



ASHLYNN  
MONROE

# LOST HEARTS

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To my husband Scott,

Every year we learn a little more.

In the bad times and in the good times you have been a  
constant

in my life and in my heart.

Thanks for growing up with me (but never old).

I can't imagine my life without you.

## Chapter 1

*Desire rushed in her blood, making it pulse with life. Molten lava burned her stomach, making each breath a small gasp of excruciating want. A rush of untried sensations swirled through her brain, drowning her in drunken lust. Panting, she cried out a final release which he answered with his own whisper, just her name breathed into her hair and filled with heartbreaking devotion. She shattered.*

Laurel sat up in her bed with a start! He had returned to her. Broken joy blended with sick terror deep in her soul. Shivering and alone, she wept. Replaying the last fragments of the dream in her head she let the tears wash away the fog of sleep.

For the past six months she had slept peacefully without the dreams.

*Not now,* she silently begged the heavens. With the

ceremony forever bonding her to another man only days away she could not bear to have him return to her mind. She was in love with a dream. How was it even possible to love the creation of her fertile imagination? He who arose from her pent-up frustration, materializing into the perfect dream lover. He, the nameless one, had come to her since the day she turned seventeen. How a sheltered virgin created those dreams spoke of the influence of the many passionate encounters she espied during festival nights at court. Awaking each morning to the sad realization that even if he felt real, he was not, had driven her to read everything ever written about dreams and the dreaming mind. He might not truly exist but he left his mark on her. Laurel felt genuine longing for him and it never failed to make her cry.

On her nineteenth birthday her father announced she was to marry his dearest friend and ally's son, Lord Evanston. Laurel awakened the morning after her betrothal with a sense of deep loss and the feeling of abandonment in her hour of greatest need. Her dream lover was no longer.

Dear Lord Evanston was the great playmate and conspirator of her youth but her feelings for him would never be any more intense than deep friendship. Even if she

was to go to him physically untouched and innocent her heart belonged to a wispy spirit, created by her own mind, who gave her passion-filled nights. Her body tingled with the burning touch of his hands and the exquisite joy of his hard cock as if he had form to touch her, as if he possessed substance to make love to her.

Her love had no name but Laurel felt his brand on every inch of her skin. His body, perfect in every imagined way, appeared built by a life of physical labor. A bit too long, his dark hair fell just so into his eyes, exotic eyes of the summer sky mixed with the turbulence of the coming storm that darkened erotically as they drowned in the depths of passion. His sun-kissed skin was smooth over his broad shoulders and the prickly little hairs that covered his chest always felt like sand on silk when her hand passed over them. His vibrant, pure strength and male grace was amazing and he had a boyishly sexy playfulness that gave his face an ageless handsomeness. His lips were a firm demand against hers and every dream ended with them whispering her name as a broken plea, a prayer of desperate devotion confirming the communion of their souls.

Still shivering, even with the summer heat rolling over her, she got out of bed and pulled on her silk robe of robin's

egg blue. It was the last gift her mother had given her before her death. As quietly as the lost spirits of the night she left her room and gracefully wandered out into the castle garden. The twin moons were at full radiance tonight and lit her path better than a lantern.

Both Moons reaching full moon in concert happened once every sixty years and it was considered a night for good fortune and festivities. Laurel was the heir to the noble title and as such she was kept extremely sheltered. Unlike the other girls her age she would not have the freedom to choose a village boy to discover the pleasures of her body with. She could hear the rivalry at the bonfires, and as she passed various dark nooks of the garden she could hear soft sighs of love. It made her edgy and sad to hear evidence of the freedom others enjoyed. It made her heart yearn even more for her mysterious dream lover who treated her like a woman, not a princess.

Her father was a great storyteller and spun fantastic tales about other worlds, some with many more moons and one with only a single moon. He told her about strange customs, clothing, and food, all the things he sampled while in the service of his country's military.

As the youngest son it was never expected for him to



inherit the title, but while he was away an electrical windstorm engulfed the village and castle, taking with it every person he loved. Her father came home to a title, but it was an empty consolation. For many years he lived in the workers cottages, draining the family's fortune to repair the village and helping his people rebuild with his own hands. He even married a girl of the peasant class whom he loved with a passion not even her death dare end. These things made him a ruler his people adored and gained much respect among the ruling class. He eventually became known as the Counselor King, and their ill-fated lands were prosperous once more. Laurel often visited the sick, and spent hours in service to their gods, yet she knew she would never live up to her father's legacy. As the daughter of the king she strove always to be good and giving, as was her duty. So why did she feel like such a fraud?

Laurel longed to explore, as her father had in his youth, but she knew she would never leave Etropica as her first responsibility was to her people, not her heart. Her mixed blood, noble and common, exposed her to only a small amount of discrimination as her father was beloved by so many. A few of the older noble lines would never consider her for their sons, even with her wealth and her title, as she

was considered to be tainted with common blood but old Lord Ambrose welcomed her as his future daughter. Ambrose and her father had been friends since boyhood and often talked of uniting their children. Laurel knew her father held off the betrothal out of deference to her hopes she would mate out of love, but each year she did not declare a preference for a suitor was one more year she was inappropriately unwed. Only the ruling class held such a high standard of monogamy, to insure the purity of the bloodline for inheritance and power. Most girls her age were mothers and many wives. Fertility was a sacred duty; a woman bringing children with her to a marriage was a blessing and a pregnant bride was good luck to the groom and his family. Most women were ripe with child at the gift binding ceremony making them a wife. Laurel thought of her gift binding, and instead of looking forward to it with joy and hope she saw it as the tragic end of her hope to find the man who matched her dream in the flesh. She looked for him in each of her suitors, but every one left her cold and disappointed.

Filled with such melancholy thoughts she returned to her bed and dreamed of him no more that night.

Gift binding was a sacred event, it was for life and there was no divorce. The priestess and the Counselor King blessed no changing of one's mind after the ceremony. With youth came the freedom to be with many lovers and explore sexuality, the blending of two people by the Nature Mother left no opportunity for those who decided to bind to change their minds. Once bound, the souls of the pair converged and a telepathic link formed, never to be divided. A bound pair could feel the emotions and needs of their partner.

Laurel heard many a whisper about the way this bond enhanced physical intimacy, and there were men who swore they felt every labor pain their Bonded suffered. Laurel even knew a woman who died right at court the very moment her husband died from a weak heart a league away. If one did not have regular and satisfying relations with one's bonded mate then the telepathy dulled. Most of the pairs at court were arranged bonds, and as such had little connection. She'd even heard talk of a man who brought other women to his bed and his bonded wife had no idea, as their bond was so weak.

She knew Evanston would not push the strengthening

of their bond on her, and in her heart was sure he would even be relieved if it never grew to be more than it was on the first night it formed. She still felt nervous he would know her secret, her love for another, as soon as they bonded. Laurel was too embarrassed to tell him, yet she felt she should. Evanston was kind and sweet but she suspected he would not be forgiving if she bonded to him with such a secret between them. There had long been whispers that he preferred male company, but Laurel knew he must carry on the line for his father's sake and so did not dispute the betrothal. Evanston was as trapped by their upcoming gift binding as she was herself, and it made her want to weep for his sake as much as her own. As her oldest and best friend she cherished him dearly, and if she could not have love at least she knew there would always be friendship in her bonding.

Each day that passed brought Laurel closer to the binding and was filled with an abundance of preparation and anxiety. Her ladies worked tirelessly to ensure the flowers were beautiful and her gown perfect. Her father purchased beautiful jewels for Laurel to wear in her hair,

on her ears, and around her neck. She hid from the questions and the planning as much as possible but was gracious to her people for their efforts and acted as if she was truly happy for the binding. She did not want them to know of the heartache she suffered, as they deserved more from her than such disrespect.

Lord Evanston arrived the afternoon before the binding and Laurel courteously welcomed his surprise visit. Her usual pleasure at seeing her friend now felt an awkward formality.

"Lady Laurel, you are looking very beautiful, albeit tired, this day." True concern colored Evanston's pretty words.

"Thank you my Lord, I admit preparations have kept me scurrying about all day and do get a bit exhausting but I am so very pleased to see you, my friend. I would speak to you in private if we might?"

Artfully, they dodged the chaperones who were following them discreetly.

Evanston looked worried. "My Lady, what matter do you need such privacy to address?"

"Dear Evanston, I have cared for you as my dearest friend for many years, since the cradle I suppose, and so

what I tell you is from my heart and not meant to wound you. I do not feel a passionate love for you but rather the love of a friend. I have lately been plagued with longing for a sleeping apparition, a man who haunts only my dreams and I doubt even exists. I felt a need to confess this to you prior to our gift bonding as I desire no secrets dividing us. Please forgive me."

His hearty laugh both offended and enraged her.

"I pour out my soul for your perusal and you insult my good intentions! I think you are a poor friend indeed!"

"Darling Laurel, I have loved you for as long as I can remember and can accept your secret love. I see this dreaming passion as a very lucky sign for me indeed. You are untouched and innocent, your body cries out for what it has not experienced yet needs. Once we are bonded I will help you see no dream can compare to the true act. You are dear to me, very dear to me, and I am so sorry if I have caused you hurt. It is with relief I laugh, no more than that. I worried you were to tell me you have fallen for some dashing nobleman at court. I am a fortunate man indeed to be bonding with a woman who would speak her heart in an attempt to spare mine. Darling Laurel I will treat your soul with tenderness and your body I will awaken out of dream

passions into the light!"

To her shock, he crushed her to his lips and savaged her mouth with a kiss that left her breathless but did not ignite the passions he so eloquently promised. She saw the fire in his eyes and knew he spoke true. Evanston was in love with her! Suddenly she felt even worse than when he laughed. Now she knew why he did not do as other young lords and chase about the maids at court, he had always been waiting for the bonding between them! Laurel would not only be losing her freedom, but would also be breaking the heart of her dearest friend. As she crumbled into tears Evanston looked embarrassed and awkward as he tried to comfort her.

"Dear Lady Laurel you break my heart with your weeping. I am sorry I lost propriety and if I have scared or hurt you, please forgive me. I forget that you are not like other girls your age and that you have been secluded. I will be careful with you, my heart, I will be a good bondmate. Please do not weep dear one."

His genuine regret and consternation caused her to weep harder. She wanted to be a good daughter, a good leader, and a good bondmate, but in her heart she wanted so strongly to run from it all and jump on the next transport

offplanet to search for the man she was already in love with. He was too real to be a dream! He needed her. He wanted her. She wanted him too. Poor Evanston would never fill her with the same feelings of passion and contentment as the nameless one did. Laurel pulled her emotions together and kissed Evanston on the cheek. "I am sorry Lord Evanston. I thank you for your kind concern, please do not trouble on it further. If I may, I do believe they need me in the sewing room about the colors again; I am hopeful you will be delighted with what I have chosen. I will ensure that we have a nice supper laid out in your honor this evening. I hope to see you and your dear father then. Goodbye." Wings seemed to grow from her feet as she flew blindly away from him and her heartache. She never saw the tight look of pain on his face.

Laurel spent the rest of the day hiding in shame. She always thought her dear friend as much a hostage to title and tradition as she found herself to be, but now she saw him to be a willing slave to the bonding she so dreaded. Her heart knew she had been wrong about her safety from Evanston pushing for the deepest of bonds; it was so obvious now he would want the deepening of the matebond, would probably push strongly for it. Laurel



found she had to decide if she was the kind of woman who could give a strengthened bond to him and still succeed in hiding her true heart, or if she should push their friendship to her advantage and shame the lust out of his eyes. Either way they would both be hurt, their friendship perhaps irrevocably damaged, and she dreaded his pain more than her own. Laurel was, after all, accustomed to sacrifice for duty.

At supper her eyes were red from weeping and both Evanston and her father noticed. Neither voiced their concern, of which she was glad, but it was a very stilted meal lacking the usual warmth Evanston's company contained. Laurel girded herself and continued on as she had been taught. She was the consummate lady even as her heart was breaking.

## Chapter 2

*He came to her and she welcomed him into her arms with a desperate passion that shocked them both. They seldom spoke in the dreams, but tonight she begged him to leave her mind and never return. His hard chest pressed against her back as he nuzzled her neck while wrapping an arm around her and letting his other hand slide deliciously between her legs. She felt his fingers on her breast, tweaking the sensitive nipples and driving her into a frenzy of desire, all the while he stroked her most intimate places, making her hot and wet with her passion for him. Even as he brought cries of ecstasy to her lips she railed at him to leave her, that she already was as good as given to another, and that in the morning her mind would no longer be her own. She cried out that this was the last night she would ever be free to feel him as a man. Laurel cried out her love and she begged for his forgiveness. He never*

*spoke but his passion matched hers in its intensity and desperation. Laurel felt him pull her back and slide his aroused manhood into her tight, ready body and his hands never left the places where they teased and stroked her into a madness of need. She began to ride his cock in a rhythm of want and need until she reached the pinnacle and when she heard his low growl of a moan she knew he had achieved his release as well.*

Waking abruptly, tangled in her bedding, panting and sweating, she could not stop herself from reaching out, expecting to find him in her bed, Her dream had felt so real, more real than any of the dreams before. Her body ached and her womanly places throbbed with unfulfilled need like never before.

She slept no more that night and lay crying fitfully until dawn.

Her ladies clucked their tongues at the red and puffy state of her eyes and called for a healer to remedy her ravaged looks. They applied pastes and chants, oils and lotions, until she looked as fresh as if she had slept peacefully and well. Laurel felt lightheaded and ragged but she put on a smile for her ladies who loved her so and

wished to see her happily settled. Several older ladies, who had attended her mother and loved her like their own daughter whispered of what to expect, of how the young lord's love was obvious to them, and how lucky she would be not to have a man who only saw her as a title and not a woman. They had no way of knowing no man could compare to what her demented mind could conjure! She kissed them gratefully on the cheeks, thanked them for their loving care, and kept her heartbreak to herself. They thought her to be pure and had no idea she had let her mind be so addled as to love an apparition. She allowed them to assume she was afraid of the physical intimacy of bonding, it would hurt them less than the truth. Her heart heavy, she watched in the mirror as they transformed her into an ethereal beauty, and was amazed with the result. She sighed. *Well if I am to go to my execution at least I will be beautiful at the end*, Laurel thought to herself.

Aromas from the feast wafted around Laurel, making her already nauseated stomach tremble. She held her breath, hoping to keep the sickness at bay. Breathing deeply to ease the dizziness, she thought, *just a little longer, a little more pomp and circumstance and then this whole thing will be over!* Walking with legs suddenly

turned to stone, Laurel trembled as her father took her arm and led her to the Gifting Garden.

It was beautiful, as it always was. Her eyes fixed themselves on a pink moonflower and she used it to focus herself and restrain her fierce urge to run. Tears clung to the surface of her eyes. Laurel did not allow them to fall.

Her father walked her to the enormous stone slab in the middle of the garden where the priestess and her acolytes waited. Laurel remembered the whispered stories of the first settlers to Etropica, the barbarous ones. According to known history these ancestors had been the ones to put the stone slab into the Gifting Garden, and they had used it for a very different purpose than her people did now.

Shockingly the ancients had bound souls in a very sexual ceremony viewed by all! Laurel always suspected the tales were fiction, but in the ancient histories she read many high-ranking bindings were consummated on the stone as a show of the binding to all! Even living with such open sexuality as she did Laurel could never imagine having such an intimate moment become a public spectacle.

The contracts gifting lands and livestock to her father and their people seemed far too lavish, even to Laurel. Lord Ambrose had been very generous with his gifts and it

showed her great esteem. She did not want to disgrace her father with childish emotion so she kept her tears in check.

Lord Evanston looked very handsome in his fine clothing and Laurel cringed when she saw the joy and anticipation in his eyes. He was welcoming her and his actions in gifting her father with the rare cloth his people produced, but seldom traded or gifted, honored her greatly. Few grooms esteemed their brides in this way any longer as it was a very old custom, and only a bride held in the highest of respect and love could expect such a display of gratitude to her family. It caused her further guilt to know the love Evanston was so willing to give was a love she doubted she could ever fully return.

Her father took a golden ribbon and placed her hand on top of Evanston's. The king began to gently wind the ribbon around their joined hands and arms, binding them both physically and ceremonially. It would soon be the responsibility of the priestess and her acolytes to bind them spiritually. Laurel resisted the urge to flinch as her father finished the binding. She looked up at Evanston's face but quickly had to look away as the intensity of his gaze unnerved her. She saw his small smile as he noticed her reaction. He still thought he could overcome her lack of

desire for him.

In a surreal voice the priestess began to chant, and Laurel knew if she had been witness to any other binding the magic of the priestesses voice and the beautiful ceremony would move her. Instead she fought her nausea and the urge to flee as each moment became more torturous. Closing her eyes and breathing deeply she let her inner heart say farewell to her dream of finding the man who haunted her, for in moments he would be lost to her forever.

When she opened her eyes she noticed Evanston was no longer looking at her and the priestess had abruptly stopped in the middle of the chant. She turned her gaze in the direction they were looking.

To her horrified amazement *he* was there, in the flesh, standing in the pathway to the altar. His broad, tanned, and muscular chest was bare and he carried an assortment of strange implements Laurel knew had to be weapons. He stood proud and unafraid as the large gathering silently peered at him. They seemed to be wondering if he was a welcomed guest or a threat.

No one spoke until her father said in a booming voice, "Welcome to the gift binding of my beloved daughter.

Please take your seat on our beloved Nature Mother's welcoming bosom and indulge in the festivities to come. Today strangers are family and all are welcome to partake of the bounty we share."

His eloquent words seemed to fall unheard on the stranger. His intense gaze never wavered from Laurel's face and she felt her cheeks grow hot, his gaze far too familiar. He was her dream man she was certain, his every nuance of expression and even his beautiful face and body matched each tiny detail to perfection. She wondered if somehow her fear had brought him to fleshly existence. She prayed she had not somehow given this apparition life as all her people were here to witness her humiliation.

As if he could hear her thoughts a smile broke out on his face and he threw his head back in a booming laugh.

A shockwave seemed to erupt as he startled the people sitting closest to where he stood, and the unrest moved through the assembled crowd. It was in that moment her father's guards apparently decided he was a threat and drew their laser daggers. Her dream man pulled huge metallic blades from his back and the gigantic, fierce-looking weapons made her step back cautiously. She was more afraid for the guards than her dream lover, somehow she



knew he could handle those weapons as if they were an extension of his body.

Laser fire erupted and the mystery man managed to deflect it easily.

Evanston nobly pushed her behind him. People screamed and scattered, and total confusion erupted in the usually peaceful garden. Trampling over the sacred and rare plants the crowd rushed for safety. Somehow, even as he defended his life his eyes never left hers, and it was in that moment she was his, her heart seared with his brand. He moved with lethal grace as he easily defeated her father's guards and disabled their weapons. Not one of the men were seriously injured. They rushed him and he easily brushed them off as if they were insects, instead of large well-trained fighting men. His size compared to all the men around him made him seem even more surreal and god-like as he approached.

Just before he reached her both Evanston and her father blocked his path. She saw him smile fleetingly at her father and hold up his hand. Some strange light emanated from the stranger and her father fell unconscious at his feet.

She heard herself scream, as if she was no longer in her body. Laurel saw Evanston hold her to him to prevent her

running to her fallen father. Grabbing the nearest weapon Evanston began to attack the stranger. His neutral expression now filled with malice as he quickly disarmed the smaller man, and if she had not screamed and grabbed her dream lover's arm he would have delivered a deathblow. Her dream man looked deeply into her eyes and she felt her body grow heavy. He was doing something to her, drugging her with his mind!

As she began to lose consciousness she wondered how it was possible. She felt him catch her as weakness took her. Laurel was lost, floating in the vast darkness of his mind. Fleeting she hoped her father and Evanston would be all right. As she gave in to the pressure upon her mind she heard him whisper to her, just her name, his voice full of desperate devotion.

## Chapter 3

Laurel awoke with a pounding headache, and struggled to make sense of the fragments of thought and memory that assailed her as she desperately fought to keep her newly gained conscious state.

She had no idea where she was. Strange bleeps and whirls caught her attention. She never heard such noises. Her world strove for harmony with nature. She was confused, afraid of the hard metallic surface she felt against her hands in the dark. Her hand found a wall and it, too, was cold metal. Fighting back her cry of dismay she heard a *whoosh* as a wall opened and light flooded into the room. A dark figure stood silhouetted against the light and without knowing how, she knew it was him. Her dream man had turned out to be a nightmare in flesh.

She was very light-headed but in her defiance struggled to stand anyway. He was there as she fell, catching her in

his impossibly large and strong arms. In terror Laurel covered her face, too afraid to face the reality of her current situation; a pampered and sheltered life had not prepared her to be at the mercy of another.

He gently removed her hands and, with her eyes still closed, she could feel his gaze upon her. His soft chuckle rumbled against her, rousing both her anger and her fear. He murmured soothingly to her in a language she did not understand, he must have realized her lack of understanding because he stopped speaking rather abruptly.

Laurel felt his arm move, and then his hand was rearranging her hair. She felt a strange object against the side of her temple and began to struggle frantically, unsure of his intent in placing the unnatural object on her skin. He made shushing sounds and she felt something latch onto her ear and clip into the ear channel. Screaming she tried to dislodge the foreign object from her head. His strong hands easily prevent her from removing it in her terror.

Then he spoke, and she understood what he said! "Love, please don't fight me. I have only put a universal translator behind your ear, it will not harm you. See, you understand me as well as if you have always spoken my language. Is it not better to know what I am saying?" He

waited for her response.

Laurel found her voice to be dumb with shock. It took several moments for her to speak. "I do understand you and now you can explain what your purpose is. Is my father well? And Lord Evanston? My people? How many were wounded or killed in the struggle?"

"Not one of your people were harmed or killed. How your people can live as primitives is beyond my imagination! Your destiny is secure, there is no longer any reason for you to fear your father or the primitive he was trying to unite you to. I am here and I will never let you go, you will never have to fear our separation again. I am well tested in battle and I would fight with all my strength to keep you, my soul bride."

Chills ran down her spine at his words. When he was a harmless hallucination or dream she was not afraid of him, but in the flesh and speaking such nonsense he frightened her.

"Laurel, my soul, you will return to your people soon and they will welcome you. I waited until it was right to come to you, but your primitive customs forced me to arrive sooner than I expected. You are so young, but I know you will be able to accept your destiny."

"Yes, please take me home to my people, my father must be very worried by now, and I am sure there will be no retaliation if I ask for mercy for you. I promise to let no harm come to you. By what title or name are you addressed?"

She realized he still deftly held her in his arms, and she felt his rumbling laugh in response to her heartfelt words. Her annoyance with him was mounting at an ever-increasing rate.

"You, my soul, can call me by my birth name, Julius, but my people address me as Honored Warrior King. You are my soul's other half, stolen from our people before birth and hidden away. I feared I would have to exist without you always. I searched for you for the last fifty years. You are safe now, and on my vessel *Destruction*."

"Fifty years? But I am only nineteen years old, you must have the wrong person. I am sorry Julius but you need to return me. My destiny lies on Etropica with my people. I am sorry for your loss but the woman you seek is far older than I."

He laughed again as if she had told the most delightful of jokes.

Laurel shoved him away in her irritation and found

herself landing on hard, painful steel.

Julius did not keep the humor out of his voice as he spoke, while extending his hand to her to assist her in standing. "Lovely one, you are the one I seek and yes your natal time has been but nineteen years, but you were in stasis in your mother for much longer, and in stasis on your primitive world after she died. Your father thought to cheat your destiny and create a new one for you, but no one robs a Warrior King of his right forever. You are not of Etropica and should not have to remain there.

You are of my world. Etropica is a religious freedom colony whose people left our modern world many hundreds of years ago to commune with nature and forsake our modern ways, robbing you of the life that is rightfully yours. Your true mother was not the woman who raised you but a warrior lady of my land. She and my mother made the unbreakable vow of fertility and swore an oath to the spirits of war so their children would unite in soul and spirit.

Then, many years later and after I was born, your mother met a foreign soldier who came for training on our world. She fell in love with him and conceived his child. They bonded, but he left her.

My spies learned of this after many years of searching. They said your father returned to his home and assumed the identity of a fellow soldier who had taken his own life upon hearing his entire family was dead and that he bore responsibility for a society in a state of ruin.

She told no one of her pregnancy and kept you in a state of unborn stasis to hide you from my family, as she planned to leave with your father. Your father then returned to our planet to take your true mother to his home and make her part of his life of lies, but he was unaware of the restrictions of the lovebond and it killed her before they could reunite. Our people bond differently than those on Etropica and if the love is not nurtured it becomes a festering plague that kills the lover slowly. When he returned to our planet she lay dying, and so she gave your unborn life force to her own mother until your father found a suitable surrogate to birth you, robbing you of the life rightfully yours.

Your father took his time bringing you into his new world in order to keep his ruse true. He found a woman incapable of bearing children from a distant place on your world and brought her to his village. He made it appear as if he was just meeting and falling in love with her. He



married her and after a time your true mother's mother called to your life force and implanted it into the woman you knew as your mother. After your birth your father told his people something terrible had happened during the birth to cause her to become incapable of bearing more children. They accepted you as his one true and only heir. Your people worship fertility and so his declaration and his keeping of your mother must have seemed very noble, instead of the lies and betrayal it was.

We have belonged together since your conception, and in the moment our bond began I felt your existence, even though I was only a small boy at the time. It is how my mother knew her friend betrayed their vow. Most people leave it to chance that their child will find the truemate who will complete their soul, but some do as our mothers did and *ensure* their children will have someone to complete them. Letting nature provide a mate can be disastrous; I once knew a very old man who did not find his soul bride born until he was too old to see her mature. She grew to be very withdrawn from the world because her earliest memory is feeling her other half die. They never bonded physically and so she was able to survive, but her life is only a half-life, lacking the love and completeness the

truebond brings. It is a terrible fate.

Our bond is why I was able to feel you as you grew, and after you reached an age of physical maturity I could reach out so we could unite on a telepathic level while we slept."

She had so many questions and doubts. "Then why have you been absent for the last six months? You look like a man in his early years not one over fifty years old. Your story rings false!" Laurel accused.

"I have been in an unnatural suspension as I traveled at abnormal speeds across the galaxies to come for you. When I heard in your thoughts your father planned to bind your soul to another in the unnatural way of your people, I had to stop it, I had to come for you. I have been unable to visit you in sleep because my mind and body shut down, the trip would have killed me otherwise. Time is also different on my world, and with advanced medicine aging slows until it seems to stop. We do age, just extremely slowly."

"My father is a good leader and loves our people, he never would mislead them. The stasis you speak of is unnatural and unbelievable. I am not of your world and I think you have done something to my mind to make me think of you as I do. You are a devious trickster but I still

do not know what your wish to gain from this deception. Lord Evanston's father has been my father's friend since boyhood and he is a respected leader, why would he allow an impostor to rule? Bloodlines are very important to our people, he would never allow his son to unite with a foreign woman, even if she was brought up in our ways. You speak of things you could never truly know. My mother loved me and adored me; she raised me with devotion. She would never have gone to her grave keeping such a truth from me! You dishonor her memory, and me, with your words! If I am a prisoner here so be it, but I want you to leave me in peace!" Laurel spat the words out and turned her back to him. She had heard enough.

He left quietly, but somehow she felt him still in her mind, carefully guarding her and monitoring her turbulent emotions. It was irritating and made her feel unsettled yet at the same time she felt the sense of peace and contentment she had been missing for the last six months. She did feel a pull to him that was unnatural but it could be a trick, or something he or his spies had done to her. Either way, she would not allow these inconvenient feelings to sway her mind or influence any decisions in the matter of his allegations against her family. As the lady of her people

she would one day rule them and could not allow a deluded alien to derail her true destiny. Her people needed her to continue her father's legacy. As much as she did not want to be a wife to Evanston, he would be good to her people and held the same values of seeing to them and their prosperity as she. It was a good match for Etropica. She could never bring a barbarian to them as her bonded mate!

Her worries for her father and her sudden pang of homesickness brought tears to her eyes. Laurel tried mightily to hold them at bay, but in the end her confusion and fear escaped her control. She wept for a long time, and then eventually found herself in a deep, dreamless sleep that Julius did not intrude upon.

When she awoke Laurel was stiff and hungry. At some point Julius must have returned because her head rested on a pillow and she was covered in a light blanket. Both were of some synthetic material which made her skin itch. Having always slept surrounded by the comforts of cottons and down she found them strange, but she was glad she hadn't been left with nothing on the cold slab. The room was dark but when she stood dim lights illuminated the

room enough for her to study it. She did not see even one natural material in the room; it went against her religious and esthetic senses to be in such a cold and foreign room.

A small meal of unappealing-looking goop sat on the table. She was hungry but not enough to ingest the foul smelling paste.

Another door opened to what could only be a latrine and basin, for as she touched the basin cool water came out, but it smelled stale. Her father's tales contained information on spacecrafts and how they recycled water. It still made her cringe at the unnatural and disgusting idea that the water had once served another.

For a time she paced the small space trying to decide how to escape, or at least get a message to her father. She had no knowledge of how a spacecraft worked or how the machines that sent words and images across the stars operated, even if she did find the machine to do this she doubted she could operate it.

Laurel was not an idle person by nature, so long hours sitting alone in a room made her stir-crazy. She loved the outdoors and nature, and her people filled their homes with plants and trees. Her home allowed the breeze to flow naturally through the rooms, both refreshing and cleansing

the air. In this creepy tin box she felt suffocated and stale. She longed to go home, but she also knew pleading with Julius would be a waste of breath. *Think Lauren, think!*

Suddenly the *whoosh* of the door sliding into the wall interrupted her thoughts. Laurel had spent an hour trying to figure out how to open it, there was no obvious buttons or handles so she had finally given up searching in frustration. *And now He opens it easily! Aarghh!*

Julius stood in the doorway. His large frame blocked any attempt she might make to escape. His presence sucked the oxygen from the room and made her uncomfortable, even as she was reassured he had returned.

Instead of looking at Julius she looked out that little window. Laurel spent time watching the stars through a tiny window in the wall of the ship, it had terrified her at first but after a time she was fascinated by the specks of light that seemed to whirl past like fireflies. She saw him striding towards her out of the corner of her eye. She would not move.

She would not look at him.

"What can I do to make you accept who you are, Laurel? I have told you the truth. I am sorry I had no choice

but to separate you from your home with violence, if I had known your father was going to bond you against your wishes I would have come to woo you in the way of your people, not mine. My people understand war and possession. You may be naive, but even your own father understood calculated ruthlessness and how to get ahead with lies. You feel the same bond I do for you, we are *one*. Don't be a spoiled child and neglect the gift that is our bond out of anger at me. You will not win!"

Julius grabbed her and painfully hauled her off the bed into his arms. He pressed his lips to her, punishing her for her insolence. Then he was lost in her. His lips tried to coax the passion he knew Laurel capable of from her. He had dreamed of having her in the flesh for so long he trembled like an untried boy.

Her scent, her sweet freshness, surrounded him. It made him heady with desire and caused him to feel something he had never known before in his life, tenderness. He wanted her, but he wanted her to want him too. Julius had always taken what he wanted and now she held the thing he wanted most but could never take, love. Pure and good and fresh. Bonded love.

He wanted her in his home, he wanted to fill her with

his children, he wanted to know that after a long battle she would be waiting to tend to his wounds and be the reason he survived to come home. He loved Laurel, but he knew that if he pushed her too much she might pull away from him forever. Pushing away from her and ending the one sided kiss, he turned his back to her, and with only a few steps reached the door. As it opened he turned around and looked at her.

Tears ran down her cheeks and he wanted to comfort her and shake her all at the same time.

With several long strides he returned to her, and the warrior in him roared for him to claim his mate! Julius knew she wanted him as much as he wanted her, and so without another word he went to war. This was a war he knew he could win, he knew his opponent's every weakness, he knew how to make Laurel mad with desire!

Without asking for permission Julius took what he knew to be his. He felt her desire for him, being near to her had strengthened their bond and he knew she was already wet with desire for him. He lifted up her elaborate dress until the delicate silk undergarments were the only obstacle in his path. Julius gave them one sharp jerk, the light fabric rent in half, and he casually tossed the ruined garment to



the floor.

Laurel's quick and sharp intake of breath stilled his rigid member, for he already had her bent across the sleeping platform to thrust into and show her he had every right to her body. He could not seem to do as he had planned, and then he realized why: her connection with him was restraining him. She was angry and did not want him, he wanted to take her nonetheless but her strong will held him back. Angrily he let her go and left the room, irate at her refusal and her ability to manipulate the bond he had thought her too young and unskilled to use.

Laurel wept in confusion. She had longed for him in the flesh all of her adult life, but she would not give in to threats or force, it was not her way. She loved the gentle and passionate man from her dreams, but the reality of him was a conundrum that she did not know if she could understand, let alone love! On minute he seemed to care for her and the next he was treating her like property.

Although she would never have loved Evanston, he would have made a good leader and bondmate. Julius would never understand her people, and she doubted he would even let her returned to them if she allowed him to

bond with her; his people's ways sounded much like hers in this aspect. Once done she doubted it could ever be broken while they both lived.

She feared what a forced bond would feel like: Laurel had heard stories of the olden times when noble ladies would be stolen by fortune-seeking men and a bond forced upon them. Some died immediately, others died more slowly from head pains after year of having someone they hated in their minds. Her favorite scary story as a child had been about the Headless Lady who had chopped off her own head after enduring a forced bond. When she grew older she learned it was actually based on one of Evanston's ancestresses who committed suicide most gruesomely, and had killed her maid and the maid's children in her madness the same night! He had teased her as a child that he would bond with her one day just so he would have his own headless lady; she smiled sadly at the memory.

Evanston truly did love and desire her; he must be devastated. She was not sad the bonding was stopped, but she was sad for his humiliation and worry. Her race was a peaceful one, but men were still men, and to be weaker than another was not something Evanston would be proud of.

Laurel knew they would come for her and she was terrified for her father and friend, but she found herself equally worried for her captor's wellbeing. She was in love with Julius, or at least the Julius of her dreams. She knew he was right and a bond did truly exist, but without the ceremony it would never truly hold them. As long as she could keep him from having the ceremonial bonding performed she could escape this nightmare and regain her freedom. Laurel had to admit there was a piece of her heart that did not want the bond broken. She wanted Julius to be her bonded mate, but she also wanted to do what was right for her people and her father. She could not have both, so she chose her duty. Laurel decided she must escape, but before she left she would join her body to his so she would have the memory to hold in the future. She would not go to her wedding bed a virgin if she did this, but Laurel knew Evanston would forgive her the indiscretion. Laurel also knew Julius had spoken the truth and that they would be together physically but she would not abandon her people and her father for her own selfish desires.

Waiting patiently, she thought of all the reasons she should not give in to the desire of her body, but the very idea of going through her life not knowing the feel of his

body and his touch was not acceptable. Laurel could not walk away without one small moment in time with him.

Hours passed. She was hungry and tired of her cramped prison.

Julius stepped into the room carrying a tray with very unappetizing gruel. She sat looking up at him. He did not speak and she could see the tension in him. When he sat the tray down on her little table she stood and went to him.

Following her innocent desires she went to him and put her arms around his neck. Softly she pressed her lips against his. He did not move or yield to her innocent seduction. Pulling back, Laurel looked up into his face and she saw a war being waged in his eyes. She spoke softly and with sweet honesty. "I want to be with you Julius. I want to feel the reality of your arms. I want you to make me feel like you did in my dreams."

"You cannot take this act back. Once we join you will not be virgin and it will be even harder for you to resist our bond."

She looked into his eyes when she replied. "I know this but I need to feel you and I want the pleasure I know we

can have together."

Letting go of his control Julius grabbed her roughly and then his mouth claimed hers passionately. She felt his tongue dancing within her mouth and one of his large hands held her to him possessively by the back of her neck while his other began to remove her fine gown. She felt the fabric tear as he tried to undo the tiny buttons. Moaning into his mouth as the sound of the tearing fabric fired her passion for him she gave no thought to the fact her only article of clothing was being damaged beyond repair.

Running her hands over his chest she could feel the frantic beat of his heart and it heated her blood. His mouth moved to her neck and she could feel his breath just under her ear, with a contented sigh she melted into his body. Picking her up Julius laid her back on the sleeping platform and she felt his hands caress her body, stopping over her nipples to tease them lightly, and then his fingers continued to trail lightly down her body until he found her most intimate place. She gasped and struggled, for a moment. His lips found hers again, her small evasions quieted, and then she gave into the waves of sensation sweeping through her.

Tenderly his lips teased her nipples to exaggerated

peaks and she gasped with the wonderful sensation. Laurel doubted he could possibly match that pleasure until he placed his lips on the intimate flesh of her womanhood and lapped wildly at the nub there.

Bucking, she cried out and Julius gave a pleased chuckle. He liked how responsive his soul bride was and he had always known it would be good between them, but in her innocence he never expected her to have such a natural response to him. He decided that if she were to be his, body and soul, he would take her bound in the traditional way of the mating rites of his people. Lifting her up, he sat down on the bunk and placed her in front of him on his lap so that she was facing him. His mouth found her nipples and he sucked at them desperately.

Laurel was writhing in pleasure, moaning, and she did not realize what he was doing until it was done. He had restrained her hands behind her back and she was unable to free herself! For a moment her passionate fire was doused as if with icy water and she tried frantically to break the bonds his little electronic device generated. Angrily she looked up at him, and the raw passion on his face made her

catch her breath. His smoldering eyes brought her fire back to life and the bond between them somehow sung to her, insisting that she wanted to please him. In that moment she wanted to give him all she was. Laurel wanted to make this man bound to her, enslaved by his desire for her.

Julius let her struggle, he let her be angry and he made no attempt to explain or soothe her. He watched her fire burn out, and saw when the natural song between them took over and her soul responded to the ancient ways. He began again to flick her sensitive nipples with his tongue in a rhythm of desire and lust.

Laurel moaned as she gave into the passion hidden inside of her. She accepted her bonds and the man who held her captive. She decided it was her turn to enslave him; it was her turn to make him feel bound by unseen shackles. Laurel scooted off his lap and knelt in front of him. His engorged manhood was inches from her soft lips. She had caught glimpses of many couplings on festival nights, but she herself had never done what she wanted to do. Pushing aside her worry that she would not know what to do she turned off her rational mind and let her body guide her.

Pleasure now controlled her actions. Laurel leaned forward slightly and pressed a chaste, innocent kiss to the large head of his rod, then her small pink tongue darted out of her mouth and flicked over him. She tasted a drop of his essence and knew she was on the right course. Taking his member delicately in her mouth she suckled him until she heard his moan. She felt Julius' large hand hold her softly by the hair and he began to tug her head forward and pull her head back by gently manipulating the hair he held. It was not painful, but it felt very subservient. Somehow the feeling of another person's will controlling her fuelled her desire for him, and she felt the place between her legs grow heavy and moist as a longing she could not quite name filled her. She needed something more from him and she needed it desperately.

He suddenly pulled her head from his straining member. "Say my name. By the gods Laurel, say my name!" he rasped harshly.

"Julius." One word, it came out a soft plea, and she knew he was hers.

He quickly bent her down so her breast pressed against the cold steel floor and she felt him raise her up towards him. Kneeling behind her he used the pad of his thumb to



stimulate the fleshy nub between her legs, and then she felt him wet his thumb in her essence. Shocked, she felt him lightly working his thumb into her anus. She tried to protest, the feeling of vulnerability was almost a violation. Then she felt his hard cock work into her body, connecting them as one. He quickly breached her sacred and guarded virginity and she cried out in a painful moment. His other hand reached around her and began again to stroke her nub, while he gently worked his thumb inside her anus. She felt surrounded by him, invaded by him, filled with him. Julius became her universe in that moment and she was desperate for him.

Laurel began slowly to work her body against his cock knowing there was something more, something better waiting for her. She ignored Julius's smug, throaty chuckle as she moaned and writhed, still restrained and unable to do more than accept his dominance over her, and pleaded for more pleasure. She felt an echo of his needs and knew he was feeling her responses as well. Odd as it was, she felt his pleasure for a moment in unison with her own, and it took her breath away as she was overwhelmed with the complete elation of it.

"Please Julius, oh please I cannot take it anymore you

must make this wild thing inside of me go away!"

Her innocent plea drove him to the end of his control. He took his hands from her body and placed them soundly on her hips, holding her firmly. He drove himself into her and she bucked against him as they found an ancient rhythm together while their bodies strained for the completion of their wild desire. Laurel cried out as she felt her body tighten and throb against his cock, wringing his passion from him as their desire exploded together. She heard his ragged breathing as she struggled to get her gasping breaths under control as well.

A soft sound and the sudden freedom of her arms made her aware he had removed her bonds. Laurel turned to him . . . and realized the sound had been the door of her prison. He had left her without a word.

Had she displeased him? Was the joining meaningless to him? Feeling humiliated she sat up and pulled her legs to her chest for comfort. Naked, with only her ruined dress to cover herself, she felt cold from more than the temperature. Laurel sighed and forced herself to move. She shakily stood and crossed the cell to the little latrine to wash the remnants of their desire from her body.

Opening a compartment while looking for a towel she

found garments, uniforms like the one he wore, just the right size for her. She begrudgingly put on the strange apparel. It was not of a natural material and made her feel suffocated but she forced herself to calm down and accept the unnatural feel of it on her body. *If only accepting the man to whom it belonged could be so easy.*

Sitting down on the cot, Laurel wept for how carelessly he had treated the gift of her virginity.

## Chapter 4

The Counselor King and his friend Lord Ambrose had been pacing as they waited for the intelligence about Laurel's kidnapper to arrive. When it finally came it confirmed their worst fears.

"Boxford, my dear friend, I think the past has finally caught up to you. Your dear one's promise was not some alien superstition as it had appeared to be. He has found Laurel now, and judging by how he handled himself at the garden it may not be possible to get her back. He is powerful on his world and we lack a ship fast enough to catch him before he returns with her to his home world.

I love Laurel like a daughter, and Evanston . . . well he truly loves her, and is crazy with grief. I finally told him the truth of our bargain and who you and Laurel really are, but he still wants her. He is, as I am, proud of what you have done for this land. No ruler by blood would have worked

harder and better for these people.

I was Ruston's ally, but I have always been your friend, and when you became Ruston I helped you because I saw what you were doing and how the truth would have destroyed this land. I have grown rich and so have you, this bargain has been the thing I am most proud of and yet also most ashamed of in my life, but if we go to war for your daughter we will be exposed as the greatest of traitors to tradition and neither we, or our children will survive the consequences. Evanston and I have spoken at length. Though he is my heir he is also a man who loves a woman and so will not be satisfied until he tries to bring her home. He knows that if he fails he will die. My son is willing to travel alone to spare us the shame of our deceptions and to spare Laurel the loss of her future and her throne. I may have many sons but I have always loved Evanston best. It pains me more then I can say that I must allow him to go alone to a savage planet of war to fight a leader for his woman. We can tell the military that with the advanced weapons and strength of our opposition we thought a secret rescue was safer for Laurel, rather than a war we cannot win They are sure to accept the logic of the argument."

Boxford, the interloper of title, was silent a long time.

He weighed his options carefully before he finally spoke. "You are right as usual, Ambrose, we have no other option. This secret must stay in the family and soon you and I will be united as family. I am sorry you had to burden Evanston with our deception, and we will also need to explain it all to Laurel before the bonding, but you are correct in your assumption the people of our lands would never allow us to rule if they found out the magnitude of my fraud and your assistance in it. We have done well for our people, but our successes will be forgotten if the truth becomes known. I accept Evanston's offer and I pray that he will have the strength and determination to survive and free my beloved Laurel, the Nature Mother only knows what that barbarian has done to my child. I pray he has not damaged her beyond what Evanston's loving can repair."

Evanston was standing at the door, armed and waiting for the approval to go after Laurel. His ship was loaded and ready, and although he was a good pilot he had never flown the distance required now to save his beloved. Evanston knew his determination would have a great deal of influence on whether his mission was a success or a failure. Laurel was so amazing and she had always held a

mysterious quality. After understanding the information his father imparted to him he could see some of the foreign traits in her, but he felt they only made her more desirable. He did not care she was not of the bloodline he had believed her to be. Exotic was not something any other woman on the planet could be described as, but his Laurel had an exotic ethereal quality; it was what had made her such a beloved figure to her people. She believed in the notion of service to her people and it had shown even when she was a little girl. Her people could ask for no more loyal and loving queen, and his people would never do better either. Once the bonding ceremony was complete and both kingdoms were united they would be the most powerful and prosperous kingdom in the history of Etropica. No good would come to anyone in exposing the lie. Evanston knew he would never be free of the burden of truth, but he was willing to carry the load to protect his woman and his people.

Lord Ambrose opened the door. The older man quickly, and uncharacteristically, embraced him. "Go now my son, there is no time to lose. Go and save your woman."

Evanston nodded brusquely and left his father without reply. None was needed. He would get the girl even if it

took him the rest of his life to find her. They would live the life he always planned for them.



## Chapter 5

Laurel lay on the uncomfortable, unnatural bunk, crying. Terror and heartache burdened her, as did the peace of her connection with Julius. He was trying to comfort her and she could feel his presence, not intrusive but instead imbuing her with an aura of love and protection. It caused her turmoil to feel all the more real and painful. She wanted to love him, but needed to hate him. She wanted him with her and yet silently begged him to leave her mind so she could think her own thoughts without wondering if he had somehow twisted them to cause her to feel the way he wanted her to. Laurel felt as if she were being brutally pulled apart, with her love and duty for her people on one side and Julius on the other.

Raised to be honest, she was sure her only escape to freedom lay with falsehood. As terrible as she felt about telling a lie, one that would hurt Julius, being taken against

her will to a foreign planet, especially a planet that had such strange and horrendous views on her way of life and culture, was not an option. If she could project enough belief in her own lie maybe she could fool him into believing it was truth. They had the beginning of a bond between them, but it was not a committed bond and so he could only get a vague idea her thoughts and feelings. The stronger the feeling, the clearer his reception of it would be. If she could lie well, then she could push the false feelings into the bond and make him believe her.

It would be risky but at the moment it seemed the only way.

Laurel focused her mind on Julius and pictured him. She blocked out all the things standing in the way of them being a good match and focused on what she would enjoy about being his bondmate. She thought of his strong body and his confident, protective ways. Her body grew warm and her face flushed with the not-so-innocent images that floated into her mind. She thought of how much she wanted to run her hands over his strong arms, back, and chest. How nice he smelled and how soft his hair felt, and then she imagined his intense eyes and what they might look like as he looked into her soul and saw she had nothing to hide.

How he would look in the gift binding ceremony on her world at the time their hands were bound, and how it would feel to have the power flow between them, uniting them until death. His eyes were a beautiful glowing blue, very different from any she grew up with but, somehow, so full of the fire of life they glowed with his vitality and his passionate determination to be a leader, a warrior. Having been surrounded by men of peace her whole life Laurel knew he was a different animal, more dangerous to associate with, than they and even more so to possess.

Laurel pushed her need and her thoughts towards him until her head started to ache. She longed for her ladies and the herbal remedies they could produce to cure such a pain. *She wanted to go home.* Laurel felt her homesickness start to creep into her mind and with all her determination she willed her thoughts of home away and refocused on the benefits of a mating to a warrior such as Julius, a leader and a man who made her feel like no other man ever could. She imagined going to him, falling on her knees, begging him to forgive her for not seeing he was her true bondmate immediately, and then begging him to bring her body to ecstasy again. Her face felt burning hot and her body was starting to ignite as well. Although she was breathing in

short little desperate breaths, she felt prepared to begin the lying and deception that would allow her to go home.

A small plaque beside the door had little impressions and lights, and occasionally they would beep. She felt certain it would either open the door or else alert Julius to her need for him to come to her cell. She began experimenting, pressing an indent here and there, until finally it issued a loud *BLEEP!* Staggering back at the surprising volume of the noise Laurel heard an unfamiliar male voice, his accent differed from Julius' from Julius but she could understand him with the help of the translator attached to her ear.

"Control responding, how may we assist, over?"

"This is Lady Laurel. I would like very much to speak with Julius." Then hesitantly she added, "Over."

There was a moment of silence then she heard Julius speak in the background, but could not understand his words clearly, what with the distance and the strange background commotion. The male voice spoke again, "request confirmed and complied, over."

Laurel assumed this meant Julius had gotten her message. "Uh . . . Thank you ever so much." She quickly added the strange word of ending, "over."

With a happy little bounce she flopped back onto her bunk and thought, *look at me! Mistress of strange and advance technology. Father would be horrified!*

After a moment the glow of success subsided and she nervously began the wait for the man who was rapidly becoming a part of her soul and mind. She knew he was strong and uneasily wondered what he would do to her if her plot were uncovered. *Did his people beat or harm their bondmates?* She knew that long ago in the history of her people, before they had discovered how to merge souls and complete a bond, there was no telempathy and men would beat or even kill their mates. She knew next to nothing about Julius's people or their ways. What if they punished or harmed their bondmates for disobedience?

Her worries found themselves interrupted by the odd hiss and scraping noise of the door opening. Julius stepped into her cell. She looked up at him, massive and imposing in the small space, and her breath caught. He was magnificent, beautiful. Her breath became trapped within her lungs. With a gulp of air she decided the challenge she was about to begin might just be a little more complicated than she originally assumed.

Timidly, she spoke to him, and forced herself to believe

what she was saying. "I am sorry Julius. I have been a fool. I have been fighting a battle lost the first night I dreamed of you. You are my bondmate and I can no longer sit here and pretend it is not so. I need you! I want to learn your ways and be a mate you can be proud of calling your own. I do not wish to embarrass you with my lack of knowledge when we arrive on our home world. Please show me what I need to know."

Hearing her words she winced at the honest conviction in the lie and prayed he would not detect her discomfort. She felt him reaching out to her mind, examining what he was finding. Then she felt his joy, and again she cringed that her lie was so readily accepted. She was being honest in that she did have a bond with him, yet hurting him felt unnatural and wrong. She was very conflicted. It was a relief to not have her lie uncovered, but also hard to feel his joy in the fact that she finally saw things the way he felt she should.

He extended his hand, and she took it calmly and stood at his urging. Laurel followed Julius out of her cell and into a world the likes of which she had never seen.

Around every corner lay a new wonder and more questions, and soon Laurel forgot her lies and genuinely

wanted to know more about his amazing world and its technologies. She was amazed to learn how similar their belief systems actually were, and it was easy to see why her ancestors left, how the difference between strength and peace caused the rift, and how the technologies that replaced nature could have caused the first of her people to seek freedom and refuge in a place of open air and life instead of the synthetic and restricting world Julius lived in. Laurel's respect for her ancestors grew even more in seeing the things they had given up. She realized the technology was certainly different today, but they had left behind the potential to have what Julius seemed to take for granted.

He appeared to enjoy watching her discover even the tiniest details of the wonders he daily partook of but never really thought about.

At every turn, Laurel was amazed at what she saw. She could sense Julius's humor, and his delight, in her astonishment. Overwhelmed by certain aspects of the craft, she felt apprehension about traveling in it. He must have felt her worry because he began showing her all the features in place for their safety and even bragged about how well the manufacture of his craft ranked in safety and innovation. Weakly, Laurel smiled, but still she wondered

how all the parts and gizmos kept them in flight.

When he offered her refreshments from a wall console she was intrigued at the supply of food and the variety available, especially when she learned the machine did it without having to stock the actual food in the craft. She was astonished and a bit skeptical when he explained the console replicated the food and that it had only to scan the actual food one time to be able to make it again and again with the same nutritional and molecular structure. Laurel even tried the food, after Julius assured her that she would not become ill or suffer any long-term consequence from eating it. Many people on her planet could benefit from such a machine, but even if it were to be taken there it would be unlikely to be used. Julius sensed her continued apprehension and she heard him in her mind reassuring her, *my people all eat this type of food exclusively and we are strong and healthy*. His words brought her eyes to his large, healthy muscles and her mind strayed into dangerous territory. When Laurel caught the expression in his eyes she knew that he knew what she had been thinking and she blushed hotly and looked away. She did not look away quickly enough to miss his brilliant grin.

After a tour of most of his ship, she tentatively asked



him, "I know you speak highly of your vessel but if some part were to malfunction, would we die?" Laurel prayed to her far distant Nature Mother he would not see though her motives in asking this question.

"Dear one, there is no need to fear. I employ excellent technicians, but should the unthinkable happen we would go right though this hatch to a short-stay shuttle automated to take us to the nearest planet with a survivable atmosphere. It is capable of several days of flight in deep space and we would have plenty of time to reach a populated planet on this trajectory. A person just needs to initiate the escape process and the shuttle then does all the work.

Relief radiated out of her in a gush. He hadn't suspected her real motivation in asking how to escape his ship. Her earlier concern must have convinced him of her fears and she could only assume he understood her relief to be about the safety precautions instead of what it was. Taking quick note of their location in respect to her quarters she followed him down a long corridor until they reached a dormitory. Showing her inside he said, "This is where my crew sleep and spend their free time."

He opened another door and said, "This is my personal

cabin. This is where we will both go into stasis, I had another stasis pod added for you so you will not be alone for your first deep space sleep. We will be home in six months if we use stasis, instead of the three years this trip would normally take. Tonight will be our last night of natural rest for a while, but I am sure you will tolerate stasis easily as my medical scans of you have indicated it strongly."

"When did you have me scanned?" Outrage colored her words with righteous fury.

"When we brought you on board unconscious I wanted to make sure you would recovered fully. I ordered a complete scan which was non-invasive and did not require any removal of clothing, unfortunately." He smirked at her and she wanted to scratch it off his beautiful face.

*Oh joy, I can't wait to be put in one of those coffins!*  
She thought darkly. He looked at her oddly and must have sensed her thoughts so she quickly reined in her anger and fear and made sure her thoughts of escape were not easily found. Her ability to hide her true horror over his idea of a nice trip might ruin her only chance of escape. Laurel knew she would have to be brave and go alone into space in one of his shuttles, or she would be taken so far and fast from

home her father and his military would never catch up to them.

One of Julius' crew approached him with an issue and Julius looked at the man darkly, obviously unhappy at the interruption. Seeing her opportunity Laurel sweetly urged him to speak with the man and so Julius turned to address the dilemma. Taking advantage of his preoccupation she focused her mind on not thinking about what she was doing. It was strange to be so focused on escape yet be unable to think about it. She began to slide her body along the wall and managed to make it out of the room and into the hatch where the escape shuttles sat. Just as she had figured out how to open the door and was sliding inside, her arm was caught in a vise and she was yanked away from her chance at freedom. *Drat!* Laurel figured her thoughts must have revealed her plans. *So close!*

Julius held her firmly and she could see his hurt over her attempted betrayal. She protested his rough treatment but it fell on deaf ears as he hauled her through the ship to his quarters. Laurel began to struggle violently once she realized his intent. He was going to put her into the unnatural coffin now rather than later! Laurel screamed, kicked, and cursed, but he was stronger, angrier, and

fiercely determined to keep her.

"You will see the right of what I do in time, love. Sleep now and forgive me later. I had wanted to see your beauty drift away in peace and hope but instead I must accept anger and challenge. When you awaken you will be light years from this miserable galaxy and your father's barbaric outpost. Then you will realize you must embrace your true nature and the life we will share."

Her small form was no match for Julius or the crewmembers who assisted in wrestling her into the horrifying machine. Strapped in, Laurel felt her heart trying to explode out of her chest in terror, and her breath came in desperate little gasps. She felt a hood of clear hard material slip over her head and tubing sprang forth into her nose and throat, choking her. Tears obscured her vision and she began to feel tired and ill as foul tasting gas pumped into her lungs. She heard Julius trying to calm her and she felt him in her mind, desperate for her forgiveness and understanding, but she was too terrified and overwhelmed by the unnaturalness of all that had happened to think logically.

Before the poison claimed her, Laurel swore she saw regret on his face.

## Chapter 6

The brightness hurt her eyes, and when she tried to open them she had to hold her hand over the fluttering lids to protect herself from the penetrating light.

She was no longer in the horrifying coffin.

Her throat and nose felt sore, proof that she had not imagined or dreamed up the strange tubing. She tried to stand but her feet would not hold her; whatever they did to her obviously had lasting effects. Laurel was angered. How could a man who claimed to love her have done such a terrible thing to her?

She was back in her little prison cell again. Memories of her coupling with him there filled her brain and she remembered the feeling of his hands on her body, of his hardness inside of her. Shivering, she felt torn. She still desired Julius, even after he committed such a terrible wrong against her she wanted to feel him inside of her

again. Longing for him was growing stronger and Laurel found herself pacing, sexual energy filling her with the need for motion.

Laurel knew it had something to do with the location, they must be on his world. She felt something almost barbaric inside her clawing to the surface of her mind. After six months of close proximity, conscious or not, the bond had grown stronger, much closer to what a committed bond would be. Laurel was frightened at just how much she longed for him. Julius must be desirous of her because she could feel his need and it caused her to grow hot and wet with longing for a coupling as well. She remembered how his hand on her nub had felt, and before she could stop herself she removed the uniform she was wearing. Laurel lay shivering, naked in the cold, unsure as to why she had removed her clothing.

Laurel wondered if she could duplicate the sensation of what he had done with her and if it would alleviate the growing desire. It was maddening. She felt so overcome with need for him that she gave in to the urge to try.

Laying back, she gently felt between her moist folds for the nub of pleasure and began to massage it. It was not as good as having him do it, but it was helping relieve her

agony. She could feel herself coming close to a release when she heard the door open. Gasping she sat up and tried to cover her naked body but it was too late.

Julius stood in the doorway, unmoving, and with an unreadable expression on his face. He entered and the door hissed shut behind him. Julius began to remove his clothing and without a word, or a thought, she went to him.

They kissed with a desperate need for each other as if they were each the air the other needed to breathe. Julius pulled her up so she could wrap her legs around his hips, and with only a minor adjustment she felt him slip inside of her warm, wet, and ready body. Gasping, she felt him hold onto her backside and use gravity to help him slam into her tight, hot sheath. She felt so close to the edge, and when he took one of her nipples roughly into his mouth she tumbled over into her desire. Laurel moaned Julius' name and nipped at his shoulder to keep from screaming. He grunted and moaned and then she felt him stiffen and they both gave gasping shouts as the pleasure consumed them until they collapsed, spent.

Julius set her down and looked at her, his breathing still ragged he spoke. "I left some things you need to wear by the door. You have thirty minutes ready yourself for

presentation."

He quickly slipped into his one-piece uniform and left. She stared after him in confusion for a moment. Laurel did not know what lovers said after the act, but she knew they should say something warmer than that! She gathered the parcel he left and cleansed herself with rough, irritated motions before putting on the long dress Julius had given her. It was definitely not something she would have chosen for herself. The garment was long and held up only by a beautiful and elaborate jeweled pin over her left shoulder, draping over her body and doing little to conceal her nakedness. The confounded thing dipped so low down the sides she worried one of her breasts might escape. Knowing it was a choice of either a too-revealing dress or the suffocating uniform, she chose to wear the new, revealing, garment. At least it was silk, a natural material her body was used to and accepted.

In what seemed like mere moments he returned. Laurel was speechless when she saw him, he looked unbelievably handsome. His style of dress was very odd; it was almost as if he were preparing for war. Julius had a metal plate over his chest that looked as if it were molded from a cast of his own body, and his legs were covered in some sort of



leather-type material. He wore more metal on his arms and legs; they looked like large cuffs and appeared more ceremonial than protective. Juliua extended his hand and, without thought as to why she should follow him after all of his cruel treatment, she took it.

Following him out into the ship she noticed the crew seemed different now, strangely deferential, each inclined their head and dipped down a bit as the couple passed them. Laurel was unsure as to what was happening but she followed him nonetheless, in awe of the surreal changes.

Julius stopped before the main doors of the ship and took her hands in his. It was the first tender gesture that he'd given her. Without any words, because she had no idea what to say, Laurel stared up into his handsome face.

"We leave this ship and as we do we will be entering into a partnership that is unlike anything you have previously experienced. I am the Warrior King and you will be the Mate of the Warrior King, a most esteemed and honored position among my people. I want you to know how important it is you show the proper respect to these people, *your* people. Things will be expected of you that you might not understand. What we do today will unite our souls and show the people you deserve your place of

respect."

Laurel did not know what to say. She wanted to escape, to go home. His people were not hers, yet there was no choice but to go along with him. She had no transportation home and the loyalty of the people belonged to Julius, not to her. Having no one to turn to was daunting but Laurel was still determined to return home, even if it meant never seeing Julius again.

Slowly, the doors opened and a bright, blinding light illuminated the ship. After so long in space the fresh air felt wonderful. Laurel could not restrain her delighted sigh of joy over the freshness of the gust. Julius looked down and a strange look passed over his face. Her bond with him was growing stronger and she could sense it was important to him that she feel at home on his world, but she did not know what he was feeling about anything else. Especially the cryptic comment he made earlier..

Julius could sense her desperate desire to escape him and his world. He knew her people had different expectations of their ruling class, but he needed her and refused to let her go. Before sundown they would be united body and soul, with the entire population watching. Sadly

he knew it was something he would not be able to adequately prepare her for and that if she hadn't been stolen from her people Laurel would have prepared for this one day her entire life. Julius knew what was about to be done would feel to her more like a punishment than the great honor it was, but he had no choice and no time. If the bond was not sealed she wouldn't give up her hope of escape and so never accept her rightful destiny by his side.

Laurel stepped out of the ship with Julius at her side. The couple looked out upon the crowd of people gathered and an earsplitting cheer erupted from the assembly. Laurel shrank back but she felt Julius put his arm around her, both to give her comfort and to prevent her from fleeing.

As they moved into the mass of people the crowd parted for them. Julius waved joyfully to his people and Laurel could feel his deep love for his homeland and its people. She understood his devotion for it was the same for her at home on Etropica. Would she ever feel the joy of walking among her people again?

They walked the long main thoroughfare with stately precision, and every step of the way Laurel looked for escape. It seemed every man, woman, and child was armed!

What kind of society allowed children to possess dangerous weapons? She realized trying to escape with such a heavily armed crowd would be most foolish if not fatal! With the growing sea of people, she saw no exit or hiding place, and so had no choice but to follow the man who claimed her as his own. Was she property? His way of speaking of his bondmate was so different from what she was used to, it frightened her. He expected something from her she was not sure she was willing to give, as she did not truly know what it was. He was shielding those thoughts from her and it made her nervously suspicious. What could be so bad he didn't want her to know it in advance?

When they arrived at the large complex at the end of the thoroughfare Julius led her inside. She followed him helplessly, trying to maintain her dignity. More people awaited them inside and she noticed they seemed to be dressed in finer clothing and carried themselves in a different way; this was definitely the upper class of his society. They appeared no more or less snobbish than the upper crust of Etropica. *At least there was one similarity between their cultures.* She was exhausted but there was no sign of relief from the anxious mob any time soon.

Finally Julius led her to a large room, and here only

about two dozen people awaited them. She was both relieved and terrified as the tall double doors closed with a heavy thud. These people were dressed differently again, and a sense of religious purpose filled the room. A few men dressed as warriors stood beside an altar elevated on a high platform at the end of the room. Large screens on the walls showed the crowd straining to be near the compound outside. Julius spoke as if he was addressing both the gathering in the room and the whole of his people.

"I have found what was lost, returned what was stolen. My dynasty will not die with me but will carry on in the child we create here today. I present this foreign woman as family, a daughter of our world who has no knowledge of our ways or heritage. Lady Laurel of those who have forsaken our ways has returned and will be known as the Warrior King's queen and bondmate. You are meant for me and you will serve me and the good of our people. Let this bond be forever and eternal as our esteemed priestesses unite us."

As he finished speaking the doors burst open, and to her shock Lord Evanston rushed forward holding one of the inferior weapons of her people. The warriors in the room charged towards him and Laurel gave a cry of dismay.

Julius quickly spoke. "Do not kill him. Do not taint this hallowed day and place. I will deal with him after."

Laurel felt dread at his statement, it seemed very foreboding.

Evanston struggled uselessly against the men who held him, as they were much larger than he. His weapon had already proven useless against the armor they wore and he was quickly and helplessly disarmed. Raw emotion filled his face and she knew he loved her as a woman while she only felt the love of a friend for him, and after truly being with Julius she was amazed she had ever considered settling for such a pale shadow of love. One of the warriors put some sort of bonds on Evanston preventing him from moving or speaking. They reminded her of the bonds Julius had used during their first mating and the memory brought a flush of heat to her cheeks.

Feeling the presence of men standing next to her she glanced up to see the remaining warriors beside her. One ancient-looking priestess stood in front of the long altar and began to chant loudly in such a strange tongue her translating device did not work. Laurel looked up at Julius helplessly and he gave her a sad, strained smile. That did not reassure her! Noise filled the room as all the priestesses

began to chant, but it was not in unison and cacophony surrounded her.

Laurel was both frightened and fascinated by the sound, something within her responded to the chant. It may have been genetic memory or just the primal nature of the sound but Laurel felt herself becoming aroused and she was both surprised and embarrassed by the realization. Standing on either side of her the men took her by the arms and led her to the altar. She felt it then, the intention of the ceremony. She knew she would have to prove she belonged to Julius for all of the assembled people to see.

She knew in that moment she loved him with all of her heart, but could she do what was required of her? Laurel might have been raised in a sexually promiscuous world but it was certainly not this licentious! Laurel felt her breath coming out in little pants that were a combination of her fear and her desire. She felt herself growing wet and her face flamed at the knowledge of how desperately wanted him, no matter the circumstances. She needed him inside her and she could not hold back her desperate little moan.

Julius stepped up next to her and, without warning, unpinned the shoulder fastening holding up her dress. It fluttered to the floor in a flood of color leaving her pale

flesh naked and exposed for all to see, every mole and birthmark now the visual property of the strangers in the room. Shocking herself, she realized she had never been so aroused in her entire life and that she desperately wanted Julius at that moment. With a cry of dismay she tried to cover her body with her arms but was instead quickly hoisted up onto the altar by the warriors and her arms pinned down by the larger of the two men. The other man pulled some sort of straps from a hidden place under the altar and used them to secure her legs open, exposing her most intimate places and pinning her legs against the sides of the altar. Struggling frantically she tried to cry out but her voice had left her.

Although Laurel did not feel violated, this was definitely not rape as in her heart she was willing, her mind reminded her she was naked in front of many strange eyes. No matter how wrong her mind told her it was, her body was feeling the delicious arousal of the moment and Laurel felt herself growing hotter and wetter as each second passed. She could feel Julius's soul calling to hers and realized that what was happening was his will and the will of his people and gods. Laurel was horrified by the barbarism of the act even as she felt his desire for her fuel



her own need for him.

Turing to the side she saw Evanston watching the spectacle in outraged horror. Turning from the sight of him she wept for the pain he was experiencing. Her heart went out to Evanston, but it belonged to Julius.

Julius' need for her and the wish for her to be as joyful as he was over the bonding swept through her as she felt him radiate his need for her cooperation and understanding. In that moment she realized that for the bond truly to be completed she had to accept his strange ways just as she accepted the man into her heart and soul.

Crying out his name, the moment of her surrender was obvious to all and she ceased her struggles. He kissed Laurel then with all the feeling and love he held for her and she knew she was his for all time, he was a part of her soul and no force on the planet would ever be able to change those facts.

He leaned forward, took one of her nipples tenderly into his mouth, and suckled it hard. Laurel writhed from the pleasure. She felt her pussy tingling with anticipation and she wanted him inside of her! Julius whispered her name as he stepped closer between her legs and freed his straining cock. He entered her swiftly and she felt the moment they

both fully accepted the bond created before they were born. Laurel felt as if she going through sensory overload as a sixth sense joined her own five and she felt an echo of his needs and pleasures. It was overwhelming but also invigorating at the same time.

Laurel's attention was jolted to the physical as she felt his thumb caress her clitoris in hard, fast circles and her orgasm began to build. When he began to pump his cock harder and deeper inside of her body she knew she would come and she did not care who saw. She just knew that she had never felt so wanton and so delightfully aroused before. Crying out his name, Laurel could feel him thrusting within her even as she felt what he did as he moved within her. It was beyond description, the massive jolt of pleasure incited her climax for all to see, and at that moment she had no cares over where or how the magic of the moment happened.

On the monitors she finally noticed the crowd outside had erupted in jubilation. Vaguely she realized that just as she could see them they too could see what was happening to her. Julius came inside of her and she knew what he had said about creating life was true, the union had produced a child, and she marveled at the knowledge. Laurel had no

idea how it was possible to know so soon, but somehow the magic of the chanting and the bond gave her an extrasensory perception she had never dreamed possible.

Finding herself quickly freed, Julius then handed her a robe and helped her down from the altar. He looked deeply into her eyes and she felt his devotion and joy wash over her in warm, loving waves. Laurel loved him more deeply than she had ever thought possible, she knew soul deep he truly had been meant for her, just as she had been meant for him, and she was humbled by her good fortune. He did not speak but she heard him in her mind distinctly.

*Thank you my darling, you made me proud today. Women who have held your title in past generations trained for years for the moment I thrust upon you with no warning, and you handled yourself with more grace and dignity than many of your predecessors. I am so proud to be your bondmate. You are everything I could have ever dreamed of for my mate. You have given me two gifts this day.*

*Thank you for my heir Laurel, I could not wish for a better woman to be my partner and the mother of my heir! Never again will you have to endure a public mating, do not fear this is a regular part of your duties. I will never*

*bind you again during a mating unless you request I do so. I am now your humble servant and I will live each day for your pleasure! I am going to enjoy teaching you all of the many ways that my people give and receive pleasure and I am sure that you will be an excellent student!*

His smile was now more natural, relief evident in his thoughts and posture. Her senses were attuning to his so well that his relief seemed to fill her and become her own.

Evanston stood, still captive, looking angry and bitter. Remorse filled her for his pain and Julius must have felt her need to make things right with her friend because he motioned for the priestess to join them as he spoke.

"This man has lost what is valuable to him and as it has been returned to us we must give him something of equal value to replace it. Priestess, can you use the ancient magic to give him a replica of Laurel to take home?"

Julius felt Laurel's worry for her people. He saw through her thoughts that with no heir her kingdom would most certainly be thrown into turmoil upon her father's death. Even if the king took a new bondmate and a child resulted, the offspring would surely be too young to rule when her father died and there would be a long, bloody

conflict over the kingdom anyway. Her marriage to Evanston would have insured the bloodline, no matter how much of a sham it was, and would have continued the happy prosperity of the people.

The Priestess bowed deeply to Julius and Laurel. "Warrior King, it is my duty to serve you but my pleasure to assist you in this request. I see the wisdom in what you ask and will see it done."

Evanston looked as confused as Laurel felt, and realizing their confusion Julius explained his request. "We have an ancient rite, a way to give one of our maidens your face and only Lord Evanston will see her true face when he looks upon her. She will see it in the mirror but others will see and hear only you, Laurel. He will not lose face and your father's secret will be protected. My priestess can call upon all the young maids of our land to find a true bondmate for your friend. It will be as it should and balance will thus be restored."

Laurel gripped Evanston's arm, her eyes pleading for understanding. "Julius is my true bondmate, I cannot deny him. Please understand. How did you follow us so quickly and how are you able to comprehend this language?"

"I took one of our slower vessels to a trading colony on

the nearest moon and bought passage on a cargo ship. For the price I paid they willingly followed Julius's vessel as closely as they could without alerting his crew, and while I was there the captain gave me the device so I could understand the many languages his crew spoke. I had to go into an unnatural sleep and I feared they would kill me, but the captain was trustworthy and has earned the bonus I promised him when I return home. I do not like this idea of a replica of you, the people know and respect *you*, and their magic seems unnatural and wrong. Will it hold to the girl always or will it wear away over time?"

Answering him, the priestess seemed slightly offended that he doubted her abilities. "What I will do will hold even in death. In time you will no longer doubt my spiritual power."

Evanston nodded and Julius looked at him gravely. "If I release you from your shackles do you promise to accept that Laurel is mine and that the bond is fully established between us?"

Evanston still looked angry, but when he spoke Laurel could hear the resignation in his voice. "I saw her accept you with my own eyes. Your people are barbaric, and if she is willing to be bound to you and your ways for all time

there is nothing I can do to change it. I love Laurel, but I am also her friend and do not wish to have her hurting in any way. As you are now a part of her this prevents me from harming you. I will stay and see if your priestess can truly do as she claims. Laurel, your father lied to the people but they are happy and the kingdom is richer for what he has done. I hope this will be our last lie. If the truth was to become public knowledge no one would benefit and many would suffer. I believe in what your father has done for his people Lauren and I will rule though this replica of you to carry on his legacy. Do not fear for the people as they will be in loving hands. Our two kingdoms will unite and our future will be good."

Laurel wept joyously and hugged her friend. She chose to ignore the waves of jealousy she felt radiate from Julius and in a watery voice she asked, "Lord Evanston, will you deliver a letter to my father?"

"Yes Laurel I will, if you promise me something. If you need me or your father, or if you want escape from this place, you will come home and damn the consequences of it."

"I give you my word. I do not think it will ever come to pass while Julius breathes, but if I am in need I will not

forget my way back home." Laurel felt how unhappy her use of the term 'home' had made Julius so she took his hand and squeezed it to reassure him.

The priestess, Evanston, Laurel, and Julius left the assembly hall together. As Laurel and her bondmate walked among the people she felt odd knowing what they had witnessed, but the obvious jubilation of the crowd let her know she had indeed made the right decision when she followed her instinct to give in to Julius and her destiny.

After entering a waiting transport they departed the ceremonial grounds for the estate. Evanston and Laurel rode awkwardly, unnerved by the speed with which the small vessel traveled and Julius seemed rather amused by their reactions. After a few minutes they passed the city wall, and after only half an hour they arrived at a lavish estate outside the limits of the crowded capital. Laurel was extremely pleased with the natural beauty of the gardens, and the size of the wooded lands surrounding the huge estate.

Taking her hand in his Julius spoke softly into her ear. "I am glad you find your new home inviting. Here we will raise the next generation of leaders and I will spend my days making up for what you have suffered." He kissed the



side of her neck softly, lovingly.

They all left the vessel and entered the grand dwelling. Servants immediately surrounded them offering their congratulations and assistance. Julius ordered refreshments be laid out for them in the main hall and then led the group there to discuss what needed to be done to set Laurel's kingdom to rights.

After only a few minutes the priestess went into a trance and soon had the name and location of the woman who would serve as the doppelganger. Evanston in particular did not look convinced, and Laurel had private reservations also. Calling for his guard Julius spoke quietly to one of the men. They left quickly, without reply. With her new way of knowing his thoughts Laurel heard Julius order the guard to make haste in retrieving the woman and to bring her to them within the hour.

They ate, drank, and rested after the physically and emotionally exhausting events just past, and Julius told Laurel of the wonders of his world, now her world too.

"Laurel you now hold a place of honor and respect. As my queen and part of my soul you are to assist and advise me in all my decisions as Warrior King. You will be in a role much the same as the one you prepared for on

Etropica. We have issues to deal with, as all kingdoms do, and in time you will know them all. Today I do not want to burden you with anything more, it is for the celebration of our bond. Before the day is done you will meet the woman who is to return and take your place. Can you accept this solution?"

"Yes. I cannot leave you, but I cannot abandon my people to suffer without an heir. My father is a good king and I do not wish to see his dreams for our kingdom shattered. If I do not return many will suffer, but if I were to leave you I feel I would die of the pain of it. We are one now and I never want to leave you, no matter how important the reason. I love you Julius and I am so glad you finally came for me, I missed you before I even knew you."

Taking her hand, the hand of the woman he had dreamed of having in his home for so long, he found it hard to believe that she was finally there and was afraid she would disappear like a dream in the morning. Before they could speak further on the matter the guard returned with a frightened-looking girl. She was younger than Laurel had supposed she would be and dressed in a style that clearly showed her to be of the lower classes. Laurel was apprehensive and wondered how the meek girl would ever

be able to emulate her.

Julius spoke to the girl. "Are you bonded?"

She bowed low and would not look at the king when she spoke. " No, Honored Warrior, I am not."

Standing, the priestess went to the girl and tipped her face up to look directly into the girl's wide and frightened eyes. "I have seen that you are the bonded mate of this man from a place far away into the stars. His world is not like ours, it is a colony which has forsaken our ways. If you agree to go with this man we will have to give you the face of another and the fate of a princess. Do you have the courage required?"

"I have no bondmate . . . I do not understand what you want of me?" The girl's voice sounded timid and confused.

Evanston stood and walked over to where the girl stood. Laurel could sense her friend was feeling a strong connection to the girl. She smiled, glad he would soon learn for himself how she had been able to accept the barbarian for her mate, as he too would soon feel the pull of his soul to another.

Looking up at him with recognition, startled, the girl said nothing but her eyes seemed alive with wonder.

"I am Lord Evanston." He spoke quietly to the girl and

his eyes never left hers.

"I am called Milihanna. I am the daughter of a laundress and a woodcarver. I am not a princess."

"I am the son of a lord, and if you are willing to come with me to my world you will be taking the place of a princess. Can you do this? Many people's happiness will depend on you."

"I have nothing here, my parents and brothers are long dead. I do not know if I can be your princess, but I can feel the truth of what you are, my other half, my bondmate. I would not want others to suffer because I was afraid. I will do what you ask if it means I can stay by your side always." There was no question Milihanna meant what she said, sincerity could be heard in every sentence.

Laurel felt touched by the girl's words to her friend and was delighted he too would have true happiness in his life. Maybe the girl would suit after all, especially since the truth was that she herself had no true claim to her position on Etropica.

After a moment the priestess led the girl out of the room. Evanston looked rather forlorn so Julius gave the foreigners a tour of his home and estate to distract the man and introduce his mate to her new life. The strange animals

he kept for riding delighted Laurel. They were tall, strong creature and were mostly hairless. They walked on their two rear legs and their short arms appeared to be of little use. Although they had a wrinkled hide and three large eyes in a flat face they somehow seemed very noble and proud. Julius showed her and Evanston how to ride the creatures but they both declined the opportunity. Laurel felt the creatures looked far too regal to ride, and Evanston thought they looked quite fearsome. Julius laughed, and made several passes around the pair on the creature before he dismounted and scratched his mount on its wide forehead. It made a loud squealing noise of appreciation and ran off to join the others of its kind at the far end of the meadow.

When they returned to the house it was dark and the priestess stood waiting. "It is done. The lady is now Laurel to all eyes but her own, and Lord Evanston. I will not bind you now as I would advise you to do this according to the primitive customs of your people, but it will be a truebond. A ship is waiting to take you both home to Etropica. It will travel the slow and primitive way of your own ships to give you three years to teach the girl how to be Laurel. What I have done cannot be undone, even in death."

A small vessel then arrived and the priestess left to

return to the temple in the city. Laurel's breath caught as the girl walked out into the darkening twilight with her own face. She also appeared to be the same height, even though Laurel knew Milihanna to be at least an inch shorter, and the girl's hair was now the same shade as her own even though Laurel knew it had been midnight black just hours ago. She walked around her twin in amazement, and then she hugged the girl and spoke quietly.

"I give you my blessing if you always remember to be kind the man that is my father and to put the good of my people, your people now, ahead of your own wishes."

"Thank you Lady. The priestess said we must leave quickly before anyone sees me to make sure this works. She said a transport will arrive shortly."

Milihanna turned to Evanston and spoke quietly. "I feel your worry and your conflict. I will do my best. I had worried that I would never find my truemate and now I have. I am poor, and staying here I have little. I have always felt I had a special calling, a purpose outside the life I knew here, and now I understand why. I will honor you and I am very glad to be going with you, no matter how different our worlds. Teach me what I need to know and I will do my utmost to be a good mate, and a good ruler."

Laurel could see how torn her friend was, and how unsure he was about leaving with the girl, but she could also see he felt drawn to the girl. It was strange to watch the girl who looked like her speak, and hear her own voice from the other woman.

Julius felt his mate's uneasiness and he called to his guard to hurry the ship yet keep its arrival incognito. Only moments later the craft arrived and Laurel tearfully said goodbye to her friend and the girl who would live the life she once thought to have. Laurel tucked the letter she had quickly written to her father into Evanston's hand and he nodded, a lifetime of understanding passed between them and she knew that her father would get her farewell.

Watching them leave, knowing it was unlikely she would ever see them or her homeland again, Laurel felt an odd sense of relief and sorrow. She realized the faux-Laurel was better than no Laurel at all, and she knew Evanston would be happier with his truemate than he would have ever been with her, but she also knew her father would never fully accept her replacement. The letter had been short, but as her father was a man of few words she knew it was the right way to say goodbye.

Hoping someday her father could forgive her for

staying behind, she watched the craft depart with Julius beside her. He felt her pain and put his arm around her shoulders to comfort her conflicted heart. Smiling up sadly at her bondmate, she saw the depth of his love and knew that she had made the right decision. Her life and destiny were forever united to his.

Laurel looked into her mate's eyes and knew she had finally found home.



## **Author Bio**

Ashlynn Monroe is a busy wife and mom. She enjoys writing about anything and everything paranormal or fantasy related while maintaining a career as a full time customer service professional. When she is not lovingly raising her young family, she is dreaming up her next tale of romance. She'd love to hear from you at [ashlynn.monroe@live.com](mailto:ashlynn.monroe@live.com). Visit her website at [ashlynnmonroe.webs.com/](http://ashlynnmonroe.webs.com/).