards. Over the years, scientists had learned that the mates worked almost three times better as a team than working separately, their skills completely complementing each other. Ten Teams were sent in for the sole purpose of freeing any prisoners locked up in this encampment and another five Teams, of which all the royals were a part, were in charge of the search for Haeda Shi'Lan, the Black Rose, including Mikel Logann's younger sister, Princess Valla. It would be up to the Royal Teams and their guards to take down the royal traitor to the *Chantrean* people.

The Teams made a pact amongst themselves that no more innocent civilians would die and suffer in their place. Haeda had a problem with *them*. Now she could face them. Together, or one on one.

But Ryan was hopeful, with some divine intervention from *The Retribution* and whomever else Hermione called in, serious damage would be done to the person backing the Black Rose and her endeavors. Whoever this *Iblisors* leader is, he had a rude awakening coming, and Ryan couldn't wait to give it to him.

Hey, you, we can't wait to give it to him. We're in this together, remember? Liana whispered in his mind through their link. Though he heard the humor, he also heard her fear. She was picking up some intense emotions and they'd just barely entered the cave systems these blood-drinking creatures called home.

Are you okay, moya?

I will be. This may sound strange, but I really, really think we need to take the next tunnel to the right.

Why do you say that?

Liana looked at Ryan, her eyes full of worry, her mind positive he would condemn her, but still she spoke her thoughts. The walls are telling me what I'm searching for most is in that direction.

Ryan looked at his mate one moment longer. He lost her once for not trusting her. He'd not do

so again. Besides, this was why he'd insisted she'd come, some gut instinct of his own insisting she'd be necessary for their success. *Then let's go.* Pressing the microphone on his neck, he whispered into the com link. "I need the four other groups searching for the target to lock on to Liana's and my Bio Signals and follow our path. She has an emotional lock on the proper direction. Maintain radio silence from here on out to prevent premature announcement of our arrival if at all possible, but if those blood drinkers are in here with us, and are in any way threatening, shoot to kill. I repeat, if they attack first shoot to kill. We do not know what kind of defensive or offensive capabilities these creatures have, only that daylight is their greatest weakness, so keep your solar lights burning at all times and aim it at their eyes when you can."

Ready to go, love?

As ready as I'll ever be, my mate.

After taking her hand and dropping a quick kiss on her palm, Ryan gave her a hug of encouragement, then stepped behind her to guard to back. *I know you can do this. You were born to do this. I know for absolutely certain you were meant to be on this mission, for this very thing. Now go carry out your duty, love. I have your back. We all do.*

Taking one deep breath, Liana closed her eyes and let the whispers in again. It was so strange,

listening to the feeling of not only the people around her but the things as well. The dirt she was standing on, the carved wall, dug by hand by slave workers, the pebbles and rocks on the cavern floors smoothed by the bare feet of the slaves, feet that had worn the rocks smooth over thousands of millennium.

Urgency continued to build in Liana, forcing her to pick up her pace recklessly, but she didn't dare slow or she'd be too late. *The sword is calling for me, Ryan. The sword needs me, now. Now, Ryan, now.*

You can't wield a sword, without hurting yourself, Liana.

This sword just needs rescuing and it can wield itself. It will choose its own champion. The Sword of Nuada once belonged to the king of the gods and it's been waiting for someone to hear it for all these thousands and thousands of years. The sword tells me it glowed with the light of the sun and was irresistible in battle, having the power to cut his enemies in half.

So you're picking up all that information and emotion from the sword itself? Ryan asked.

I guess my near death experience made my empathy stronger, or when the Goddess Alana healed me she knew what was coming so she made me strong enough to face the coming challenges. Does this new stuff upset you, Ryan?

Hell no! I just think it's even more cool than before. Imagine all the things our kids are not going to be able

to get away with when they're older.

Down one tunnel after another, they twisted and turned, their pace, out and out running now. Stealth went out the window long ago, but it was if they were wearing some sort of invisibility cloaks because no one stopped them, or even sensed them nearby.

Was it the work of the Goddess Queen Hermione on board *Retribution*? Could it be her colleagues, the rest of the Gods and Goddess that, as Liana put it, took great joy messing with our lives from time to time? Or was it the Sword itself lending Liana the power she needed now to find the sword and defeat the Black Rose so that it could finally choose its own champion? There was only one way to find out who was truly pulling Liana's strings, and that was by finding the Sword and the Black Rose. And Liana knew just where to do that.

If you all are ready, a few more hallways, a couple more locked doors, and we should be where we need to be if you'll follow me.

Now it wasn't just the walls calling to her. It was the rocky floors, the reset lights, the trembling wood beams overhead, all giving warnings of danger. "Stop," she called out when she reached the end of a hall facing a double set of doors that looked like they led deep into a mine. "It's a trick. No mine. Just a big room. Lots of mirrors. A

ballroom. Lots of men, sharp teeth, guns, ambush for you. You must have ship bore a hole through the roof and send sunlight down into the room. It's noon outside now. They won't be ready for that. It's the only way. The only way."

Ryan relayed orders. "It's a trap in there. Dozens of blood-drinkers and the Black Rose. They're loaded down with guns and fangs. We go in there, we'll be slaughtered, but if *Retribution* bores a *hole* straight down the center of that room and floods it with natural light, that should incapacitate a large bunch of them. Several other Teams should transport directly inside the room while the light is flooding the room to shoot to kill whatever is standing. Unfortunately, Liana and I will also have to be the first ones in that room. We must get the Sword that's in there. It's of the utmost importance, and the Black Rose has been wearing it for months as her battle sword. It needs to be returned to its rightful, honorable, owner, whoever that might be."

After going over all contingencies, the plan was a go. While the other Teams that had rescued survivors prepared to make a second trip into the room full of bloodsuckers, Liana closed her eyes and called to the animal deep inside herself. It had been so long since she'd been able to frolic with her beast, but it was vital that they wrestle the weapon away from Haeda today, even if that

meant causing unimaginable pain unto themselves. Her Lioness agreed. The Black Rose would be stopped, here and now. No one would suffer again like their mate had suffered, and if they had to hurt in the process of seeing that never happened again, Liana's lioness and she were in perfect agreement.

Walking around the corner, out of sight of the others, Liana quickly stepped out of her leathers, and took a deep breath to center herself. Holding her arms out to her sides, she smiled and greeted her Lioness first in her mind, let their magick meet and play in their memories first before allowing the white-hot magick to spread over her body.

From an outsider looking on, it would probably appear as though a million fireflies had landed on Liana's skin at once and then flew off just as quickly leaving a huge, ferocious mountain lioness in its place. Except this Lioness understood everything she did as human, retained all her human knowledge, and even kept her *Lionese* memories once she shifted back to human. She knew right from wrong, but she was more durable in the feline form. Liana and her Lioness knew that Haeda, or the Black Rose, wouldn't give up quietly.

Walking back from around the partition with her leathers in her mouth, she set them down on a conference chair then went to stand by her mate. *I*

have a bad feeling Ryan. I feel more comfortable going down in this form now. Have your weapons ready, and if I tell you to do something even if it is bizarre, please do it. Okay?

Absolutely, baby. You've earned my trust. I give my word. I'll follow your instructions to the letter out there today.

Okay. I'm nervous enough. Let's get this show on the road.

"Begin drilling through the top dome of the antechamber now, *Contessa*." Ryan ordered. "Once completely through send concentrated bursts of magnified sunlight at 1000x normal through the opening, then begin transport of as many able-bodied guards through the opening three minutes after operation sunburst commences. The rest of us will wait approximately thirty seconds after the others transport in with exception of Liana and myself, before entering. Liana and I will enter as soon as operation Sunburst begins. We will hopefully use the sun as a distraction to sneak in unnoticed as we search for the Sword of Nuada."

"From all of us aboard *Retribution, Adventurer, Victory*, you do us all proud today in all our home worlds. This day all your names will go down in history."

"Contessa, start drilling."

Outside in the hallway, dirt from the ceiling began to fall in steady clumps. They were fortunate no one ran out while they were all

tossed on the ground buried in rubble. They would have been shot where they lay. Standing as quickly as silently as they dared, they waited for the second signal, the one to tell them that the light had been turned on,

When the agonized, gasping screams started, Ryan and Liana eased into the room. The carnage that met their eyes was much more than they expected, much more than what they themselves had created. Apparently, they'd interrupted a feast, an orgy of food and blood. Bodies—whole, and in parts—were scattered across tables everywhere, while still smoking vampires quivered in the corners where they'd run to when the attack started.

Pushing against the neck mike, Ryan spoke again. "Widen that light beam by five hundred yards and 1000x normal again. Our job here is nowhere near done.

Ryan, Haeda is hiding amongst the dead bodies on the table in the center. If we approach their food, the vampires will attack. That's been their plan all along if someone found this hiding spot. Apparently someone discovered just what the weapon will do if it's wielded by someone with skill in swordplay. But it can only be wielded by a woman's hand, hence the reason it needs to escape, and needed me.

But you can't fight.

What else can I do? For her, I can do this.

You'll be naked in front of vampires.

Then have your goddess come down here and fight in my stead. Match her with the blade. They'll suit each other.

Pressing the microphone once again, he said one last thing. "We need the Princess to make herself presentable. Valla will have to be the one to fight, then. She is excellent in a swordfight, having fought all three of her brother and her father and beaten us all in an effort to prove she could join the ranks of the palace guard. It's why we brought her along. I had another gut instinct she would be needed on this mission. It's why she's out in the halls changing into leathers she can move freely in; those are lightweight yet protect just as well as regular armor. It will give her an extra edge if she needs it."

When the next wave of attack happened, the hole in the dome almost tripled in size, and the searing white heat almost blinded those not already wearing protective eye gear. After blinking several times, Valla Logann, High Princess of *Manruvia* was standing next to him and Liana, awaiting her chance at fighting their people's enemy.

Thirty seconds later, Haeda, the Black Rose, rose from the dead bodies like a macabre scene from a horror movie, covered in gore and blood. From behind her back, Valla pulled out a long clean stick made out of ancient wood, something

used in some form of martial arts. As Haeda, the Black Rose came in to attack, her sword raised above her head, Liana swore she heard the sword say, "Don't make me kill her. She doesn't deserve to die, you evil cow," but the witch just cackled in glee.

Just then something snapped inside Liana. For every time she'd been kicked, bitten, pushed, made fun of, looked down upon, spit on, beaten, and called Omega, the power inside Liana grew...and grew...and grew...until a fiery red heat poured out of her chest and exploded outward, searing everyone who was filled with hate within a ten foot radius to ash. The Sword of *Nuada* flew into the air.

Though Liana magickally attacked as a Lioness female, once unconscious, she could not maintain her shift to reverted back to her human form. Without anyone to hold the sword, everyone expected it to fall to the ground in a clatter of metal. Instead, it circled in the air, twirling and twirling, faster and faster, almost celebrating in victory. Liana probably could have told them exactly what it was doing and feeling.

* * * *

With his mate still unconscious, Ryan pressed his neck communicator. Emergency transportation to

the medical bay, STAT. Something has happened to Liana and she's now unconscious.

Fifteen minutes later, Liana still lay in the pink mist of the healing chamber and Ryan was repeating the exact chain of events that led up to her being there to the third doctor on board the medical ships. Liana finally began to stir. Rushing over to the clear dome, he wanted to be the first thing she'd see when she broke through the layers sedation she'd been under while they'd try to figure out what had happened on the planet below.

What happened, Ryan?

That's my question? How did you do whatever you did, love?

She shook her head, a V of confusion marring the lines of her forehead. "I just remember being very angry all of a sudden. Then it wasn't just about The Black Rose or Valla but about all the times someone abused me because I was the Omega by accident of my gift. About all the things I'd taken, all the abuse, and as I thought about those things, I could feel the power building inside me, building and building, and I suddenly knew exactly how to free the sword. I had to free all the hate that had built inside me, and let it all out at once, in one big burst. I guess I'd stored up an awful lot of hate in my lifetime."

Ryan chuckled, bending his head to laugh in his

shirt. "You could say that. Valla never even got a chance to show off her sword-wielding skills, since you took out the Black Rose and every vampire in that particular compound all together.

"But that was just the beginning. We found notes, plans. And that Sword you found, that Sword that seems to have claimed you for now, says there are two other weapons that must be found before an ancient curse that was written ten thousand millennia ago kills us all."

"And when is this deadline coming up?"

"You have until May 2012, or we're all doomed."

EPILOGUE

Valla Logann couldn't believe that she was on her way to the legendary planet of Earth to beg one of their mythical Gods to help them in their war against the *Iblisors*. If they had their facts rights, and their own Goddess Mari insisted they did, then the blood-drinkers had once tormented those living on Earth as well. She could only hope that at least one of the Gods would listen to the pleas of her and her allies. But she knew it wouldn't be easy.

Amy, Maryann, and even Eve and Liana had all told her many times over that men don't show women of royalty, especially blonde women, much respect. They expect them to be no more than an accessory for their arms, without minds of their own. Well, she'd never fit into that role and she'd not try to. She had several Gods she would try to speak to first. Those of water would be easier for her relate to, so hopefully she wouldn't have trouble with Pontis, Poseidon or Neptune. If

those didn't work out, well, she had others she could try. The best part of the trip was being out from under the eyes of all her older brothers and her overbearing father.

Besides, what trouble could she get into on a world where no one knows her and no one suspects she's here?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

A little about me...I'm a wife, a daughter, a housekeeper, a personal shopper, a cook, a peace negotiator, an accountant, and in my spare time an Erotic Romance Author. Heck, I'm a woman who wears many hats, just as most women with a family to care for do. I'm a lover of books...books of all types. I'd like to say I've been writing since I could hold a pencil, but that wouldn't be true. I didn't start seriously writing until my DH encouraged me to when my weekly spending habit on books became obscene. He thought—wise man that he is—writing might not only rescue his wallet but keep me occupied and out of trouble. He was right.

In the winter of 2002, I sat down and began my first book, *The Protector's Destiny*. I finished it Spring of 2005 and it was first contracted with a now defunct publisher in the summer of 2006, though it wasn't the first book published. That honor belongs to *Taliff's Cure*, which I wrote in its entirety in the fall of 2006. EXtasy Books published this, my very first published work, in February of 2007.

Since that first project, *The Protector's Destiny*, I haven't slowed down. I don't see myself ever quitting this career, though I admit, my husband will probably tell you I still spend entirely too much time and money reading my favorite authors.

I'm also at MySpace and have my own Yahoo Group, so stop on by and visit! So please, pull up a chair and enjoy your trip through my virtual home.

PS: I'd love to hear from you. You can contact me via my [Contact page](#) on my website.

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