

# MYSTIC KEEPERS



Aubrey Ross

Changeling Press

Mystic Keepers (Collection)  
*by Aubrey Ross*

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## Mystic Keepers

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## **Mystic Keepers**

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With powerful forces conspiring to destroy them, a young couple flees the Mystic Keeper realm and seeks refuge on Earth. Little do they know their sacrifice will set in motion a drama spanning generations.

Only by bonding with their "equal and opposite" can Mystic Keepers unlock the full potential of their elemental power. Through erotic rituals and sensual abandon Frost Keepers join with Flame, Light Keepers blend with Shadow, and Time itself is redefined. Passion burns bright and mysteries unravel as these daring Keepers battle insidious evil to win a future with the ones they love.

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## **Mystic Christmas**

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## Prologue

### Dimension 290-2

Kayrin's nipples gathered into jewel-hard knots as Larot lavished them with attention. She arched her back, raking her fingers through his red-streaked hair. His *iède*-laced breath sent fiery darts from her breast to her clit, making her throb. This was Flame Keeper magic. Not that she needed the additional stimulation to respond to him. Her being cried out for his touch, longed for the completeness she only felt while his body surged inside hers.

"Oh, my love, I never tire of tasting you." He whispered the words against one breast, his hand firmly squeezed the other.

Long and lean, his body arched over hers, cradled between her thighs. Should she tell him now or wait until they finished? He descended, trailing warm, wet kisses along her torso. Definitely after! He would be afraid of harming her once he knew, and she craved his uninhibited passion.

Each touch, each caress fueled the love burning in her heart, made her ache for the future others would deny them. How could fate be so cruel? Why were people so regimented? It shouldn't matter that Larot was socially insignificant. She loved him desperately.

He eased her legs up and back, gently parting her folds. The care, the reverence, with which he touched her never failed to stir her emotions. Knowing the aggressive desire driving him made his restraint even sweeter. His tongue

circled her clit, dragging a moan from her throat. Heat expanded through her pussy making her core pulse with desire.

Fear pushed through her passion. How would he react to her news? Would it drive him away? What would they do?

"Fill me, my love. I need you inside me." He ignored her plaintive words and continued to worship her with his mouth. "Please!"

She had never felt the forces pulling them apart so keenly. The entire dimension had aligned to oppose their union. But she wanted Larot!

He flipped her onto her stomach and pulled up on her hips. She gasped, excited by his urgency. Dragging her arms to the small of her back, he crossed them and thrust into her heat with one forceful drive. Her cunt stretched, welcoming his thick cock. Her body responded with rhythmic pulsations, thrilled by his possessiveness. She needed this wildness, needed to know the desperation fueling his desire. His shaft filled the emptiness threatening to consume her. The pillows muffled her rapturous cries.

Pushing deep, he released her arms and cupped her breasts, working her nipples simultaneously. She rested on her forearms, pushing her hips back against him, unwilling to lose the blissful fullness of his cock.

"I love you," he whispered above her ear as one of his hands insinuated itself between her thighs. "Make room for me, *rijnna mi*. I want to feel your pleasure before I find my own."

She scooted her knees apart, opening herself, giving him room to play. Heat seared her delicate folds. Flame *iede*! He'd coated his fingers with the mystic substance, accelerating her arousal to the point of pain.

"Move!" she cried out. "I can't bear it."

"Yes, you can." He circled her clit with his fingertips.

"Accept the heat, absorb it, embrace it."

An unexpected rush of cold counteracted the effects of his Flame *iede*. He gasped and shuddered against her back. "Did you do that on purpose?"

"No. You felt it too?"

"Gods, yes! Your pussy is ice-cold."

"I'm sorry."

He laughed. "Don't be. It feels incredible."

Intensifying the power of his Flame *iede*, he rubbed her clit more vigorously. He pulled nearly out, then slammed back in. She braced against the bed, welcoming the driving penetration of his body. Arching and clenching her inner muscles, she surrendered completely to the sensory storm pounding them.

It had never been this intense before. Never quite so—savage!

Her back bowed and she buried her face against the bed, muffling her scream as an orgasm tore through her body. He tried valiantly to choke back his passionate cry, but it echoed off the ceiling high above.

Panting harshly, he rolled them to their sides, still buried within her body. "Something is different, my love. What's going on?"

Her breath hitched in her throat. Was it possible? Could he sense the depth of their bonding? Reluctantly separating their bodies, she turned to face him, staring deeply into his eyes. "We're going to have a child."

He stilled, his eyes wide and luminous. "Are you sure?"

"Yes."

She hadn't known what to expect, but his laughter startled her. Wrapping his arms around her, he rolled, bringing her on top of him. "That's wonderful! Are you not pleased?"

"Of course I'm pleased, but..." She straddled his hips, and tried to match his enthusiasm. "What will we do? Where will we go?"

He sat as well, wrapping her legs around his waist. "Why do we need to go anywhere? Don't you see? Keepers can only conceive when they're truly bonded. Your parents will have no choice but to accept our union now."

"There is the slimmest possibility *I* could have been persuaded to accept you, Larot, but the Flame Master had other plans for our daughter." Sierra, Matriarch Flame, stood just inside the chamber door.

Larot gasped and tried to reach the covers at the foot of the bed.

Having sensed her mother's presence just before she spoke, Kayrin wasn't surprised. Her long hair covered her nudity for the most part, so she pressed herself against Larot's chest, and met her mother's angry gaze. "What Father would or would not have accepted is no longer important. You rule the Order of Flame and I am with child."

"Get dressed! We must make plans." Sierra left the bedchamber as silently as she had entered.

"By the gods, how long was she standing there?" He reluctantly disentangled their bodies, passion forgotten in the face of calamity.

"It doesn't matter. The entire dimension will know of our love soon enough."

His smile returned. "I suppose we can't hide it any longer, can we?"

Matriarch Flame awaited them in her lavishly appointed private chamber. Her long red-streaked brown hair wound about her head in a braided coronet. She stared at her daughter with eyes the same color as the red streaks in her hair. Her rich clothing, her regal bearing, everything about her proclaimed her authority.

"It is no longer safe for Larot in this dimension," she began without preamble. "Your child is at risk too."

"What? Who would dare harm my bonded mate or our baby?" Kayrin objected.

Shaking her head, Sierra expelled a ragged sigh. "You are so naïve. How many times did I tell you that your abilities would make you the most sought after mate in the dimension?"

"I have no unusual abilities! This neutral *iede* you claim I have is useless. I can barely manipulate a Flame sphere."

"You are still very young. Many Keeper abilities remain latent until—"

"It's irrelevant," Kayrin cut in sharply. "I am bonded to Larot, and we are going to have a child."

"Which escalates the danger like never before. If the child is born a Flame Keeper, the risk decreases. But if the child shares your neutral *iede* ... They will stop at nothing to possess you both." She paced the chamber, a rare show of agitation. Matriarch Flame was known throughout the dimension for her unshakable composure.

"What should we do?" Kayrin asked her mother, but she looked at Larot.

"I cannot protect him here. Once it is learned that Larot has stolen what belongs to the Time Master—"

"I belong to no one! I never agreed to bond with Alrick."

Ignoring her daughter's outburst, Sierra went on. "It will come to war if you remain. He must leave this dimension and never return."

"Then I will go with him."

"No!" Larot laid his hand on Kayrin's upper arm, but she twisted away, too upset to consider his objections.

"Do you understand what this sacrifice will mean?"

Kayrin said nothing. How could she not understand? She had been groomed from birth in preparation for her responsibilities as Flame Mistress. Her heart had simply led her in a different direction.

"You are heir to the Order of Flame. Your 'useless' neutral *iede* will one day allow you to master all the Keeper abilities. Not just Flame Keeper skills, *all of them*. Are you listening?"

She heard every word her mother said, but none of it had seemed real until the past few days. Unexpectedly flashes of power had begun manifesting within her. Her body's response to Larot was a good example. She had spontaneously

produced Frost *iede*, something impossible for any ordinary Flame Keeper.

"All I know is I love Larot. If he must leave this dimension, then I will follow. And nothing and no one will ever harm this child!"

Larot shook with anger and fear. His expression contorted with emotion. "I will not have you make such a sacrifice for me."

"Would you have your bonded mate united with another? Would you watch the Time Master raise your child?"

He just stared at her, his gaze tormented.

"It's no sacrifice, my love, as long as we're together."

Sierra's handmaiden burst into the room unannounced, her terrified expression halting the Matriarch's reprimand. "He's here, my lady! You must hide Kayrin!"

"Who is here? Speak plainly."

"The Time Master is demanding to see Mistress Kayrin. He claims a vision has revealed her dishonor, and he will not rest until he determines the truth of the vision."

"Stall him any way you can. I will be down directly." Matriarch Flame quickly formed a comm crystal in the cup of her hands and handed it to her daughter. "Take this to Sacha. She understands the need for discretion. I will deal with Alrick."

"Who is Sacha?" Larot asked, obviously embarrassed by his ignorance.

"Most call her Your Eminence," Matriarch Flame drawled sarcastically. "I happen to call her sister."

"The High Priestess of the Sacred Order of the Veil is Kayrin's aunt?" He sounded utterly in awe.

"And she's giving it all up for you." Sierra shook her head. "You'd better make her happy."

Before she did something practical and responsible, Sierra rushed from the room. She had known for some time that her daughter's affections were straying in an undesirable direction. With a child involved, the die was cast. There would be no going back.

Sierra's own bonding had been negotiated by the elders in an attempt to strengthen the power of Flame *iede*. She had resented every solar cycle she spent under the Flame Master's domination.

Her daughter would not endure such a fate, even if Kayrin must leave the dimension to avoid it!

Indignation emanated off the Time Master in waves. Sierra nearly laughed. Tall, broad-shouldered, with short, sable brown hair and piercing green eyes, he demanded attention with his handsome features and militant bearing.

"Alrick." The informality of her greeting was an intentional slur.

He narrowed his eyes and compressed his lips for a moment before he spoke. "I've come for my mate."

"We've had this conversation before, Master Time. I knew nothing of the contract negotiated between you and my bonded mate."

"That doesn't invalidate the contract."

She cleared her throat and squared her shoulders, meeting his gaze directly. "With all due respect, I find it hard to



believe that Osten would have finalized such a contract with *anyone* without so much as mentioning it to me. This is not personal, you understand. If he had made me aware of the negotiations before his death, things would be much simpler now. But as it is, I must validate the contract. If it proves to be authentic, I will approach my daughter—"

"Your daughter has nothing to do with this. I have a contract naming her as my bonded mate. I am entitled to court her."

Sierra raised her chin, her dislike of the Time Master growing with each word he uttered. "How can the subject of your courtship have nothing to do with the situation? Your attitude troubles me greatly."

"I saw her, Sierra!" He dispensed with all formality with the use of her given name. "I saw her in the throes of passion, writhing beneath her lover."

"You witnessed this or you had a vision?"

"For a Time Keeper it is the same." He clasped his hands behind his back and glared at her. "I know what I saw."

She took a deep breath and studied his face closely. Betrayal and determination burned in his bright green gaze, but it was the underlying ruthlessness that gave her pause. "It's over, Alrick. Let it go."

His arrogant façade crumbled at her words. Comprehension dawned with ferocious intensity. "What have you done? Where did you send her?"

He reached for her, but she shielded her body with *Flame iede*, and he snatched his hands away.

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"This will *never* be over. If I must search dimension by dimension until I find her, I will have what's mine!"

Sierra trembled as Alrick stormed from the room. Her life just changed forever. The Time Master meant every word.

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## Chapter One

### Dimension 939-3 (Earth)

Olivia Dover sat in her favorite chair listening to the rain pelt the windowpanes. It was supposed to snow on Christmas Eve, not rain. A sad little smile curved her lips. It didn't matter that she lived in New Orleans. She longed for a white Christmas.

She longed for a lot of things, none of which changed the reality of her existence.

Olivia was alone.

A fluffy white cat jumped into her lap and she laughed. "Okay, maybe not alone. I still have you, Baby."

The cat looked at her with adoring, bright blue eyes. She stroked Baby's broad head and the cat purred enthusiastically.

Silver garlands reflected the multicolored lights illuminating the Christmas tree, but Olivia felt anything but festive. The few packages she had bought for the holidays had been packed up and shipped to her goddaughter in Atlanta weeks ago. A miniature village, once her pride and joy, now occupied the space beneath the tree where presents used to go.

Baby meowed, the feline equivalent of a pep talk, and Olivia chuckled. "You're right, pet. Moping doesn't change a thing."

She looked more closely at the miniature village. She had constructed and decorated each little building by hand. The

brick chimney from one of the houses had separated and leaned against the general store. Several of the buildings needed fresh paint and the roof of one bowed comically, swollen by humidity.

This would never do.

Grabbing her raincoat and umbrella from the hall closet, she headed out the back door. Charley's workshop was in the back corner of their spacious yard. She'd avoided the workshop as often as possible in the ten months since she lost her husband, but occasionally she had no choice but to enter his domain.

She opened the umbrella and hurried across the yard. Rain fell in sheets, soaking her pant legs. She shivered violently despite her coat. Mentally listing the things she would need, she pushed open the door to the workshop and froze.

A young woman, soaked to the skin and trembling, knelt beside a man. Olivia noticed the bright red streaks in her hair and frowned. Must be one of those Punk Rockers. The young woman's attention was focused entirely on the man.

The workshop was undisturbed, everything in its place. They didn't appear to be up to mischief. Maybe they'd just been surprised by the storm. An alley ran directly behind the workshop. Still, this was trespassing.

Olivia was about to tell her unwanted visitors to move on when the young woman extended her arms to either side of her body, hands up. A shimmering red substance collected in her palms. Olivia blinked, and blinked some more. It looked like a mixture of glitter and chalk, and it materialized out of nowhere, or flowed directly from the woman's hands.

*Impossible.*

The woman brought her cupped palms closer together and the shimmering powder formed itself into identical balls. Too stunned to move or make a sound, Olivia watched the balls expand and glow, illuminating the workshop in red.

Torn between fascination and fear, Olivia inched toward the door, but couldn't drag her gaze away from the young couple. Was the man ill? Good heavens, was he dead? He wasn't moving...

*She wasn't alone!*

Kayrin sensed a person behind her. Craning her neck without deactivating the Flame orbs, she found an elderly woman standing near the door. *Prazot!* She had hoped to go undetected.

"I not will am to harm you." She stumbled over the unfamiliar words hoping she got enough of them right to communicate her meaning.

The old woman crossed her arms and stayed put, staring intently. Kayrin turned back to Larot. Feeding energy into the orbs, she expanded them until his entire body was inundated with red light.

"What's wrong with him? H-how are you doing that?"

The voice came from much closer, but Kayrin didn't divert her attention from her task. "Veil fever."

"I've never heard of such a thing. Should I call an ambulance?"

The image of a vehicle containing medical supplies appeared within her mind. The language infusion was

working, just not as quickly as she had hoped. But then she hadn't expected to interact with the natives quite this soon.

"No ambience. I will heal."

Using the orbs, she monitored Larot's vital signs and his energy levels. There wasn't a whole lot she could do for him. Veil fever was rare. Once a Keeper knew they were susceptible to it there was a preventive inoculation available, but neither she nor Larot had ever come through the Veil before.

"Where are you from, dear? I've never heard an accent quite like yours."

If only she knew. "Far away." Kayrin let the orbs blink out and turned her attention on her reluctant hostess. "Your dwelling, is it warmer than here?"

"Yes, but I'm not sure I'm comfortable having strangers in my house. How about if I fetch some blankets and..." Her dark eyes lingered on Larot for a moment. "How would we get him inside? Isn't he unconscious?"

"You have nothing to fear from us."

The old woman's eyes narrowed. "Your English is getting better. Who are you? How did you come to be in Charley's—this workshop?"

"The tale will be long in the telling. Can we get my mate inside?"

"Your *mate*? You really aren't from around here are you?"

Kayrin didn't bother with a reply. Reluctantly jolting Larot with an energy charge, she held her breath until he opened his eyes.

"Where are we?"

Kayrin glanced at the old woman. He had spoken in their native tongue, too disoriented to access his language infusion. "Safe," she responded in the same language. "I need to get you into this woman's house. Can you rise?"

"I'll try."

Struggling beneath his weight, Kayrin half dragged, half carried Larot into the cozy house. The old woman eyed them both carefully as if she were searching for weapons. She probably was. Natives of this dimension were notoriously suspicious.

They settled Larot in a bed on the main level of the house and the old woman went to make 'tea.' Kayrin presumed it was something edible and hopefully not poisonous to people from Dimension 290-2. She sat on the bed beside Larot and pressed the backs of her fingers against his flushed cheek. His fever still raged.

The woman returned a short time later carrying a serving tray. "My name is Olivia. What shall I call you?"

"Kayrin."

"Karen?"

"Is that a common name in this—place?"

"Fairly common."

"Yes. My name is Kar-ran." She attempted to reproduce the other woman's pronunciation.

Olivia poured a steaming beverage from a chubby little pot into a container with a small ring attached to the side. Kayrin waited to see how Olivia picked up the beverage container before she followed suit.

"How long have you and your mate been in New Orleans?"

"Not long. The massive star has appeared three times."

The old woman's brow furrowed at the phrase. "Oh, you mean the *sun*. You've been here three days? Where are you staying?"

Kayrin sniffed the beverage before taking a sip. The taste was faintly bitter, but she welcomed the warmth. "Staying? Yes, we are—*compelled* to stay."

"Compelled by whom?"

Pretending not to understand the question, Kayrin took another sip of her tea.

"Are you sure we shouldn't get him to a doctor? He doesn't look good."

"He will recover in time. There is no treatment for his—illness. His body must adjust to the ... differences in this location." The words flowed more naturally now. She didn't have to consciously process each phrase.

"Are you hungry? I can make you a sandwich."

Kayrin offered a wan smile. "You are very kind. I must attend to Larot. Perhaps later."

Olivia stayed in the doorway, clearly uncomfortable with the situation. "How did you make those red glowing—things? What did they do?"

"They are called Flame orbs and they do many different things. I used them to scan my mate, to determine the extent of his illness."

The old woman's expression turned dubious, but she didn't comment on Kayrin's explanation. "I suppose I'll let you get some rest. Do you have luggage or ... *How* did you arrive in New Orleans?"



Kayrin just smiled. The more she explained the less likely Olivia would be to accept her answers. "We mean you no harm. As soon as Larot is stronger, we will trouble you no more."

\* \* \* \*

Karen had seemed too distracted with her husband's illness to eat, but Olivia knew how important it was to keep up your own strength while tending to a loved one. She'd had two years of practice before cancer won the battle for Charley's life.

Pushing away the unhappy thought, she made a small mountain of assorted sandwiches. Karen was much too thin. She needed to eat. They should probably try and get some broth down Larry, too. His name had been something more unusual, but with her sketchy memory Larry would have to do.

Karen sat on the bed, gently stroking Larry's hair. Tenderness radiated from her expression, the gentleness of her movements. Olivia smiled. "I brought those sandwiches. You really should eat something."

"You are too kind."

The young woman's smile was beautiful, but the sadness in her eyes made Olivia's heart ache. "Are you all alone? Is there no one you can call?"

"We are strangers to this place. Were it not for your kindness, I don't know what I would have done." Her lovely face blanched and she rested her head in her hands.

"Do you have this fever too?"

She shook her head. "My condition is very different than Larot's."

"What's wrong with you, dear? Can I help?"

"You have been more than generous, and my condition is a joyous thing. I am going to bear a child."

"Oh, you poor dear." Olivia crossed the room and patted Karen's shoulder. "You shouldn't be faced with such uncertainty with a baby on the way."

"The timing is inconvenient, but I am thrilled about the baby."

"As you should be. This is a wondrous occasion. You two relax and don't worry about a thing. I'll see you in the morning."

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## Chapter Two

Larot emerged from his fiery prison by degrees. His skin no longer burned and the brutal aching in his joints had faded to an annoying soreness. Not everyone survived Veil fever. He should be grateful, but shame and frustration assailed him. His mate needed protection and tenderness as she nurtured their child within her womb. Instead she'd been forced to care for him, to find food and shelter as the fever gradually incapacitated him.

Looking around the shadowy bedroom, he tried to remember where they were. What had happened? How long had they been in Dimension 939-3?

The image of a silver-haired matron formed within his mind. Were they in the old woman's house? His memory was muddled.

Kayrin lay on her side, her back nestled against his chest, her round bottom cradling his groin. He smiled. It didn't really matter where they were as long as Kayrin was safe and their child protected.

Hunger unfurled within him, cramping his abdomen and driving the breath from his lungs. *Prazot!* Combating Veil fever had dangerously weakened him. If he fused their bodies, he could transfer energy directly from Kayrin. He needed her desperately, but he feared for the safety of the baby.

A soft chuckle responded to his dilemma. "What you have in mind won't hurt our daughter, it will only pleasure me."

"You read my mind." He touched her shoulder. "Are you certain we have a daughter?"

She rolled onto her back and raising her hand, gently stroking his face. "The pregnancy has stimulated something dormant within me. Remember what happened the last time we made love? I'm beginning to understand what it means to have neutral *iede*. I was brushing my hair and my hand turned to Shadow."

His chest tightened as her words drove home the sacrifice she made to be with him. She was destined for so much more than—

"I'm destined to be your mate and the mother of your children. Nothing else matters."

He kissed her hungrily, deeply. "I only wish I could help teach you to control these powers, to reach your full potential. I'm not qualified to mentor—"

"You're not my mentor. You're my mate. And you are the only one qualified for that position."

Fitting his mouth over hers, he tried to be gentle, but her fingers threaded through his hair and her tongue surged into his mouth. She rolled onto her side, molding her breasts against his chest.

"I was so afraid I'd lose you." Her lips moved against his as she whispered the words.

She used her mouth and her hands to communicate her fear, her relief, and her joy. Her hungry kisses and urgent caresses soon had him gasping for breath. Hooking her leg over his hip, she aligned her mound with his cock, rubbing urgently.

"Slow down, my love. I'm not going anywhere." He caressed her back and gentled the kiss until she relaxed against him. "I'm right here."

"I need you. I burn for you." Her hands moved over his body, squeezing his shoulders, tangling in his hair. She rocked against him, slowly now, each movement a silent plea. Easing away from her, he cupped her breasts, noticing a fullness they hadn't possessed short weeks before.

His heart flipped over in his chest. Her body had already changed in preparation for their child!

"Are you tender here?"

"Not tender so much as sensitive. My nipples especially."

Eager to explore this development, he scooted down along her body and pressed his lips to her breast. He circled her nipple with his tongue and watched it tighten and flush. "Very nice." Moving to her other breast, he lavished it with the same attention, kissing and licking until it too puckered tightly. "Turn around. I want to touch you while I'm inside you."

She had no objection. Rolling onto her other side, she returned to the position she'd been in when he awakened. He rubbed her back and explored the smooth resilience of her rounded ass. Without his prompting, she bent her knee and angled her leg, allowing him access to her slick pussy.

Heat rippled through him, love and tenderness. She was always so responsive, so giving, willing and eager for whatever he chose to do.

He touched her gently, thrilled to find her wet and ready. Parting her folds, he slid his shaft against, but not into her.

Surrounded by her moist heat, he molded her tightly against his body and began a leisurely journey across her flesh.

Reaching back, she combed her fingers through his hair as he stroked her breasts, her side, her hip, her thigh. She was so incredibly soft.

Determination surged through him. He would protect her with his life and find a place for them in this strange world, regardless of the price. Love recognized no distinctions, no political agendas. His mate would be happy, his daughter raised in love.

He kissed her neck and entered her slowly, allowing them to savor the blissful fullness of his cock filling her pussy. She sighed, pushing back against him. He groaned, arching forward.

Buried to the hilt, he paused, slipping his hand over her hip and into the valley between her thighs. He circled her clit with his fingertip, smiling at the reflexive tightening of her core. This drove her crazy. And he loved to drive her crazy.

"Move. Please," she whispered.

"Come for me first. I love to feel you come."

"You love making me lose control."

"Guilty. Now come!"

Kayrin trembled in his arms. The warmth of his body molded her back and his cock filled the aching void inside her body. She tightened her inner muscles, thrilled by his determination to give her pleasure.

Everything about him was right. He knew just how to touch her, and he always put her pleasure above his own. Selfless. Generous. *Larot*. How could she help but love him?

His persistent finger circled her clit, building the tension within her. She surrendered to his tender ministrations, allowing the pressure to expand. He nipped her neck. She yelped, but the unexpected sting triggered her orgasm. Her core pulsed rhythmically and waves of sensation engulfed her body.

Circling her clit with his clever finger, he pulled out and rolled her onto her back. "Open for me, *rijnna mi*. Welcome me inside."

She pulled her legs wide, bending her knees, offering herself in blatant invitation. He settled between her thighs, positioning his cock against her.

"Are you sure this won't hurt our daughter?"

"Positive. But I am going to hurt you if you don't—" A sharp gasp replaced the rest of her sentence as he drove home in one firm thrust.

He arched, his head thrown back, eyes squeezed shut. "You feel so good." He groaned. Rocking his hips, he dragged his cock nearly out of her, then slid back in. Over and over, with deliberate slowness, until Kayrin arched wildly to meet each teasing thrust.

She gasped, frantically trying to bring him deeper. Emotion quivered through her heart. He had survived Veil fever. They would raise their child together. Her heart swelled with love and tenderness. Despite the uncertainty facing them, she was determined to find happiness—with her mate.

He thrust firmly, pushed her higher, and intensified the pleasure ricocheting through her body. She wanted to kiss

him, to clutch him close against her heart, but he held himself away, balanced on his knees and extended arms.

Shifting his weight, he slipped one hand between their straining bodies, swirling his finger around her clit at the apex of each stroke. She moaned. Sensations rushed from inferno heat to icy chill and back again. Pleasure exploded within her, stealing her breath and making her quake.

He lunged into her, spilling his fiery seed deep within her body with a ragged laugh. "You did it again." He gasped. "We're going to have to figure out how to control that or I'm in big trouble!"

"Or you'll just have to find other ways to pleasure me," she offered with a wicked smile.

"And have my tongue flash frozen? No, thank you. There has to be someone who can teach you to control this."

"Mother gave me a list of Keepers we could contact in the event of an emergency, but we are not to disrupt their lives or endanger their missions."

"Understood."

Easing from her body, he caressed her mouth with slow, leisurely kisses. She indulged her need to touch him, starting with his face and working her way down. Her fingers drifted ever closer to his burgeoning cock.

She snatched her hand back and sat up. "Did you hear that?"

"Hear what? The disappointed groan of my—"

"No. There is someone moving around in the outer room."

He paused, his expression intent as he listened.



"Okay, I can't actually hear them, but they are there. Trust me. Someone is out there."

Effortlessly manifesting clothes as he crawled out of bed, Larot moved cautiously toward the bedroom door. Kayrin dressed as well. Clothing her body in *iede* was one of the few Keeper skills she had mastered before her mystic awakening began.

"You stay here." His gaze promise dire consequences if she ignored his directive.

She tried to obey. He was capable of investigating the disturbance and dealing with any intruder as long as they were from this dimension. Kayrin fidgeted at the thought. What if they were not from this dimension? What if Alrick had sent a Death Keeper...

Stepping out into the hall, she crept toward the front room. Three figures stood silhouetted in the moonlight. She couldn't distinguish one from the other and didn't know how to trigger a light source. Two stood very close together, the third a step back.

Instinctively she manifested *iede* and cast it into the air. Silvery light illuminated the room. Larot ignored the distraction, but the male intruder glanced her way, giving Larot a momentary advantage. The intruder held a knife to Olivia's throat. The old woman shook visibly, her eyes huge in her weathered face. Aiming carefully, Kayrin shot a stream of Flame *iede* into the blade. The culprit yelped and dropped the weapon, giving Larot an opening.

Coating his hands with Flame *iede*, Larot shoved the intruder backward as Kayrin hurried Olivia away from the

fray. The intruder screamed, clutching his chest. The clear imprint of Larot's hands burned through his clothing.

Larot advanced. With one forceful swipe of his leg, he knocked the other man's feet out from underneath him and followed him down. Larot pinned the intruder's hands to the floor and kept his knee in the middle of the intruder's chest.

The sparkling *iede* began to sputter out. "How do we turn on the lights?" Kayrin asked.

As if in a daze, Olivia moved to a simple lever mounted on the wall and flipped it up, activating the overhead light source.

Kayrin glanced at Larot, making sure the criminal was completely restrained, then returned her attention to the old woman.

Olivia stared back in wide-eyed wonder. "What are you?"

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### Chapter Three

The police had come and gone before Kayrin attempted to answer Olivia's question. The authorities were extremely interested in the burns on the burglar's chest and his wild account of Larot putting them there with his bare hands. Larot allowed them to examine his palms, but when they found nothing unusual, they simply recorded the accusation in their report and took the criminal away.

"There has been a rash of burglaries in this area," Olivia told them. She stood at the front windows watching the last squad car drive away. "I wonder if it's been that man all along?"

"The law enforcement personnel are sure to make that determination."

She spun and faced Larot. "I didn't think you could speak English. You certainly seem to have made a miraculous recovery."

"Veil fever is painful and debilitating, but once the body adjusts to—"

"He has always healed quickly." Kayrin figured they had enough to explain already. They sat on the sofa, waiting for Olivia to begin her interrogation, suspecting she didn't even know which questions to ask.

Olivia walked to a heavily padded chair facing the sofa and sat as well. Her stunned gaze darted from Kayrin to Larot and back again. "You saved my life. That creature meant to kill me. I owe you both my life."

"It's no more than anyone would have done." Kayrin tried to sound casual.

"It was much more than anyone else *could* have done. You aren't from another country, are you?"

"What makes you ask?" Kayrin bit back a smile.

"Well, you're either mutants like in those X-Men movies or you aren't from *anywhere* around here."

She sounded tense and still looked terrified. Kayrin wanted to comfort her, but she feared approaching Olivia would compound her discomfort. There really was no point in denying it.

"We mean you no harm, Olivia. We really do have nowhere else to go."

"Are you ... from another planet?"

"We are from a parallel dimension, one of many separated from this place by an energy barrier called the Veil."

The old woman nodded, but her eyes remained clouded with confusion. "Veil fever. Passing through this energy Veil is what made Larry sick?"

"Larry?" Larot chuckled. "Is that the Earth equivalent of my name?"

Kayrin smiled at him. "My name is Karen and you are Larry from this day forth."

"Why did you come here?" Olivia fidgeted in her chair. Gradually the tension eased from her posture. "You said before that you were compelled to leave, or something like that."

"There are those in our dimension who oppose our union. When I realized I was with child, it put Larot—no, Larry in grave danger."

"Karen is a princess and I am nobody. She was supposed to bond with someone of her social standing, but she fell in love with me."

Olivia pressed a hand over her heart. "Just like a real life fairytale. I'm harboring a runaway princess. This is so romantic."

They all shared a laugh.

"We have much to learn about your dimension." Karen hesitated. Olivia had been kindness itself and there was a real possibility they would put her in danger. Still they had no alternative. They were supposed to avoid the other Keepers unless it was a dire emergency. Alrick's spies were everywhere. "It is imperative that we blend in so well that no one realizes we are not—from around here. We would be grateful if you would teach us what we need to know."

"I lost my mate less than a year ago. My life has been miserably lonely without him. I welcome the company."

Larry wove his fingers through Karen's and smiled. "We will not impose upon you any longer than we must."

"This is no imposition." Olivia beamed. "You are foreign dignitaries. I'm honored to offer my hospitality."

"Foreign indeed." Karen gave her mate's hand a little squeeze.

"We'll take things a step at a time," Olivia said emphatically. "We'll get you clothes and work on those

accents. I'll have you blending in so well you'll forget you're not American. Do you have a last name?"

They shook their heads.

"Well, Larry and Karen Dover, welcome to New Orleans. Today is a very special day. Not only did you just save this old woman's life," she offered them a beaming smile, "it's Christmas. We'll start your lessons with what that means to the various people of Earth."

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## **Mystic Keepers 1: Cayenne**

Aubrey Ross

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## Prologue

Calling upon eighteen cycles of training, Malik Cendar stood proud and tall before the Matriarch of the Order of Flame. The Presentation was part of *Pim Noctar*. It must be endured if he hoped to gain approval to bond with his chosen mate, and he had chosen no ordinary mate.

Matriarch Flame moved around him in a slow assessing circle. Though countless wrinkles creased her skin, her waist-length hair remained the vivid blending of chocolate brown and fiery red shared by every member of her Order. "You are nicely formed, young Frost."

Was she too senile to remember his name? Or did she think ... *Focus, Cendar!*

He snapped himself back to attention. Every eligible Frost male coveted the Flame Heiress. Her family was reputed to possess the most powerful *iede* in the dimension. Wealth, prestige, and authority were all determined by the strength of mystic *iede* and as the mate of the Flame Heiress, Malik would share in her power.

All that stood between him and his goal was the approval of this stubborn old woman. Determination surged through Malik, helping him focus. He inclined his head respectfully, acknowledging her comment.

"Please disrobe."

Unflinching, he reached for the fastenings of his tunic. A crackling fire leapt merrily in the massive hearth, mocking him with its dancing light. Smooth firestone walls surrounded



them, sculpted and seamless. A cage for all but the most powerful sorcerer.

He'd suspected it would come to a full demonstration of his virility. With the future of the Order of Flame on the line, why would the Matriarch settle for anything less? But if she intended for him to perform, where were the attendants? By all the furies of Frozen Hell, she better not intend to do it herself!

Defiant now, he faced the old woman and clasped his hands behind his back.

Matriarch Flame chuckled and turned to the smooth firestone wall. She chanted softly, spreading her hands first side to side, then top to bottom. A doorway appeared. Three young women entered, their diaphanous dresses floating and fluttering as they moved.

They lined up in front of Malik, eyes downcast.

"Which maid pleases you most, Frost Keeper?"

"It matters not, Matriarch Flame. I have already completed my purification. I will not mate again until I am fully bonded."

She smiled broadly, apparently pleased by his answer.

"Your intended mate is my granddaughter. I must be certain you are compatible and worthy of this great honor before I initiate the *Pim Noctar*."

"I understand." It had taken nearly a cycle for the Flame Council to process his application. He had no intention of failing now, despite whatever tests the crafty Matriarch had in store.

A softly spoken directive from the old woman set the middle girl in motion. She knelt before him, never so much as raising her gaze.

*Here we go!* He steeled himself for the humiliation of performing like a trained animal.

The attendant stroked her warm hands up his thighs. Fixing his gaze on an invisible point directly ahead of him, he waited for the first brush of her fingers against his flaccid cock. Heat. Tingling, prickly sensations enveloped his sac and he looked down. Her head was bent, her mouth open wide, nearly touching his balls, and she was—breathing on him!

*Damn! He hadn't counted on Flame iede.*

Warmth invaded his abdomen and swirled around his cock. The sensation passed through his flesh in a lazy spiral, drawing blood to the reluctant appendage. When he was hard and throbbing the kneeling attendant raised her head and smiled into his resentful eyes.

"I understand your vow, but this will be over more quickly if I take you in my mouth. Would that be acceptable to you?"

Feeling less violated, he nodded, canting his hips to bring his erect cock within easy reach. She cupped his balls, massaging them gently while her wet mouth slid as far down his shaft as she could reach. Groaning, he fought against the pleasure, but gods her mouth was hot! Back and forth that silken mouth slid. Not a hint of teeth, just the firm circle of her lips and the unbelievable heat.

She pulled back, suckling the sensitive head of his cock like he would suckle a nipple. Clenching his fists against his

thighs, he widened his stance. She swirled her tongue around and around. He gasped. His balls pulled up tightly, pulsing.

"Now, Mistress Flame, now!" He ground out the words between clenched teeth.

The girl quickly ducked out of the way and Malik pumped his seed into the Matriarch's waiting palm. She examined the milky liquid objectively, shooting Flame *iede* from her fingertips, creating a soft red glow.

"You are potent and compatible with our *iede*." She paused, the substance evaporating in a puff of pink smoke. "But are you worthy?"

Malik panted, bracing his hands against his knees as his body cramped with the need to—*rut*!

Detailed images bombarded his mind and stimulated his senses. He saw the attendant's supple thighs part, revealing her glistening cunt. Bright red pubic hair cut short accented her folds, displaying her clit. She parted herself invitingly. He accepted the offer in one brutal thrust. She screamed. Pleasure? Pain? It terrified him to realize he didn't care. He pounded into her like a ravenous beast.

*This isn't real!*

But the images continued, becoming progressively more graphic. He lay on his back enthusiastically licking the pussy of one attendant while another straddled his hips, eagerly fucking him. The third guided his fingers to her sopping folds...

"No!" he shouted. "I will not be tempted! I will mate with Cayenne and not before."

"Out!" The Matriarch's voice cracked like a whip and the attendants rushed from the chamber.

Malik's senses gradually cleared. The frantic mental compulsion released, but his cock still throbbed painfully.

"Malik Cendar of the Order of Frost, I find you worthy of Cayenne Dover, Heiress to the Order of Flame. May your bonding be successful and your offspring strong."

"I thank you, gracious Matriarch." He managed to rasp out the traditional response. "I will not rest until my mate is satisfied."

"That is good to hear, young Frost." She nodded toward his raging erection. "I have set *Pim Noctar* in motion. Get thee to thy mate! You have no time to lose."

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## Chapter One

"You're a psych major," Cayenne Dover said as she poured coffee into her companion's mug. "What does it mean when a person has exactly the same dream over and over?"

"That depends on the dream."

Setting the glass carafe on the warmer, she pursed her lips impatiently. "You'll never get rich as a psychologist with answers like that."

"I plan to be a child psychologist and I don't expect to get rich." Julie smiled, blowing delicately on her steaming coffee. "Now, tell me about your dream."

"I never said it was my dream." A chuckle disrupted her protest, so Cayenne shrugged and explained. "The dream started about three weeks ago. The first one was fairly harmless, but each one that followed grew more intense."

"Then they aren't identical."

Cayenne hesitated. Julie was the only one of her three tenants she'd even consider having this conversation with. Still the erotic nature of her dreams made Cayenne uncomfortable. "Forget I brought it up." Cayenne pushed back her chair and gathered the plates. "Isn't Paul picking you up soon?"

Julie caught her wrist, returning the dirty dishes to the table. "There is no way in hell you're getting out of this. Sit back down and talk to me."

Reluctantly, Cayenne sank to her chair. Julie was three years her junior, but infinitely more experienced when it came to men. Or at least sex.

"It's only been in the last few dreams that I ... you know. Before that I always woke up too soon."

Wrapping both hands around her mug, Julie stared at her with unwavering interest. "Start at the beginning. Tell me everything."

"This is some perverted fascination, not a desire to help me." Cayenne softened the criticism with a quick smile. "I was only aware of him to begin with. I can never see him clearly. I just know he's there."

"You're talking about a dream, right? You don't have a stalker or something?"

Blowing a strand of hair out of her eyes, Cayenne chuckled. "No, I don't have a stalker."

"What does he look like?"

"Do you know who Mark McGrath is?"

"The lead singer of Sugar Ray?"

Cayenne nodded. "Well, picture him in about ten years."

Whistling soft and low, Julie gave her approval. "Works for me. So what happens in these dreams, or do I even need to ask?"

"He comes to me—"

"And makes you come?" Julie grinned. "Sweetheart, it doesn't take a psych major to figure out what your dreams are about. You need to trade in your vibrator for a real live man! When was the last time you—"

"I think I hear Paul's car in the alley."

"Oh, don't get all pissy. Your subconscious is just telling you what your mind refuses to accept. You need to get laid!"

Cayenne shoved her chair back and stood. "And for this I cooked you pasta?"

Julie laughed uproariously. "Paul has got a friend that will give you the ride of your life, if you just want to fool around. He's hung like a horse, but only sort of house broken."

"Sounds charming."

"Sounds like exactly what you need for a night or two. Bet it would cure you of these bizarre dreams."

A car horn interrupted their conversation.

"You're ditching me with the dishes, aren't you?" Cayenne watched her friend cross to the back door.

"It's Paul," she said, grabbing her purse off the counter.

"Have fun."

"You too." Julie blew her a kiss and breezed out the door.

Grumbling all the while, Cayenne did the dishes—alone.

She loved to cook, but hated cleaning up the inevitable mess. Julie generally spent each weekend with Paul as Cayenne didn't allow overnight guests. Her other two tenants had gone home for the summer, so Cayenne had her house to herself.

Her semi-playful conversation with Julie echoed through her mind as she showered, hoping to cool off before going to bed. Was she so sexually frustrated that it was affecting her dreams?

The mere thought of her dream lover made her nipples tingle and her clit throb. Closing her eyes, she faced the tepid

spray. The water slicked her hair back from her face. She arched her neck.

Hot blood coursed through her veins in sharp contrast to the cool rivulets streaming over her skin. Turning the faucet, she waited for the spray to chill. The water hissed as it hit her heated flesh. Her pussy ached, hollow and needful.

The image of his face formed within her mind, rugged features, sharp gray eyes. He'd started out gentle, tender, seeming almost hesitant to touch her, afraid he'd frighten or harm her. But last night he'd—even in her mind she hesitated over the word—fucked her, hard and fast, dominating her with his strength, overwhelming her with his passion.

She moaned.

Cupping her breasts, she gasped. Her skin was hot to the touch, feverish. The heat was so intense her nipples burned her fingers.

*What was wrong with her?*

Julie's initial response had kept Cayenne from admitting the dark turn her dreams had taken in the last few days. Did she secretly long to be dominated by a lover? Her body had certainly responded with wild abandon in her dreams.

Her legs wobbled so badly she feared she'd slip if she tried to get out, but she'd never been more desperate for her trusty vibrator! She raised the showerhead, keeping the cool water flowing over her as she leaned against the shower stall.

She slipped one hand between her thighs and cried out. Her clit was so swollen and sensitive the slightest caress was painful. She pressed her palm over her mound, whimpering. If it hurt to touch her clit, she couldn't make herself come.



And her whole body ached for release.

Tears blurred her vision. She pushed away from the slick tiles. Trembling and miserable, Cayenne turned off the water and got out of the shower.

She felt sunburned.

She felt empty.

The softest towel she owned abraded like sandpaper. Even the soles of her feet stung.

Naked, sobbing helplessly, she stumbled into her bedroom.

Malik caught Cayenne to his chest as she collapsed against him. He had given her as long as he dared, courting her gently through shared dreams. But his need for her sweet body could no longer be denied!

If the heat radiating off her flesh was any indication, she was more than ready for the bonding. Curving his finger beneath her chin, he brought her face up until their eyes met. Each of her deep, anxious breaths filled her with his scent and the powerful pheromones emanating from his pores. *Breathe, rijinna mi, breathe!*

Her hands moved restlessly against his chest. Pressing his aching cock into her soft belly, he studied her features.

Though she'd chosen a style far shorter than customary, the color of her hair was so glorious he didn't mind the sleek, short style. A rich blending of brown and fiery red, her hair could only belong to a Flame Keeper.

"What's happening to me?"

Her pink tongue darted out, wetting her lower lip.

He groaned. Oh, to feel that tongue trail across his belly and circle the head of his cock!

"*Pim Noctar*, Cayenne. Your body yearns for its mate."

"That's one bizarre pick up line," she muttered, rubbing her mons against his thigh. "Am I dreaming? I must be. I know you. You're the one..." Her pupils nearly eclipsed her irises and her entire body was flushed. Though her thinking seemed muddled, she clung to him.

"What we are feeling is no simple lust, *rijinna mi*. This is a sacred bonding. Part your lips. Let me kiss you."

Her hot breath escaped, filling his mouth. She tasted of Flame *iede* and passion. He traced her lips with the tip of his tongue, teasing, nibbling, and licking, before he pushed inside. She groaned. He delved deeper, took more.

He cupped her breast, gently abrading the nipple. She squirmed. *Gods, her breasts were perfection!* He squeezed one soft mound while he circled the crest with his tongue. Gathering Frost *iede*, Malik blew across her skin.

She gasped. "That's cold. Oh, it tingles. What did you just do?"

He grinned and increased the intensity of the *iede*. "This." He exhaled his frosty breath again.

Shivering violently, she clasped his shoulders and arched her back. Her nipples gathered into jewel-like peaks, the color deepening from rose to scarlet. He carefully caught one highly stimulated tip between his teeth and applied gradual pressure as he sent a steady stream of chilly *iede* directly into the tiny openings.

She cried out sharply and trembled as he triggered a shuddering orgasm in a way only Frost Keepers could.

Cayenne couldn't remember falling asleep, but this was by far the most intense dream she'd ever had. Malik. Her lover's name was Malik Cendar. She knew it as surely as she knew her own. This was the first time she'd seen his face clearly, but his muscular body and softly accented voice had filled her dreams for weeks.

The fever subsided a bit with her pleasure. He settled his mouth over her breast again, licking and suckling, making her tingle and shiver. She pushed her fingers into his frost-tipped hair, expecting the stiff sticky drag of too many styling products. The strands slid softly between her fingers, then sprang naturally back into spikes. How odd. How wonderful.

She was standing naked in her bedroom with a veritable stranger, and nothing had ever felt more right.

More perfect.

More preordained.

He knelt before her and she whimpered. She loved the gentle swirl of a man's tongue against her clit, so intimate, so tender. Nothing made her come faster or harder than oral stimulation.

"I hope you like this, Cayenne, because I've dreamed about having my mouth on you for over a cycle. I'm ravenous for the taste of you."

His words, so in keeping with her thoughts, sent tingles up her spine.

He lifted her leg to his shoulder and she steadied herself against the bedpost. Expecting him to dive right in, she held her breath while his gaze moved over her exposed flesh.

"Oh, *rijnna mi*, you are exquisite." He inhaled deeply, holding her scent inside his body for a long time. He parted her folds and traced her slit with his tongue, back and forth, back and forth, never touching her throbbing clit.

"Please, Malik." She arched, trying to bring his taunting caress where she needed it most. His cool breath heightened her smoldering heat. He eased her leg down from his shoulder and she groaned. *Why was he tormenting her?*

"Offer me your clit and I'll pay homage to it."

He had the oddest way of putting things. She hesitated, feeling self-conscious. Her body throbbed impatiently. Closing her eyes and averting her face, she reached down and parted the way for him.

He only touched her with the tip of his tongue and occasionally brushed her with his hair. Her legs pressed against the edge of the bed as his tongue circled her clit, then flicked across it. Cool and soothing, yet undeniably arousing, the sensations were incredible.

He slowed, making each pass a distinct caress. Her core throbbed hungrily. What would it feel like to have his thick shaft sliding in and out of her, stretching her to the point of pain? Another titillating circle and she shattered, unable to hold off the forceful climax a moment longer.

She sank to the bed and he helped her lie back, draped both legs over his shoulders. His mouth settled over her drenched folds and the rest of the world fell away. He was bold and demanding, licking and sucking, thrusting into her like he would with his cock.

She twisted her fingers in the bedspread. He tipped her hips up, pushing his tongue deeper. In. Out.

"Promise you won't scream."

"I promise."

He thrust in with his tongue and Cayenne panicked. She'd given the promise too quickly! His tongue was ice cold! And that strange, swirling tingle he'd sent into her breast coated the walls of her cunt.

*Oh God! This couldn't be right.*

He thrust again, deeper, colder. She shivered. Clawing at the bed, she arched. The hard, rhythmic waves went on and on. She wasn't sure where one ended and the next began, or if he had somehow triggered one incredibly long orgasm.

Colors danced before her eyes. She laughed. They looked like rainbow-colored snowflakes. She was hallucinating! This had never happened before.

She felt him shift positions and looked down in time to see him guide his cock to her entrance. Lethargic and jumbled from her marathon release, she didn't think to object or question. He carefully lubricated himself with her juices and held her wide open while he pushed inside.

Closing her eyes, she concentrated entirely on the feeling of his cock moving into her, filling her, stretching her. It pinched. It stung. She tried to relax, to accept him.

"Hold your legs open, *rijnna mi*." He guided her hands to the bend of her knees and showed her what he meant. This freed his hands and he immediately put them to use, stroking her breasts, belly, and thighs.

He gently traced where their bodies joined, moving her juices up to her clit, stroking her tenderly. His shaft created uncomfortable pressure inside her. She held perfectly still, clasping the bend of her knees, wondering how she'd bear it once he started thrusting.

His other hand slipped beneath her and she nearly let go of her legs. What was he doing? He burrowed between the cheeks of her ass and found her tight little hole.

"I'm not into *that* at all!" she objected vehemently, but his finger was cold, so she knew it was already too late. "Malik, I think dealing with your ... This is really..."

Her protests trailed away into a strangled moan as his finger gently breached her virgin orifice. Icy sensations swirled up her anal passage, while heat flooded her cunt. Cayenne cried out. She drenched his cock with cream. She could feel it seeping out and running into the crack where his fingers played.

"Thank you," he said with a playful smile.

He pulled back slowly, his cock sliding easily now.

She was on fire!

No, she was freezing!

Her cunt burned, boiled while his thick shaft moved carefully in and out. But his clever finger was still in her ass, sending occasional pulses of chilly sensation spiraling through her entire body.

She lifted her hips, pulling her legs wide. He moved faster, deeper, more forcefully.

"I ... can't ... wait," he grated out between thrusts.

He gently removed his finger and grasped her hips with both hands, increasing the impact of each penetration. She tightened around him, amazed that it no longer hurt. Driving deeper than he'd ever gone before, he threw back his head and shuddered with the force of his release.

His seed exploded inside her and Cayenne cried out. It was cold! Like his breath and the sensations he created with his fingers, Malik Cendar's semen was ice cold.

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## Chapter Two

Knowing his mate was struggling to accept the reality of their bonding, Malik didn't argue when she retreated into the bathroom a short time later. He heard her activate the shower, so he sent a cleansing pulse along his naked body and conjured pants before descending the stairs to the main level of the house.

Cayenne was not the only one struggling to accept reality. Their dream wooing had been a pale foreshadowing of the feelings his mate aroused in him. Tingling aftershocks of pleasure zinged through his body. Malik smiled. He had never imagined that bonding would affect him so profoundly. He felt content, replete, yet ravenous for more. His smile broadened. The next twenty-four hours would be very interesting.

Light from the kitchen invited him into the cozy little room. Breathing highly concentrated Frost *iede* into his cupped palms, he formed a translucent ball of ice. He retrieved a specific psychic resonance from the extensive catalog in his memory and saturated the ice with the rhythm. The image of a dark-haired man formed within the ball, fluctuating, wavering as the resonance searched for its source.

Malik gradually intensified the *iede* until he could see his friend clearly. Jax Severn pushed back from a computer desk and turned to face the empty office behind him.

"Show yourself!"

"It's me, Jax. I can't come to you just now, but we need to rendezvous soon."



"Malik? Malik Cendar? Are you in New Orleans? I can barely hear you."

"Yes, I'm in New Orleans. Give me your phone number and I'll contact you through more conventional means in the morning."

Jax rattled off two sets of numbers. "What's going on? What brings you to this dimension? I figured you for the Steering Committee. Why are you slumming with the Keepers?"

"Long story."

"Well, meet me at Café Du Monde in the morning and I'll buy the beignets."

Malik chuckled. "Will Cayenne know what that means?"

"Who is Cayenne? What's going on?"

Malik heard the bathroom door open. "What is an appropriate time?" he asked in an urgent whisper.

"How about nine?"

"We'll see you at nine."

Quickly disintegrating the ice ball, he brushed his hands off on his pants and conjured a shirt. Why was he bothering to dress when he had every intention of reveling in *Pim Noctar*, of indulging every carnal instinct his mate would allow?

He listened to the subtle creaking of the floorboards as she moved about upstairs. Should he wait for her to come down? Or go up after her?

\* \* \* \*

Cayenne shrugged into her kimono-style robe and sighed as the cool silk settled against her damp skin. Her pulse

pounded. She had to concentrate just to keep her breathing deep and slow.

She'd analyzed the bizarre situation under the soothing current of the shower. There was no way she was dreaming and she didn't think she'd gone crazy. Malik was real. And he was affecting her—stimulating her.

He was in the kitchen, waiting for her. Cayenne closed her eyes. The bond between them was growing stronger. If she could sense him, could he sense her? Probably.

She needed answers.

She needed his throbbing cock moving inside her again!

This was ridiculous. She would not be a slave to her sex drive.

Opening her eyes, she tightened the belt on her robe and headed downstairs.

Cayenne paused in the archway separating the kitchen from the dining room and stared at Malik. She'd never seen him in the light. Or fully dressed.

Though sleekly muscled and graceful, he emanated danger. She glanced into his smoke-colored eyes and heat infused her face, her neck, her chest, continuing its persistent descent until it pooled between her thighs. His gaze followed the path of the heat as if he could actually see it.

Short blond hair, slightly longer on top, faded from rich antique gold near his scalp to silver at the tip of each subtle spike. Though interesting, the look was about twenty years out of date. His clothing, however, was the height of subtle chic. Collarless charcoal gray shirt and pleated dress slacks two shades darker.

"Don't come near me. Don't touch me. Don't breathe on me," she stressed emphatically. "Just sit down at the table and tell me what the hell is going on."

He ambled to the table and pulled out a chair. Instead of sitting, he turned it around and straddled it, folding his arms across the back. "I'll do whatever I can to help you understand."

"Did you give me some sort of drug?"

"What is happening between us is stronger than any drug. I was half-crazed when they brought me through the Veil. If I hadn't been able to find you—"

"Do you do that intentionally?"

"Do what?"

Cayenne shifted, leaning her shoulder against the archway. "Use phrases I don't understand. When they brought you through the veil? What is that supposed to mean?"

Light gleamed off the silver tips of his spiky hair as he shook his head. "You really have no idea who you are? How is that possible? Where are your parents? They should have been here to bless our bonding. This doesn't reflect well on the Order of Flame."

"Bless our bonding? The Order of Flame? Am I supposed to know what you're talking about?"

"Why are your parents not here?"

"My parents died when I was a child." She glared at him and walked fully into the kitchen.

Malik's gaze followed her, but he said nothing for a long time. "That doesn't make sense. They were bonded Keepers. How did they die?"

"Their car was sandwiched between a tree and an SUV. No one survived the accident."

"No automobile accident can kill our kind."

"Our kind? What is that supposed to mean?"

"Did you see their bodies?"

"I was ten!"

He glanced away, pausing for a moment before he returned his gaze to her face. "Who cared for you after their passing?"

"A friend of my parents. She was designated as my guardian in their will. Look, I learned to deal with their deaths a long time ago. Why is this important now?"

More head shaking. She wanted to smack him.

"It's all wrong." He carelessly raked his fingers through his hair. "What you were told about your parents couldn't possibly be true."

"What the hell do you know about it? You don't even know me!" Her anxious steps took her quickly from one end of the kitchen to the other and back again.

"I know you, Cayenne. Apparently, better than you know yourself."

Where had he come from? How had he infiltrated her dreams?

The heat within her body was building again, making her long for his—cold!

"What is a bonded Keeper?" she asked, desperate for something to distract her from the desire making her pussy throb.

"That's a very complex question."

She could almost feel his lips parting her folds, his tongue circling her aching clit, blissfully cold. What he'd done with his finger! Even his cum was cold. "Are—what are you?"

"The question should be what are we." Malik rested his chin on his forearm and smiled. "We are the same, you and I. The same and yet opposite. We are indigenous to another dimension."

"You're from another dimension?"

"We are from another dimension."

He pulled out the chair beside him and patted the seat. Her gaze never left his as she joined him at the table. "You think my parents were murdered?"

"Did you sense anything the day of the accident? Hereditary connections are very strong among our kind."

There was that phrase again. *Our kind*. One issue at a time. "The day my parents died..." Her mouth dried up, robbing her of the rest of the words.

His warm fingers closed around hers, squeezing gently. "Go on."

"I saw the accident in my mind." Blood rushed so loudly in her ears she could hardly hear her own words. "I started screaming. My teacher thought I'd lost my mind. It took the school three hours to verify what I told them, but I'd described everything perfectly. Except ... they were already dead when they hit the tree."

The brush of his fingers against her cheek drew her back from the past. "I'm sorry, *rijinna mi*. I would take away your pain if it were within my power, but only a Past Keeper can erase memories."

"Past Keeper. Is that different than bonded Keeper? You have to start explaining what all this means."

"Let's go outside."

"Is the garden all right or should I get dressed?"

He flashed his sexy smile and heat rolled through her belly. "I have no interest in going anywhere that requires your getting dressed."

Unlike the famous courtyards in the French Quarter, which were encircled by the walls of the house, Cayenne's garden was out back. The high brick walls had been added many years after the original construction. Despite the historical inaccuracy of her domicile, she enjoyed the tranquility.

He held the screen door for her as she stepped out onto the back porch. Hot, humid air wrapped around her and she groaned. How had people survived before air conditioning?

"Do you want something to drink? I'm not being a very good hostess."

"I have no complaints."

*Thank God for the darkness.* She was sure her entire body was blushing. She still couldn't believe she'd allowed him to ... do everything they'd done together.

"I suppose I should warn you." He spoke in a deep, rumbling tone. "When you get excited, I can smell it and it makes me wild for more of what we did upstairs. So if you really want to talk, try not to think about it."

Mortified, Cayenne inhaled deeply. She didn't smell anything.

"Relax. Only your mate can smell it. It's a private signal telling me you want to fuck."

"We ... have sex once and that makes you my mate?"

"Being your mate gives me the right to fuck you, not the other way around." Malik wrapped his arm around her, cupping her ass through her silk robe. "Do you want to talk or do you want me inside you?"

She twisted out of his hold and rushed down the stairs into the shadowy garden. Was he being a jerk on purpose? Helping her focus on an emotion other than lust?

*No.* She gave her belt a firm tug. *He was an arrogant ass.*

Plopping down in one of the padded lawn chairs, she watched him meander around the garden. He looked damn good in moonlight. She suddenly pictured him peeling off his shirt and...

He glanced at her and grinned.

"What is a Keeper?"

"Our dimension is split into two divisions with opposing purposes. Each division has separate Units. Within the Units are Orders. The Orders are devoted to specific abilities or skill sets. Both our Orders fall under the Unit of Energy. There is also Information and Spirituality."

"Wait. You're making this sound like a massive corporation."

"I guess that analogy is as true as any. I've heard our dimension likened to a military organization, a professional sports franchise, and a religion. The truth is we are all of those and yet we are none." He sat across from her, his features partially obscured by the shadows. "We are guardians. We are teachers. We listen, we observe. Do we

influence the countless civilizations in which we interact or are we influenced by them? Who can say?"

"Within the Energy Unit you are a..." she prompted.

"Frost Keeper."

She shivered violently, remembering all of the sensations he had created with cold. "I should have known. Am I a Frost Keeper, too?"

"No, you're my equal and opposite. My mate. You're a Flame Keeper."

Fragments of memory flashed through her mind. The scorching heat in the shower. Countless incidents she'd dismissed as imagination. Spicy food. Too much wine. "What you do with cold I can do with heat?"

He laughed. "You damn near killed me without even trying. I'm almost afraid to teach you about *iede*."

She crossed her legs, firmly pressing her thighs together. Her mind frantically worked to assimilate everything he'd told her, while her body blazed with the need to writhe and wrestle and be impaled by him. "But you will teach me?"

"Not tonight. Tonight is for us. *Pim Noctar* will only continue until dawn. Each time we join it reinforces our bond, strengthens our connection."

"But I have so many questions," she protested.

"Not tonight."

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### Chapter Three

"Come here," Malik said, scooting to the edge of his chair.

"You just told me I'm an alien! Do you honestly think I'll just shrug it off and spread my legs for you? How did you get here? Do you have a ship or does it have something to do with this veil? Are there others—"

He grabbed her chair and dragged it across the ground until their knees touched. "I will patiently answer your questions as soon as the sun rises. Has the fever left your body? It has not left mine."

A sly smile parted her lips. "A compromise, then?" Loosening the belt at her waist, she allowed the robe to gape, revealing the upper swell of her breasts. "I'll work on easing the ache while you indulge my curiosity."

Blood and *iede* filled his cock, hard, cold, ready. He wedged his legs between hers, resting his hands on her knees. "I can think of a lot more interesting things to do with my mouth than talk."

Her palm touched his shoulder, startling him with its heat. The stubborn little *xalotte*. She had to be crawling out of her skin with desire. Why was she insisting on conversation?

He paused. If everything he'd believed about life suddenly changed, there would be nothing more important than understanding the truth. He'd brought chaos to her door with *Pim Noctar*. Now it was his responsibility to meet her needs.

Slowly tugging on her belt, he freed it from the loops. "I have another proposition. I'll trade answers for your

obedience. You follow my directives, without question, and I'll tell you anything you want to know."

Her eyes narrowed and her lips pressed into a grim line.

Trust would not come easily to Cayenne, but he could be patient. And stubborn. She must learn that he would never hurt her, that from this day on he would put her safety before his, her pleasure before his, her happiness before his. It was the way of bonded mates.

"All right."

He smiled. She sounded as if each word had pained her. "Open your robe."

She parted the material, allowing it to frame her naked body. Moonlight gilded her skin, hiding the true color of her nipples and the crimson highlights in her hair. Her crossed legs protected her feminine secrets, but he wouldn't push her, yet.

"How did you get here? Have you ever visited this dimension before?"

"There's an energy barrier we call the Veil separating our dimension from countless others." As he spoke, he placed her hands on the padded arms of the chair. "The Sacred Order of the Veil is so named because its members are born with the innate ability to perceive what transpires beyond the Veil." He paused, raising his gaze to her face. "I've never been to Earth before. Uncross your legs."

She complied, but kept her legs pressed together from ankle to thigh. A smile tugged at the corners of his mouth. She was stubborn, this mate of his.

"Then someone from this Order brought you here? You can't come through the Veil alone?"

"Only Veil Keepers can manipulate the Veil. They're the most powerful of all the Keepers. Well, Time Keepers are very powerful as well, but they work in sets of three: a Past Keeper, Present Keeper, and Future Keeper. This assures the balance of each set. Now relax and don't move your hands."

He stroked her kneecaps with his fingertips, watching her expression closely. Her eyes widened, then she hid the reaction. Dipping his thumbs inward, he eased her legs apart and caressed the soft skin of her inner thighs. He moved higher, closer to her feminine curls.

"No more questions?" he teased, a gentle reminder that she still had much to learn.

"How many Keepers are there on Earth?"

"Put your feet up here on the seat of my chair." After a moment's hesitation, she put one foot on either side of his hips. Her thighs opened exposing her folds, then her folds parted presenting her cunt. His cock bucked against his pants and he had to shake the chill off his fingers before he touched her. "I don't honestly know. We can ask Jax tomorrow. I have to touch you. Now!"

He combed through her pubic curls, groaning at the moisture gathered there. Heat radiated off her flesh, intensifying the closer he got to her entrance. She was so still, so quiet. He looked at her face. Her head rested against the back of the chair and her eyes were closed. She'd caught her bottom lip between her teeth, her hands clutching the arms of the chair.

Before the night was over he would hear her cries echo in the balmy night.

Rubbing two fingers up and down between her folds, he watched her essence gather on his skin. Her scent rose all around him, stimulating, elemental. He wanted to devour her, to bury his face between her legs and fill his mouth with her taste.

He pushed his fingers slowly into her wet pussy and felt her muscles ripple.

"Will I want you this badly tomorrow?"

The plaintive cry in her question tore through him. He wanted to comfort her. Yet the possessive instinct to stake his claim, to ensure he was the only man she would ever want, drove rational thought from his mind.

"I don't know," he said, a subtle menace in his tone. "How badly do you want me now?"

Malik slowly withdrew his fingers only to shove them harder, deeper. Cayenne cried out, trembling.

With his fingers deep inside her cunt, he leaned forward and closed his lips around her swollen clit. She arched violently, nearly toppling her chair. He caught her hip with his free hand, while he carefully suckled, licked, and circled the sensitive little nub.

Her pussy clutched his fingers, the temperature escalating in a sudden burst of heat. Forcing Frost *iede* into his hand, he counteracted the burn. He had to train her fast or she could do some serious damage.

He tried to pull his fingers out, but her inner muscles contracted so tightly he couldn't move. Startled, he raised his

head and watched her skin sparkle, creating a scarlet aura in the moonlight. She shook and moaned, her passage rhythmically squeezing his fingers.

Flame *iede* shot up his arm, knocking him back against his chair. Heat and pleasure pulsed through his body, leaving him panting and shaken.

"Did I do that?" She sounded worried.

"This could get interesting. Your mystic levels are intensified by *Pim Noctar*, but you have no control. Do you feel better or worse?"

She fidgeted, her hands absently stroking the outer swell of her breasts. "Hot. I'm so hot."

He pulled her to her feet and cupped her breast. As he feared, her flesh seared his palm, her nipple poker hot. Urgently, he pulled her toward the glass-topped patio table. She didn't resist, but stumbled along behind him. Exhaling frosty breath over the entire surface, he said, "Lean over the table."

She touched the glistening substance, distrust obvious in her expression. The situation was more pressing than she realized. He didn't have time to argue with her. Pulling the robe from her shoulders, he lifted her to the table and spread her out on her stomach.

"It's really cold!"

"It's what you need. Let your body absorb my *iede*."

He quickly retrieved her belt from the grass, knowing she would start struggling as soon as she felt the tingle. Working quickly while she was still soothed by the chill, he bound her

wrists together and tied them to the wrought iron trellis beside the table.

Her breathing stabilized and she looked back at him over her shoulder. "This isn't funny."

"I assure you, I'm not laughing."

"Whatever you breathed on this table is stinging the hell out of my skin."

"Then I must stimulate your *iede*. I overestimated your need."

"What is *iede*?" She nearly shouted the question.

"*Iede* is the basic element of our mystic power. I possess Frost *iede*. You possess Flame *iede*. The ways in which it can be controlled and manipulated are different for each type of *iede*."

"Untie my hands."

"Not yet." Malik lifted her hips. "Pull your legs up under you."

Cayenne kicked out at him once, then did as he said, folding her body into a delightfully submissive pose. Her smooth round ass gleamed in the moonlight, beckoning the firm smack of his hand. *Too soon!* He must gentle her before he taught her the pleasures found on the razor's edge between pleasure and pain.

"Open wide, *rijnna mi*. We have no time left for false modesty."

With a little wiggle, she moved her knees apart. Not nearly far enough. He took her thighs and repositioned her, adjusting the arch of her back to more fully expose her luscious pussy.

"Try not to scream too loudly."

Cayenne trembled uncontrollably. Her breasts tingled as her skin absorbed the Frost *iède* he'd breathed across the table. Raw and tender, her nipples felt as if he'd suckled and scraped too roughly against them. His cool hands caressed her hips, her back, her up-tilted ass.

Why had he chosen such an obscene position? Why didn't he take her back into the—

His teeth nipped her bottom and she yelped. The sensation stopped just short of pain. Still her smoldering pussy flared with pulses of heat. He shifted, stirring a balmy current of air. His spiky hair brushed against her inflamed folds. She wiggled and moaned. He nipped and licked, nipped and licked, from one cheek to the other, from her spine to the tops of her thighs.

"Malik! Enough. I'm burning up..."

The blissful coolness of his breath wafted over her skin, soothing the burn and leaving prickly sensitivity in its wake.

Her breath escaped in a ragged hiss.

"I want all of you, *rijnna mi*. Deny me nothing."

*As if she had a choice!*

Even without the silk binding her wrists, her body enslaved her to his whims as securely as chains.

He pulled her hips toward him, leaving only her knees and her forearms on the table. Hot cream escaped her core and ran down her inner thigh. His cool fingers captured the rivulet and traced the wet trail back up to her pussy, teasing her engorged flesh with feather-light strokes.

Capturing her clit between his thumb and forefinger, he gently rolled it, gradually increasing the pressure and the cold. Her cunt convulsed hollowly and hot juices filled his palm.

"Anything!" she rasped out. "Take anything."

"I don't need your permission to take." He shoved two fingers deep into her aching pussy, working her hard. "Invite me inside. Beg me."

His command stirred the darkest reaches of Cayenne's soul, unleashing a passion that made her wild. She arched her back. Her keening cry filled the night. "All of me. Take all of me!"

He spread her ass wide and circled her tightly puckered hole with his tongue. Icy Frost *iede* coated her, prepared her. She clutched the silk binding her wrists, fear insinuating itself into the tingling heat. He was huge. If he put his cock up her ass...

His middle finger pushed inside, interrupting her desperate thoughts. "Not while you're still afraid. I can take you here without pain, but I will wait until you trust me before I show you."

Rubbing the cool head of his cock up and down within her folds, he lubricated himself thoroughly. She held perfectly still while he pushed his thick length into her aching cunt. Her walls stretched, eagerly accommodating his fullness. On and on he drove until finally she felt his thighs press against hers and his balls nestled against her mons.

"Don't move," he whispered. "You are so hot. I'm afraid you'll burn me if you come."



She whimpered. Having his throbbing cock impale her was what she'd been waiting for, longing for. All she had to do was squeeze her inner muscles and she knew she'd go off like a rocket.

"Relax."

"You drive me to the brink of madness, but I can't enjoy it?" Her laugh ended on a sob.

The finger in her ass pushed deeper. She cried out. Before he'd touched her there she'd sworn she wasn't into this, but someone needed to explain that to her body. Her anal passage rippled and throbbed in time with her pussy. Cold seeped through the churning heat, increasing her awareness of the dual penetration.

His finger twisted, spreading the icy sensation, while his cock pulled back almost out of her. He thrust into her pussy and pulled out of her ass, in and out, in opposite directions.

She grasped the edge of the table and braced for each counterattack.

Hot. Cold.

In. Out.

His balls slapped against her wet folds at the apex of each thrust, stimulating her clit. The warm breeze dancing across her naked flesh and playing through her hair bore his scent. There was no part of her body not attuned to their joining.

He moved faster, penetrated deeper. "Say my name," he demanded.

His arm banded her hips, pulling her up off the table as his cold seed exploded within her hot cunt. Buried to the hilt, his

cock jerked and bumped against her cervix, and his hand splayed against her ass.

Held motionless in her mate's firm embrace, Cayenne surrendered to the powerful spasms of pleasure. "Malik, *rijnna mi*."

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## Chapter Four

Midsummer sun beat down on Malik, warming his face and making the Frost *iede* in the tips of his hair tingle. Cayenne's fingers felt hot against his cool skin, but it was a natural contrast, not the uncontrollable burning of *Pim Noctar*. They had successfully completed their bonding.

"This is Jackson Square." She made a sweeping gesture toward the open area across the street from where they stood. The square was bisected by perpendicular paths. Trees lined the perimeter, and displayed at the intersection of the paths was the statue of a man mounted on a horse.

"Is that Jackson?"

"Yes. Andrew Jackson, a Civil War hero. The church on the other side of the square is St. Louis Cathedral."

He smiled. She had turned into a chatty little tour guide as soon as they hopped on the dark green trolley not far from her house. He was more interested in watching the sunlight play across her delicate features than in the Victorian architecture and the university where she graduated some years before, but he smiled and nodded attentively.

"Café Du Monde has stores all over the city now," she said. "This is the original and it never closes."

"Jax said he'd buy the beignets."

"Good. They're wonderful."

Jax was nowhere in sight when they arrived. Shadow Keepers could be tricky. Just because Jax wasn't visible didn't mean he wasn't there. Malik didn't share this information with

Cayenne however. They went to an open table in one corner of the bustling room, brushed powdered sugar off the chairs, and sat.

"Who is this Jax person anyway?"

"An old friend. I'm hoping he can help us find out what happened to your parents."

Her lips pressed together and she glanced away. "Why is it so important? I've had almost twenty years to deal—"

"Eighteen years. Your parents were killed the year you should have been returned to Dimension 290-2 for training. A Keeper is given eighteen years to master their skills. Eighteen years of training with a variety of mentors and teachers. You were intentionally deprived of that opportunity. We need to know why."

"It will take you eighteen years to train me?"

He chuckled at her devastated expression. "As bonded mates I am able to transmit information in ways that conventional training doesn't allow."

She laughed. "I would certainly hope not. Either that or teaching would become the most popular profession in any dimension."

"Undoubtedly. Ah, here comes Jax."

Dressed all in black, as was his wont, Jax Severn moved through the crowded restaurant like a wraith. His angular features and jet black eyes should have commanded attention, but somehow he managed to blend into the mass, flowing with the current of humanity.

"He's only noticed when he wants to be, isn't he?"

"That's the nature of a Shadow Keeper and Jax is one of the best."

"Good morning," Jax greeted them as he reached the table. "What, no beignets? No café mocha? I'm going back to bed."

"You were supposed to be hosting this excursion," Malik reminded him.

Jax pulled a twenty out of his wallet and stopped a passing employee. She informed him that he needed to wait in line and he handed her another twenty for her inconvenience. With a beaming smile, she went to fill his order.

"Still playing by the rules, I see." Malik chuckled.

Ignoring the comment, he proffered his hand toward Cayenne. "Jax Severn."

"Cayenne Dover."

"You're a Flame Keeper? Why haven't I heard of you?"

"Exactly what we need you to find out. Until I arrived Cayenne had no idea who, or should I say what, she is."

Cayenne's gaze moved between the two men. "How did Jax know what I am?"

"Your hair," Malik said. "Everyone with Flame *iede* has hair like yours."

The young woman arrived with their food and departed just as quickly. Jax set two baskets of powdered sugar covered confections in the middle of the table and handed them each a paper cup of steaming chicory-flavored coffee. They explained what Cayenne believed about her past and Malik's approval by Matriarch Flame while they enjoyed the morning treat.

"This is the part I don't understand," Cayenne said tersely. "If Matriarch Flame is my grandmother, how could she have not known her daughter was dead? I've lived in that house since before I lost my parents, but it seems unlikely that she knew nothing about the accident. Why weren't you warned? Is there no communication between the dimensions?"

"It's a bit more complicated than dialing a cell phone, but messages are sent back and forth all the time." Jax took a sip of his coffee. "I'll summon a Veil Keeper and ask Matriarch Flame those very questions, but it will take a day or two to hear back. In the meantime, I'll start digging into your parents' accident."

"It was no accident and we all know it." Malik crossed his arms over his chest, staring at Cayenne thoughtfully. Was she in danger even now? Probably not. So, who had benefited from her parents' death? "What is the name of your guardian? Where is she now?"

"Rachel Forsyth. There is no way she was involved in any of this. She moved to a retirement community in Florida about six years ago and she never made a penny off her kindness to me."

Malik shot Jax a silent directive with his gaze.

The Shadow Keeper nodded.

\* \* \* \*

Cayenne was quiet on the way back to her house. All the talk of death and mystery had left her depressed and frustrated.

"Do you have a job?" Malik asked, fidgeting beside her on the hard wooden seat of the trolley.

"Not in the conventional sense. My parents left me a sizable trust fund, so employment has always been optional. After I graduated from Tulane—"

"What did you study?"

"History and literature." She laughed. "Rachel used to say I could either work in a museum or a library. But I met Julie when I was a senior and she moved in with us. Rachel moved out the following summer and I took in two additional boarders. I've had Tulane students living with me ever since."

"How do you spend your time?"

She shrugged. "However I like. I've kept in touch with some of my professors and they send me struggling students from time to time. I enjoy tutoring. I also offer research services. They give me a subject and I give them organized, verifiable information, even outlines—for a fee."

"You're a professional student." He grinned.

"This is our stop."

They strolled up the tree-lined lane hand in hand. Cayenne's heart fluttered as she remembered the night before. Already it felt so right, so perfect to have him by her side.

"Your training will make having houseguests awkward," he began. "Where are your tenants now?"

"Julie stays with her boyfriend most weekends anyway. I can ask her to make herself scarce for a while. She'd be thrilled to oblige." Remembering her friend's advice about

taking a lover, Cayenne felt a blush blossom across her cheeks.

He paused and brushed his thumb across her flushed skin.  
"What brought this on?"

"I foolishly confessed to Julie that I had been having erotic dreams. She'll think I picked you up in a bar or something."

"Let her think what she likes, just tell her to stay away."

Malik followed her into the kitchen and watched as she punched Paul's number into the cordless phone. She got his machine, so she tried Julie's cell. "Hi, Julie."

"Hey, what's going on?"

"What are your plans for the rest of the weekend?"  
Cayenne asked.

"We've got a party tonight, but I figured I'd come home Sunday. Is everything okay? Do you need me to come home now? I can miss the party. Paul wouldn't—"

"No, just the opposite. I was wondering if you could stay with Paul for the rest of the week, maybe longer."

"Okay, I'll bite. Why do you need the house to yourself?"

Cayenne intentionally cleared her throat. "I don't have the house to myself."

"Oh—my—God! You actually did it? You found yourself some fine young stud?"

Malik snatched the phone from her and she covered her face with her hands, realizing he could hear Julie's excited voice coming out of the receiver.

"This fine young stud isn't partial to bedrooms, so when you're ready to pick up your clothes, make sure you call before you stop by."



Mystic Keepers (Collection)  
*by Aubrey Ross*

He hung up and Cayenne dissolved into laughter.

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## Chapter Five

"Damn, woman. You burned me again."

He shook his hand and then blew on his scorched finger. Cayenne did her best not to laugh. They'd been at it for hours without a break. He was a ruthless taskmaster and all she really wanted was to tumble him to the living room floor and tear off his clothes.

"Maybe if I had something more interesting to put in my mouth, I'd have reason to be more careful."

Laughing, he shot her a sidelong glance. "You just gave me third degree burns on my finger and you want me to put something more 'interesting' in your mouth?"

"It was just an idea." She plopped down on the couch with an exaggerated sigh. "I'm tired of training. This is frustrating. It's boring!"

"Boring? Learning to control your mystic power is boring?"

"Okay, it's hard as hell and I want to do something else for a while. Is that too much to ask? Can we watch a movie? Or take a bath. Or just—"

In the blink of an eye his clothing vanished. Malik stood before her unabashedly naked, legs slightly spread, cock jutting toward her, proudly erect.

"How did you—do that?" Her gaze fixed eagerly on his thick cock.

"This?" He stroked his fist up and down along its length. "Or banish my clothes?"

Dragging her gaze to his face, she smiled. "The little clothing trick. Even humans can manage a hard-on."

"Like this one?"

He had a point.

"I've not worn anything but Frost *iede* on my body for almost ten years now. I can manipulate it to appear as anything I want and command it to disintegrate just as easily."

"You're serious? You weren't really wearing clothes just a minute ago?"

He grinned. "You'll be able to do the same in time. But only if you apply what I'm trying to teach you."

"You better reconstruct the illusion if we're going to practice some more. That's a little distracting."

Kneeling in front of the couch, he framed her face with his hands. "You criticized my curriculum. I'm striving to make my lessons more enjoyable."

He pressed his mouth over hers, tilting his face to allow the firmest seal. She waited for the bold thrust of his tongue, but he circled their joined lips in silent invitation. Understanding, she ventured into his mouth with her tongue, startled by the cold enveloping her. She adjusted the temperature with her tongue, increasing the heat gradually until she was comfortable, but not hot.

"Good," he whispered, his moist lips moving against hers. "Very good. Now let's do it the other way around. I'll come to you."

His ice-cold tongue slid into her mouth and she squirmed, but he held her firmly. Concentrating, focusing, she heated

the interior of her mouth. They kissed, practicing her control again and again until she was panting and lightheaded.

Without a word he stood, her face still framed between his hands. She looked up at him, half-afraid, yet thrilled that he would let her try. He leaned in. She licked her lips. Opening wide, she caught the head of his cock in her mouth, swirling her tongue around the tip.

Cold and hard, his cock was like nothing she'd ever felt before. His skin was velvety soft, yet underneath was unyielding, ice-cold marble. She sucked him deeper, watching his eyes drift shut and his muscles flex.

She cupped his heavy balls in one hand and reached between his powerful thighs with the other. His ass cheeks remained relaxed as she probed, silently encouraging her. She'd never touched a man here, but instinctively she knew Malik would enjoy it—revel in it.

His cock throbbed madly. She slid her mouth up and down, taking him as deeply as she could, while she searched between his cheeks for the tightly puckered hole he enjoyed tormenting.

"Oh, yes," he muttered in a harsh, hoarse voice.

Knowing he wanted her to do this thrilled her even more. She stroked his balls, adoring his cock with her warm, wet mouth. She circled his hole with her fingertip and heat discharged. Oh, God, she'd shot him with Flame *iede*.

He jerked and groaned, his cock bucking. She sucked him deep into her mouth and moved her hand to his lean hip. Rocking back and forth, he slid in and out of her mouth. She continued to massage his balls.

His hips pumped. He filled her throat with each forward lunge. She swirled her tongue around his tip as he pulled back, sucking firmly all the while. His balls tightened and drew up. He thrust deep.

With a strangled groan, he spilled his seed down her throat.

Cayenne shivered violently. His icy essence slid deeper into her body, spreading cold, making her tingle as it went.

He pulled out and bent to kiss her deeply, undeterred by the taste he'd left in her mouth. She moved her hands to his back, hugging him.

"*Rijnna mi*," he whispered against her lips.

She pushed him back, looking deeply into his shining eyes. "What does that mean? I know it's an endearment. But can it be translated into English?"

"Not exactly. 'Beloved one' is as close as English gets, but that doesn't capture the spirit of *rijnna mi*. It means I value your happiness more highly than my own. It means I'll lay down my life before I see you harmed. It means you will never want for anything it is within my power to provide."

Tears gathered on her lashes. Cayenne was afraid to blink. Even if he hadn't meant a word of it, that was the most beautiful thing she'd ever heard.

He kissed her again, gently as if he could sense her vulnerability. Malik made her feel everything so strongly she was afraid of being consumed by their passion.

Sweeping her into his arms, he carried her up the stairs and into her bedroom. He set her down beside the bed and

pulled her tank top off over her head. The built-in bra came off with it leaving her naked to the waist.

"I'll be right back." She didn't give him time to ask what she needed as she rushed from the room. Her robe hung on the back of the bathroom door. She pulled the belt free of the loops and started back toward the bedroom. Being tied up and utterly at his mercy had been the most exciting experience of her life. She wanted him to dominate her again. He'd felt it necessary the night before. What if he found her desire distasteful now?

She shoved the silk belt into the pocket of her shorts and returned to the bedroom.

"Where'd you go?"

"I was ... When you..."

"What's in your pocket?"

Glancing down, she saw the conspicuous bulge and realized she hadn't concealed anything. She didn't say a word. She pulled the blood red belt from her pocket and held it out to him, praying he'd understand.

"Take off your shorts."

She didn't hesitate. Kicking them aside, she stood before him naked, empty, waiting.

"What is this?" He pulled her vibrator out from behind his back.

Cayenne's hand flew to her mouth. He was the only man who'd ever been in her bedroom, so she'd never thought to hide the silly thing. It was tucked away in one corner of her headboard, partially covered by a pillow—usually.

Her pussy rippled painfully at the familiar sight and the heat infusing her body could be arousal or humiliation, she wasn't sure. "A vibrator." Clearly he didn't recognize the term. "A sex toy."

"You pleasure yourself with this?"

"Yes. Put it back where you found it."

"No." He grinned. "Activate it."

"I don't need it anymore. I have a real lover now."

"Women who have real lovers don't use sex toys? Such is not the case in my dimension. They are fashioned to more closely resemble the appearance of a penis, but I assure you, we have these sorts of gadgets in Dimension 290-2."

"Just twist the bottom." She closed her eyes, listening as he experimented with the various speeds.

"Get on the bed."

"Put the vibrator away."

He scooped her up and deposited her in the middle of the bed. In her humiliation over his discovery, she'd completely forgotten about the belt. He pulled her arms over her head and tied her wrists together. This was what she'd wanted. Wasn't it? Uncertainty prickled through her abdomen. He secured her bound wrists to the bottom rail of her headboard and then joined her on the bed.

The menacing hum of the vibrator stopped, but he set it within easy reach. His hands glided over her body starting at her upraised arms and meandering downward. He tickled her underarms, stroked her neck, her shoulders.

She arched up to meet him as his hands reached her breasts. His cold fingers circled her nipples, drawing them

into tight aching buds. He bent and blew over and into them. The mystic stream flowed straight to her clit, flicking it mercilessly.

"That's so unfair," she cried. "No Frost *iede*."

He raised his head and smiled into her eyes. "No." Scooting down along her body, he pushed her legs wide. "I'm a Frost Keeper and I will make love to my mate in any way that pleases her."

With that established, he parted her tender folds and lashed her clit directly with his *iede*-laced tongue. Spikes of pleasure/pain shot through Cayenne. She squeezed her inner muscles tightly, but her cunt was empty, hollow.

He pulled his mouth away and she cried out mournfully. Just a second or two longer and she'd have come! "Please, Malik. Now."

She heard him turn on the vibrator and groaned.

"Use it on my clit. Make me come. I can't take this."

Arching over her, he kissed her mouth. "You'll take whatever I give you."

Then he pushed the vibrator slowly—too slowly—into her throbbing cunt.

Cayenne went wild, twisting and writhing.

He grabbed the backs of her knees and pushed her legs up and back, pinning her to the bed with her own body. She tried to expel the offending vibrator, but he had lodged it too deeply. He bent over her, using his chin to push it even deeper before he went to work on her clit.

Lapping and pressing, circling and flicking, he gave her one orgasm after another. She moaned, panted, and screamed.



He turned the vibrator off, but continued to lick her clit, building another cycle of arousal. Staggered by the sensations ricocheting through her body, Cayenne cried out softly when he drew away from her overflowing pussy.

"Do you trust me?" he asked, tracing her mouth with his index finger.

"With my life."

He smiled. "With your body?"

"Yes, *rijnna mi*," she responded. "I give you everything."

He kissed her slowly, deeply. She trembled. The exotic flavor on his tongue was her own passion. She responded wildly, delving boldly. An increase in the pressure around her wrists told her he was adjusting the bindings. He didn't untie her hands, just freed her from the headboard.

Without prompting, she turned over and folded her legs under her, leaning forward on her forearms. Her inner thighs were slick with cream and her feminine folds felt swollen and sensitive. The vibrator still impaled her cunt.

"Are you sure?" he whispered.

"Yes."

He pulled her cheeks apart and she arched her back for him. His *iede*-coated tongue circled her, rubbed her, prepared her. The cold invasion of his finger came first, breached her gently. Then two fingers stretched her, intensified the tingling cold.

She trembled.

Icy, slick, the head of his cock pushed hard against her anus.

Pressure.

"Relax. Accept me."

She concentrated on her breathing, focused on the sweet, prickly chill spiraling through her. Her body relaxed. His cock slid in and Frost *iede* erupted spontaneously. She giggled.

"That feels almost the same as when you come."

"Well, hold still or you'll feel the real thing. You are incredibly tight. Am I hurting you?"

"Not really."

He managed to maneuver his hand between her legs and found her clit. "Oh, Gods, you are so wet!"

Gently stroking her clit with each miniature thrust, he began to move in her ass. He worked some of her cream around his cock, allowing him to slide more easily.

The sting eased. Her body throbbed with a distinct rhythm, intensified by the incredible pressure. She braced her legs. His cock moved smoothly in and out, while his fingers flicked across her swollen clit.

Tension twisted.

Friction.

Hot and cold, pleasure and pain combined in a tempest of sensation.

Her cunt gripped the vibrator. Her ass massaged his cock. She trembled and moaned. The pleasure built.

He pushed deep with his cock and pulled the vibrator nearly out. Cayenne gasped. A violent shudder shook her. Pushing in with the vibrator, he pulled out with his cock. He moved in her, against her, completing her. She gave without reservation, surrendered without hesitation, and her orgasm finally unfurled.

His hands clutched her hips as he buried himself to the hilt in her throbbing ass. She bit back a scream, but Malik's cry echoed off the walls. He shuddered, pumping his seed deep into her body.

He collapsed onto his side, pulling her with him. They lay there for a long time, too exhausted to move, then he carefully separated their bodies and tossed the vibrator aside. She curled up against him, her head resting on his shoulder.

Cayenne was nearly asleep when a chuckle rumbled through his chest. "What's so funny?"

"Would you like me to untie you?"

Glancing down at her bound wrists with a sleepy smile, she shook her head and snuggled into the comfort of his embrace.

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## Epilogue

Unable to conceal her silly grin, Cayenne ran down the stairs to answer the front door. She couldn't wait to tell Julie about Malik ... well, to tell Julie how happy she had been since Malik burst into her life six days before. She had no intention of sharing all of the intimate details of her relationship, but—

Jax Severn stood on her front porch looking even more dangerous than he'd looked the morning they'd met in Café Du Monde. His black hair just brushed his shoulders and narrow, darkly tinted sunglasses hid his expression.

She managed a smile and unlatched the screen door. "Jax. Malik has discovered the po-boy. There's a sandwich shop down the street he is single-handedly keeping in business." Pushing the door open, she cautiously admitted the Shadow Keeper. "He should be back in a few minutes."

He brushed past her and into the front room of the house. "The information I have is actually for you. Do you want to wait for him or—"

"I'm in the kitchen. No need to wait." Malik's voice startled them both.

Turning toward the back of the house, Cayenne motioned for Jax to follow. "When did you get back?"

"While you were in the shower, apparently."

Malik sat at the kitchen table happily munching on one of the mammoth sandwiches. "So, what did Matriarch Flame have to say?"

"She sent me a scathing message on Order of Flame letterhead that basically told me to butt the hell out. But she also sent this." He proffered a solid red crystal toward Cayenne.

She looked at the object for a moment before lifting it from his palm. Warmth emanated from the crystal. Flame *iede*. Malik had just begun to show her all of the ways in which *iede* could be manipulated, manifested, and controlled.

"Did you open it?" Malik asked casually.

"And have my hands incinerated? Not a chance. She's the Flame Keeper. This was obviously meant for her."

Wiping his mouth on a paper napkin, Malik pushed the po-boy aside and came around the table. "I'll help you control it if I can, but hopefully she'll have made it easy for you. *Iede* messages can be encrypted or laced with mystic traps, but Matriarch Flame knows your abilities."

"Or lack thereof," she grumbled.

He showed her how to cup her hands, where to place the crystal. "Now breathe on it." He smiled. "That's like saying hello."

She glanced at Jax. He remained at a discreet distance, his sunglasses gone, revealing his jet black eyes. Unnerved by his assessing stare, she returned her attention to the Flame crystal. "She's ignored me for eighteen years. Do I really care what she has to say?"

Energizing her breath, she leaned down and activated the crystal. Heat radiated, sinking into her flesh, stimulating her power. A resonance as familiar as her own pulse throbbed within her being. The Rhythm of Flame.

The crystal glowed, pink, rose, crimson—fire!

Cayenne absorbed the heat, accepted the flame, acknowledged her nature. "Speak, Grandmother. I am ready to listen."

The image of Matriarch Flame solidified within the crystal, tiny, yet intricately detailed. A perfect likeness. "I regret this cannot be interactive, Cayenne. But anything I do risks your safety. He is ruthless. I was so sure taking your mother from me would satisfy his thirst for blood. Such is not the case. You have not been abandoned these eighteen years. Your guardian was hand-chosen by me. Many of the people to cross your path have been Keepers. You have been observed, guarded, protected every step of the way."

Cayenne looked at Malik. The warmth in his eyes gave her courage. She fed more *iede* into the crystal and the message continued.

"Your training will be unconventional, but the Frost Keeper I sent you is strong. He is your equal and opposite." The old woman smiled. "I suspect he will not let you forget. Concentrate entirely on your training. I pray it will not come to war, but if he continues to push me, I will be forced to retaliate."

Thinking the message was finished, Cayenne asked, "Who is 'he'? Who did she keep referring to?"

"Your bonded mate will keep you safe, but Lorrان is all alone. We must be ready when she..."

The last sentence faded away as the crystal sputtered out. Cayenne tried to reactivate it. Nothing happened. She tried again and it shattered, disintegrating into fine pink powder.

"Fabulous! Who the blazes is Lorrان?" She shot an expectant look at Jax, but he just shrugged. "Summon one of those Veil people. I want to talk to her in person."

Malik cupped her hands between his, stroking her knuckles with his thumb. "She has kept you out of this for a reason. You're not going anywhere until we know more about the conflict and you are better equipped to deal with what may come. Did you not hear the command of your Matriarch? Concentrate entirely on your training."

"But she knows who killed my parents!"

"She must lack proof or they would have been brought before the Steering Committee long ago. She knows what she's doing. She sent me to you, didn't she?"

Cayenne smiled. Her heartbeat thudded as she worked to calm her manic thoughts. "But who is Lorrان? Grandmother obviously wanted me to know about her, so how do I find out if you won't let me leave the house?"

He chuckled. "I never said you couldn't leave the house. I said you couldn't leave my side. I'm your mentor, and you are on a condensed, intensified training schedule."

Jax laughed. "Is that what they're calling it these days."

"It's my guess that Matriarch Flame was counting on your being here to hear her message, Jax. The letter was her official response to your inquiries, but she's just given you some crucial pieces to the puzzle."

"I'm on it, Frost." His dark gaze moved over Cayenne's face before he turned and left the room.

Malik pulled her into his arms and kissed her tenderly. "This isn't over, sweetheart. It's just beginning. When you're

stronger, I'll summon a Veil Keeper and we'll find out exactly what this is all about. But in the meantime you're going to have to trust me."

"I trust you with my life." She wrapped her arms around his neck, molding herself against him.

"And your body?"

Heat erupted in all the right places.

"Always," she whispered against his mouth.

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## **Mystic Keepers 2: Crystal**

Aubrey Ross

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## Prologue

"Move your hand, Severn, or you're going to lose it!"

Jax chuckled at the Veil Keeper's mostly-playful threat and reluctantly pulled his hand away from her nicely rounded ass. The silky fabric of her skirt was no real barrier. "But, Minuette, *coming* through the Veil always makes me horny."

She laughed and pushed him back. "You were born horny. Inter-dimensional travel has nothing to do with it."

A quick jab of resentment cooled his raging hormones. He hadn't been born horny. He'd been abandoned by his bonded mate, leaving him in a perpetual state of rut from which he could find only the most superficial relief.

But the little Veil Keeper didn't know about his mate. Few people did. Which was the way Jax liked it. No one should pity a Shadow Keeper.

He watched her hips sway as she moved down the sun-drenched sidewalk. Fanning out behind her in a swirl of muted color, her flowing calf-length skirt and sleeveless tank top almost blended in with Earth's current fashion. She was headed in the wrong direction, but *prazot*, what a view!

"Which one is it?"

"That one." He pointed to the charming blue and white Victorian house on the corner across the street.

Minuette spun to face him, her waist-length hair whipping around her torso in gleaming waves of silver and gold. Her gaze lost even the hint of blue, clouding over like a stormy sky. "I'm really not in the mood to play with you."

"That's too bad. I think you'd enjoy playing with me." He was just teasing her—mostly.

He might be restless and discontent, but he had principles. Seducing his best friend's sister crossed the line.

"It's never going to happen, so get over it." She brushed past him with obvious impatience and headed toward the house he'd indicated. "Is Malik expecting us? I don't want to spring this on him."

"He's expecting a report, but not necessarily today." He fell into step beside her. "He's definitely not expecting you."

She stopped, fists planted firmly on her hips, hair rippling in the breeze. "You make me sound incompetent. I've navigated the Veil before, you know. You weren't my first."

"But I'd be your last." He grinned. Provoking her was so much fun. He couldn't seem to help himself. "One night in my bed and I'd—"

"Do you ever think about anything but sex? *Prazot*, you're a pain in the ass."

His teasing rejoinder would only help prove her point, so Jax kept quiet. He opened the wrought-iron gate and motioned her into the front yard. Neat flowering shrubs bordered a lush green lawn and the massive tree centered in the grass gave off a pleasant scent. Early spring in New Orleans reflected well on this dimension.

Crossing to the door, he had his finger over the doorbell when he heard a throaty moan. A metal-framed screen door blocked the entrance, but the main door stood ajar.

"Sounds like they're training," he said softly, trying not to laugh.

"Training?" Minuette's face scrunched up in confusion. A sharp gasp followed the next moan and she turned bright red. "Oh, for heaven's sake. It's the middle of the afternoon."

Jax leaned toward the screen door, peering into the front room. Keeper training at its finest. Cayenne bent over the sofa's thickly padded arm, gloriously naked. Her fair skin gleamed with perspiration and her breasts jostled with each of Malik's forceful thrusts. Her mate held her arms crossed at the small of her back and pounded into her from behind, his knees bent for leverage.

"Can you see them?" Minuette whispered. He stepped back and swept his hand toward the door. She gasped. "I don't want to watch my brother..."

"Fuck his bonded mate? You should take a peek. You might learn a thing or two."

"You're disgusting."

He laughed. "Should we let them finish? Knowing Malik, this could take a while." Cayenne cried out loudly. "Or not."

Glancing back inside, Jax checked to see if they were finished or just repositioning. Malik stroked Cayenne's breasts as she slumped against the sofa. If they were contemplating round two, this was a good time for an intermission. Jax rang the doorbell.

"I can't believe they were ... Are they naked?"

Jax looked at the flustered Veil Keeper and laughed. "You're still a virgin, aren't you? I thought celibacy was only required during training."

"My training is not yet complete."

"Let me know when it is."

"In your dreams."

Malik pulled the door open. He'd dressed, sort of. His black jeans were securely fastened, but he hadn't bothered to button his shirt. It hung open from his shoulders like a jacket.

"Jax," he greeted with a lazy I-just-got-laid grin, then narrowed his eyes. "How long have you been standing there?"

"I thought it only polite to let you finish."

"And you..." His words trailed away as his gray/blue gaze fell on his sister. "Minuette!" He flung open the screen door, forcing Jax to jump back. "Did *you* navigate the Veil? I didn't realize you'd finished your training."

She returned his enthusiastic hug. "I've been approved for solo ventures, but my training is far from complete."

"It's wonderful to see you."

Malik led them inside. Cayenne was nowhere in sight. "Are you hungry? Thirsty? Did you just arrive?"

"Not really, a glass of water would be great, and yes," Jax replied.

Cayenne strolled into the kitchenette as Malik handed Jax the requested beverage. Flushed and rosy from her recent exertion, she offered him an embarrassed hello before turning her attention to the other woman.

"Hi. I'm Cayenne." She proffered her hand in typical Earth fashion, but the Veil Keeper inclined her head and crossed her arms over her chest, tucking her fists against her body.

"Please don't think me rude. I'm of the Sacred Order of the Veil. Until my training is complete every time I touch someone, or am touched by someone," she shot Jax a meaningful glare, "it defuses my energy."

Cayenne's bright, red-streaked brown hair provided a striking contrast for Minuette's blonde beauty. Like his sister's, Malik's hair faded from rich gold at the roots to sparkling silver at the end of each strand. Minuette's waist-length locks displayed the color transformation even more dramatically. "Are you Minuette, Malik's sister?"

"I am."

Cayenne chuckled. "I pictured someone much younger. Evidently your brother still thinks of you as a child."

"I want to hear all about your training and what's going on back home, but Jax isn't here for a family reunion. What news have you from Matriarch Flame?"

Jax couldn't help but remember the conversation they'd shared in this very room two weeks before. He had hoped to know more by now, but Matriarch Flame refused to see him. "She's still playing the 'stay out of my face and I'll slip it to you under the table' game. But even the information she has provided is sketchy. I'm not sure she knows what's going on."

"What have you learned?" Cayenne asked.

"Lorran is your sister."

"My sister." She sounded doubtful. "I was ten when my parents died. I think I would have remembered a sister."

"She's two years your junior and she was sent away for her protection shortly after her birth. Few two-year-olds retain distinct memories."

"If my sister had to be sent away to protect her, why wasn't I in danger?"

Jax shrugged. "I don't know yet."

"What were they protecting her from?"

"Like I said, the information is still sketchy, but my money's on the mysterious 'he' in Matriarch Flame's first message." Jax watched Cayenne's expression tense. Malik slipped his arm around her shoulders.

"Do we know who 'he' is?" Malik sounded annoyed. Jax understood his frustration. Malik was hoping for answers, not more questions and mysteries.

"Matriarch Flame won't confirm anything at this stage, but I believe 'he' is Alrick, of the Order of Time."

Malik shook his head and raked his spiky hair with his fingers. "Why would the Time Master be threatened by the child of two Flame Keepers?"

"I never said he was threatened by her. I think his interest in Lorrان is completely different than his animosity toward Kayrin and Larot."

Cayenne released a short, sharp burst of nervous laughter. "Kayrin and Larot? Are you referring to my parents?"

"Yes. Were those not the names they used on Earth?"

"No. They called themselves Karen and Larry Dover."

"It's common practice to adopt identities appropriate to a Keeper's assigned dimension. We have to operate in anonymity or our missions are compromised." Jax looked at Minuette. She hadn't said a word, just silently took it all in.

"Back to Lorrان," Malik prompted. "Do you know where she is? Is she still in danger? Does she realize her true origin or was the information kept from her, as it was from Cayenne?"

"I have a pretty good idea, it's a very real possibility, and I haven't a clue."

"What?"

Jax laughed. "You have a bad habit of rattling off questions fifteen at a time. I have a pretty good idea where Lorrان is. I have no idea if she was kept in the dark like Cayenne or if someone has been secretly training her. I was sent a dossier right before Minuette brought me through the Veil. I'm not sure what triggered Matriarch Flame's sudden generosity, but *something* happened."

"What does the dossier contain?" Cayenne asked.

"Pieces to the puzzle. There was also a handwritten note. It said 'while you fetch the girl, send Cayenne to me'."

Her eyes widened. "Grandmother wants me to leave Earth?"

"She wants you to come home," Malik clarified.

"That's why I'm here." Minuette spoke for the first time. "So few even know you're alive. Matriarch Flame could trust no one else to escort you back to our dimension."

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## Chapter One

Crystal Yancy rushed into the spa on the Lido deck of the *Fantastique*, frantically pulling back her hair as she approached the reception desk. She managed to get the elastic band looped around her ponytail as Fern handed her the clipboard and surprised her with a smile.

"He's been waiting twenty minutes. This would have thrown your whole afternoon off if your three o'clock hadn't canceled."

"My three o'clock canceled?" Fern nodded and Crystal sighed. "Thank God for small favors."

"It's your day for them, darlin'. You got yourself one hell of a favor waiting in there. I was about to turn the phones over to voicemail and massage him myself."

"You're not qualified."

Fern laughed. "He doesn't know that."

Pausing outside the door, Crystal scanned her client's preference card and smiled. 'Rub me!' he'd written in bold block letters and then proceeded to select every possible area to be massaged.

Crystal's belly fluttered in anticipation. Was he as appealing as Fern said?

As a massage therapist, Crystal worked on every imaginable body type. It was all pretty routine. She raised her professional detachment and helped people relax for an hour. Fern's uncharacteristic enthusiasm piqued her curiosity.

Knocking briefly to announce her entrance, she stepped into the private room. The man lay on his stomach, his arms raised, face surrounded by the hole in the padded table. Except for the towel draped across his hips, he was naked, and waiting for her.

*Oh my.* Fern hadn't exaggerated. His body stretched the entire length of the table and then some, every inch of him sculpted perfection. Dark, wavy hair brushed the table obscuring what little she could see of his face. Maybe he had the body of a god and the face of a gargoyle. She grinned, feeling foolish.

"Good afternoon." She cleared her throat, trying to rid her voice of its tremor. "I'm sorry to keep you waiting. How are you enjoying the cruise?"

He mumbled something unintelligible. Okay, so he wasn't going to be much for conversation. She'd dealt with a whole lot worse. The diffused lighting created a soft, relaxed atmosphere. Simmering potpourri perfumed the air with chamomile, lavender, and a hint of almond.

"My name is Crystal and I've reviewed your preference card. Is there any particular area giving you trouble?"

Again she couldn't make out his words. He bent one knee, raising his foot off the table. She generally started with the torso and worked her way out, but she could be flexible.

Taking his foot between her hands, she went to work. "Is this your first cruise?"

"Um-hum."

She was pretty sure that was an affirmative. "How are you enjoying it so far?"

Another mumble.

His calf muscles were solid and well defined. She smiled. That pretty much summed up his entire body. Warmth curled low in her belly. Her skin tingled with sexual awareness.

*He's a client! You're here to help him relax. Stress is a silent killer. You are here to heal!*

Suppressing her unwanted reaction, she focused on the task at hand and applied firm pressure with each stroke. His body heat seeped into her palms. A slow melting sensation passed through her abdomen. What in the world was wrong with her? She never allowed herself to be aroused by her work.

She tried again to engage him in conversation, needing the distraction desperately. He offered another inarticulate jumble of sound.

As she reached his thighs, he moved his legs apart. Tension crackled in the room. Was he hoping she'd touch him inappropriately? She grinned. *Not a chance*. He might be temptation personified, but she needed this job. It had certain very important benefits, like never keeping her in one place very long.

She hesitated at the edge of his towel. He'd checked the box next to clunes. Buttocks was in parenthesis beside the selection, so he had to have known what he was asking her to do.

*Do you really want me to rub your ass?* She had to bite her lip to keep from laughing.

"Mr. Smith, your card indicates that you want a full-body massage. I'm going to move the drape now."

"Um-hum."

She lifted the towel to his waist and froze. High on his right ass cheek rested an all too familiar birthmark. Several shades darker than his lightly tanned skin, the mark so closely resembled lip prints that it had become a source of amusement for the man bearing the mark.

"Jax?" she whispered.

*This can't be happening.*

He rolled onto his side, nearly dislodging the towel. As he pushed his hair out of his eyes Crystal trembled.

"Hi there, sunshine. It's been a long time."

Swinging his long legs over the side of the table, he caught her wrist and pulled her toward him. The towel just barely covered his lap as he reeled her in. Crystal forgot to breathe, forgot everything but his intense dark gaze and his thought-stealing features. He was even more amazing than she remembered, if that were possible. Six feet, four inches of rippling muscle and sinew. She wanted to press her body against him, touch him, kiss him, and...

"Wait!" She gave herself a mental shake. "What are you doing here?"

"Setting a trap for a Light Keeper. Imagine my surprise to find *you* in my trap."

Anger made his tone brittle and those night-black eyes flashed with warning. Did he know about the Flame Princess or was he still angry about ... It had been six years!

She'd never expected to see him again. Surely after all this time he'd moved on with his life. Her heart thundered painfully.

*Okay, Crystal, pull yourself together.* She had to figure out what he knew. "What's going on?" She tried to sound casual, confused. "Who sent you?"

"You know damn good and well who sent me. Where is Lorrان?"

"Can you please put your clothes on? This is a little distracting."

He laughed, hooking his heels around the backs of her thighs. His gaze caressed her face, intense and inscrutable. "My body never bothered you before. I remember a time when you couldn't wait to get me out of my clothes."

She remembered it too. Every touch, every sigh.

And the agonizing loss of leaving him...

"What are you doing here?" She made it a demand this time.

"I'm looking for Lorrان." He clasped her upper arms, dragging her up onto the balls of her feet. "And you're going to tell me where she is."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

Releasing her arms, he kept his legs wrapped around her, while his knuckles caressed the side of her face, tormenting her with their gentleness. "The trail is so distorted with illusion I knew I was dealing with a Light Keeper. When I realized the intricacy of the illusions, I should have suspected it was you."

"There were reasons I—"

He snatched his hand back, his fingers clenched into a fist, and he lowered his arm. "This has nothing to do with six years ago."

He was wrong. The two events were connected in ways he couldn't imagine. "Will you please listen, or are you still determined to hate me?"

"I don't hate you. How could I? But I know better than to believe one word that passes those lying lips."

Before she could protest he framed her face with his palms and claimed her mouth in a harsh, demanding kiss. Crystal shoved against his chest and stubbornly clenched her jaw, preventing a more intimate invasion.

*Jax.* How had he found her?

No, he hadn't been looking for her specifically, just a Light Keeper.

His scent surrounded her, intoxicated her. Memories burned through her mind. His hands, his taste, his body moving inside her. She hadn't meant to hurt him. Leaving him had nearly destroyed her. But she'd had no choice. He was supposed to have been just another assignment. Becoming emotionally involved had put them in more danger than he could possibly imagine.

Tearing her mouth from his, she turned her face away. "Stop it!"

"I don't want to." He cupped her breast through the top of her powder-blue uniform. "I searched for you for years. I thought you'd been kidnapped, tortured, held against your will. What other reason could there be for your disappearance? I knew you weren't dead—because I still burned for you!"

She covered her face with her hands, trembling. Coming through the Veil had lessened the agony of their separation,

but she battled the yearnings every day. She ached for his touch. His image haunted her dreams. She loved him still.

"Gods, how I burn!" Reaching under her top, he found the front clasp of her bra and released it. "Why did you leave me?"

His harsh whisper tore through her heart. Loneliness. Desolation. She understood the emotions all too well.

He rolled her nipple, his breath hot against her cheek. Her core throbbed. She wanted him there, *needed* him filling her, stretching her, completing her. Nothing and no one could ease her body's elemental longing for her equal and opposite. Her mate. But that wasn't possible. They had never undergone *Pim Noctar*. They were not...

"Kiss me. Give me your mouth."

His lips brushed hers, slid against them. She'd never been able to resist his kisses. He'd spent weeks just holding her, sharing her breath, and tasting her mouth before he ever touched her intimately. It had been his tender patience that broke through her professional reserve.

She opened to him, surrendered to the thrust of his tongue. Passion muddled her thinking as her senses came alive. His mouth moved over and against hers, his tongue delving deeply, caressing her.

Beneath her top, his hand explored her skin, gently squeezed her breasts. She arched into his touch, increasing the pressure of his palm.

Without releasing her mouth, he scooted off the table. The towel dropped to her feet, leaving him naked. He pushed up her top and bent her over his arm, his hungry mouth claiming

her nipple. She cried out softly. The exquisite pressure, the wet heat! She needed this and more. So much more.

He licked and sucked until her head spun with pleasure. Her legs trembled. Cupping her breast in his palm, he raised his head and looked into her eyes. His gaze glistened hard, ruthless, cold. "Why?"

He pulled her into his arms, molding her breasts against his chest. His cock throbbed against her belly. She wanted him desperately, but not in anger, never as punishment. She arched away, but his hands cupped her ass, kept her lower body locked against him.

Pain and accusation burned in his gaze, knocking the breath from her lungs. She hadn't wanted to leave him. Staying would have hurt him more. Inhaling shakily, she whispered, "I'm sorry."

"Sorry?" He made a snarling sound and pushed her away. Crystal stumbled back, tripping over a wheeled stool. She cried out sharply before his arm banded around her waist and prevented her from hitting the floor. He set her on her feet and caged her against the wall with his body.

A firm knock sounded on the door. Crystal tried to push him away, but Jax wouldn't budge.

"This room is occupied." Her voice sounded strangled, hardly recognizable.

"Is everything all right, Crystal? May I come in?"

*Fern!*

Gazing into his furious eyes, she called out, "Everything's fine. I'll be out as soon as I finish with Mr. Smith."

"Or as soon as Mr. Smith is finished with you."



She rested her head against the wall and closed her eyes.  
"What do you want?"

"Tell me about Lorrان."

Nervously licking her lips, Crystal opened her eyes. "You're too smart to believe one word I say, remember?"

"Where is she?"

Guilt kicked her in the belly. She didn't want to lie to him any more than she'd wanted to leave him. He'd think the worst of her regardless, and again she had no choice. "We're going in circles. I told you, I don't know what you're talking about."

"I'd hoped it wouldn't come to this." His features clouded, distorted and his gaze glistened with Shadow *iede*. If he cast his Shadow upon her, she'd be trapped between dimensions, powerless and at his mercy.

Torn by the need to confide in him, to justify her actions for the past six years, she reluctantly manifested Light *iede* in her palms and threw it in his face. The powdery substance burst with luminescence as it struck his flesh.

"You vicious little *xalotte*! Have you lost your mind?" He spun in a circle, frantically rubbing his eyes.

Without a backward glance, Crystal rushed from the room, hastily pulling her clothing back into some semblance of order.

\* \* \* \*

Lost in a cloud of Light *iede*, Jax stumbled about until he found the massage table. He braced himself against it and waited for the vertigo to abate. She'd blinded him! Although

he was stunned by her daring, reluctant admiration swelled within him. Crystal was nothing if not unpredictable. He melted into Shadow, a smile curving his lips. As his corporeal body dissipated, his sight returned.

*Damn her!* Did she really hope to elude him on a cruise ship? Unless she was working with a Veil Keeper! Wrenched to full alert by the disconcerting thought, he hurried from the spa, passing effortlessly through walls and hurling himself between decks. Physical barriers had no meaning in the Shadow realm.

The dossier Matriarch Flame had given him contained fragments of information and half-truths. Initially he'd thought the matriarch herself had manipulated the facts, but gradually he recognized the work of a talented illusionist, a Light Keeper. Once he'd realized what he was up against, he'd painstakingly unraveled the tangled information.

Crystal. Why did it have to be Crystal? So much was unresolved between them. He didn't need this kind of distraction. Any other Light Keeper would have been easily controlled. Crystal was the best. Skilled and wily, with the uncanny ability to anticipate her opponent's next move.

Worst of all she knew him, how he thought, how he worked. It made her dangerous. But he was dangerous too.

He went to the area of the ship containing the crew's quarters and began a cabin by cabin search. He knew who to look for now. It was only a matter of time.

\* \* \* \*

Crystal huddled in the back corner of the spa's storeroom, waiting silently to make sure Jax hadn't followed her. He'd be searching for her now, so it was imperative that she avoided anywhere she would ordinarily go. Manifesting Light *iede*, she carefully formed a comm crystal in the center of her palm. She breathed on the crystal, activating the conduit to her home dimension. Infusing the link with urgency, she sought out Matriarch Flame.

The matriarch's regal image appeared within the crystal. Her red-streaked dark hair had been pulled back from her face and bound at the nape of her neck. Though wrinkles marred her skin, her cinnamon-colored eyes were sharp, assessing.

"You know better than contacting me directly, so I presume your circumstance is dire."

That was a rather convoluted way of asking what was wrong, but Crystal suppressed her annoyance. "Did you send the Shadow Keeper?"

"He found you already?" Matriarch Flame arched her brow in disbelief. "Impossible. The information I gave him should have taken him weeks to unravel."

On second thought, annoyance was almost inevitable when this woman was involved. "You hired the best Shadow Keeper in the dimension. Why are you surprised?"

"Jax is a decoy. They passed through the Veil not long after him, and have been two steps behind ever since. You cannot let him near Lorrán or you will lead the others to her as well."

"Others? Who are you talking about? Why must everything be so secretive?"

"I have trusted you with a life more important than my own. You have done well, Light Keeper. Trust me a little while longer. Everything will be revealed in *time*."

Crystal noted the particular emphasis she put on the last word. If Time Keepers were involved, she was screwed. "If I lead Jax away from Lorrان, I leave her unprotected."

"Not so. The Shadow Keeper will follow you and they will follow him. I will send another to you for Lorrان as soon as I am able."

"Can I finally tell her what's going on? She is so vulnerable—"

"Her ignorance protects her more than you know. As does mine. They know what I know. That's why you must never tell me where she is. Never!"

"I understand."

"I hope so. Lure the Shadow Keeper away. Distract him any way you can. I shouldn't need more than a day or two."

The matriarch's image blinked out and the comm crystal disintegrated, coating her palm with glistening powder.

"Perfect." She brushed her hand off on her pant leg and left the storeroom. No sense hiding now. The easiest way to keep Jax occupied would be to let him catch her.

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## Chapter Two

Jax sensed her before he saw her. A scalding rush of desire coursed through him. Even intangible as he was, it made him restless and hot. If he manifested, he would be blind, so his best chance was to trap her in the Shadow realm.

She poked her head around the corner, her eyes wide and cautious. Who was she trying to fool? Her senses had to be as electrified as his. If they were anywhere near each other, you could hear the sizzle.

Creeping down the corridor, she continued her shallow pretense. She was dangling herself in front of him like bait, waiting for him to snatch her. Jax had intended to do just that, but her antics made him wary. Why did she want to be caught? It didn't make sense.

He fell in step behind her, watching and waiting.

She walked to the end of the corridor, then turned around and retraced her steps. He didn't know what game she played, but he had no intention of cooperating.

Crossing her arms over her chest, she looked around impatiently.

He grinned. *Sorry, sunshine, I'm on to you.*

She opened her mouth as if to say something, then snapped it closed. A cunning light ignited within her pastel-blue eyes. Plan B?

Crossing the corridor, she slid a cardkey into the electronic lock and let herself into the cabin. Jax followed. The room was

tiny. He'd have to be careful or she'd end up in the Shadow realm regardless of his intentions. His essence served as a portal. All she had to do was pass through, even inadvertently, and she'd enter the Shadow realm.

He carefully stayed back from her as she moved about the cabin. She took off her shoes and tucked them inside the wall locker. With a rapid-fire popping sound she unsnapped the front of her uniform. Why was she undressing?

She took a slinky sundress from the locker and laid it across the bed, sheer thigh-high stockings following. Then with slow, teasing movements she stripped off her uniform. Black lace barely-there panties, with a matching bra supporting lush breasts and tormented his libido.

Every move she made was a silent challenge, a dare. *Come and get me, Jax. You know you want to.* He could almost hear her taunting voice.

The scalloped edge of her bra revealed the upper curve of one rosy areola. Her entire nipple was discernable beneath the lace, but that crescent sliver of tempting flesh made his mouth water and his fingers itch.

She walked into the bathroom, a definite swagger in her step. The more provocative she became, the more determined he grew to resist her. Taking a wide-toothed comb from the mirrored cabinet, she pulled the elastic band from her hair and bent over. Her thick silver-blonde hair tumbled nearly to the floor. Long legs and her tempting ass were displayed to perfection.

*Prazot*, she was asking for it. No, she was *begging* for it, and he needed to know why!

After working her hair into a sleek, silky wave, she tossed it back, her eyes heavy-lidded with pleasure. Oh, she was going to regret every teasing pose, every taunting little sigh. As soon as he figured out her angle.

Crystal slowly licked her lips and scanned the room for visual anomalies. The Shadow realm existed between dimensions. Shadow Keepers were able to release their hold on one dimension without transporting entirely into the next. They became intangible in both dimensions, a sort of living ghost.

After years of constructing complex illusions, Crystal had developed a hypersensitivity to anything not completely—real.

She had no doubt Jax was in the room somewhere. The tight knot in her belly and her rapidly hardening nipples told her all she needed to know. Why hadn't he pulled her into the Shadow realm?

It was probably better that he hadn't. Whoever was following Jax wouldn't be able to follow them if he pulled her through.

Two days? Could she keep this up for two days? She nearly burst out laughing. The real question was, could he?

The ship had docked in Nassau this morning. Perhaps she'd go play in the Straw Market. She glanced at the sundress thoughtfully. It had a built-in support. Carefully maintaining a straight face, she unhooked her black lace bra. She carelessly tossed the undergarment onto the bed and picked up the phone.

She punched in an extension and stretched her back while the line connected. "Hi, Liz, is Lori there? Sure." While she waited for Liz to look for Lori, she rubbed the underside of her breasts, relieving the soreness left by the bra's underwire. Was Jax paying attention to the conversation or had her breasts distracted him? Men tended to forget everything when faced with naked breasts. Jax was no exception.

"Okay, can you give her a message for me? Just let her know I have a date." She scanned the cabin, but was still unable to locate her intangible visitor. "Why are you laughing? Is that so hard to believe?" He had to be here somewhere. "I may not be back until late, so tell her not to worry. Thanks, Liz."

Shaking her head at Liz's disbelief, she hung up the phone.

Warm hands cupped her breasts a moment before his body solidified behind her. Crystal smiled.

"Am I your date or is someone going to be disappointed?"

His voice washed over her, making her shiver. "That depends."

He rolled her nipples between his fingers, his mouth nuzzling her neck. "On what?"

"Whether you're here to interrogate me or..."

She turned to face him and gasped. The layer of Light *iede* still coated his eyes, shimmering like silver glitter. She gently touched the corner of each eye and the *iede* disintegrated. He blinked repeatedly, dislodging the silver flecks.

"That stings like hell, I'll have you know."

"You left me no choice."



His eyes narrowed. "There are always choices." They glared at each other for a strained moment, then he said, "I have a proposal for you."

"I'm listening." His hands caressed her shoulders as his newly restored gaze descended to her breasts.

"Truce."

"Are we at war?"

He arched his eyebrows, his dark gaze returning to her face. "If you stand between me and Lorrán—you'll leave me no choice."

"What are the conditions of the truce?"

"No powers for one hour."

She grinned and ran her gaze down his naked body with the same deliberate thoroughness he'd just used on her. "It may take longer than an hour to get you out of my system. The toxin has been building up for six years."

"You're playing me, don't think I'm not aware. You're using that luscious body to distract me from my mission."

"So why are you letting me?"

He guided her hand to his cock, curved her fingers against his thickness. "Because the toxin has been building up for six years."

"Truce," she whispered.

"Truce."

She leapt into his arms, wrapped her legs around his waist, and trapped his cock against her mons. Their mouths came together in a deep, seeking kiss. His hands tangled in her hair, hers clasped his neck and shoulders.

Ravenous.

Their tongues dueled and danced. Their mouths clung. She ground her hips, rubbing her mound against his erect cock. Her core melted, soaking her panties and transmitting heat freely between their bodies.

She'd been hungry for so long, deprived of the only man able to satisfy her. His hands cupped her ass, slipping inside her French-cut panties. She wiggled and moaned, desperate to begin in earnest, yet knowing it would never be enough.

A lifetime with Jax wouldn't be enough.

Desperation ricocheted through her, making her whimper. She didn't want to lose him again, not after the reality of life without him. But she was trapped by circumstances beyond her control.

He placed her on her back and crawled on top of her. It was the only way the bunk would accommodate them both. He reached down, grabbing something near their feet. She was only mildly interested until he looped one of her stockings around her wrist and pulled it tight.

"Hey, I thought this was a truce!"

Straddling her hips, he quickly tied her to the nautical cleat bolted to the wall for decoration. She'd looked at the blunt metal prongs more than once thinking they were positioned perfectly for just this purpose. He dragged her other arm to the cleat's mate and repeated the process.

The position spread her arms wide, while leaving her shoulders resting on the bunk. She couldn't manifest *iede* with her hands this far apart and without *iede* she was powerless. "I agreed to the truce. This isn't necessary."

"You say that now." Heat curled into her core at his wicked grin.

Trailing his fingers along the underside of her upraised arms he sent tingles skittering through her torso. Her breasts quivered with each ragged breath. His dark eyes gleamed dangerously. Why was he doing this? She wasn't ... the enemy.

*If you stand between me and Lorrان—you'll leave me no choice.* His words echoed through her mind. This was no truce! She'd clearly underestimated him. Lust was alive in his gaze, but anger and ruthlessness shone there as well.

He pulled and pressed her nipples, increasing the pressure to the very edge of pain. "Where is she?"

She glared at him mutinously. There was a glaring hole in his strategy. She *wanted* his touch, craved his penetration.

Sliding down along her body, he bent over her breast and sucked one nipple deeply into his mouth. She savored the sting, arched into the forceful suction. *Yes, just like that!* She needed him so badly her whole body ached. His lips released her nipple with a distinct pop. Cool air wafted across the wet tip and Crystal shivered.

"Is Lori Lorrان?"

He'd been paying more attention than she'd hoped. "Who is Lorrان? Why are you looking for her?"

He kept her legs trapped between his, but tugged her panties down onto her thighs. Her clit swelled, anticipating his touch, his kiss. Using just his fingertips, he feathered ticklish caresses across her tummy. Her belly jumped and quivered, the tension inside her mounting.

"I only saw one toothbrush in the compartment when you pulled out the comb. You don't have a cabin mate."

She stared up at him silently. He'd never puzzle it out on his own and the longer he kept her here the better. If Matriarch Flame was correct. But what if the Time Keeper didn't wait for Jax? What if he or she found Lorrان on their own? Did they realize how close they were?

Crystal should have lured him off the ship. This was a major miscalculation.

"We're on the same side," he coaxed with his deep voice and his night-black eyes. "I can protect you both, but you have to trust me."

She was following orders. Always following orders. She didn't have the luxury of making decisions for herself. She was a soldier, an underling.

His hand crept toward her slit, the threat obvious. "Don't make me do this, sunshine. Tell me what I need to know."

*Sunshine!* He mocked her with the endearment. He used to whisper it on a sigh as he came deep inside her body.

Parting her gently, he fingered her clit, keeping her thighs pressed together, accenting the demanding pulsation in her core. She gritted her teeth, trembling. His gaze assessed her face, the rise and fall of her breasts. He knew her well enough to sense when an orgasm was upon her.

He took her to the edge and stopped. She cried out. He did it again.

"We can do this all night."

Sucking in a ragged breath, she furiously blinked back tears. "Wouldn't you rather be inside me? You're punishing yourself as much as me."

"I'm not the one being stubborn. Just tell me how to find her and I'll make us both very happy."

She turned her face away. Admitting she knew Lorrان would compromise the mission. She could say nothing.

He wrapped his arms around her thighs, hugging her to his chest as he lowered his face.

"Oh gods, please don't! I can't bear..."

His tongue parted her folds and curled around her clit in the sweetest caress. Over and over, slowly, gently, his tongue moved against her swollen nub. Her pussy throbbed painfully, demanding release, demanding penetration. She whimpered and moaned, arching up against his mouth to no avail. His arms kept her thighs pressed together, preventing him from doing more than teasing.

"Jax!" she sobbed, hating him, wanting him, needing him.

"Is she a passenger or one of the crew?"

He hadn't bothered raising his face, and his warm breath played over her sensitive flesh. *Damn him!* She twisted and thrashed, bucking against his restraining hold. Tears escaped the corners of her eyes. Her muscles knotted so tightly she felt nauseous. It would serve him right if she threw up all over him!

"Give me something and I'll let you come. A clue. A hint. We can barter."

Time Keepers were often clairvoyant. Whoever followed Jax through the Veil could be mind-linked with him right now

his knowledge. Regardless of her body's desperate need, she could not surrender.

Why was she being so stubborn? Jax tugged off her panties, pausing when he felt how wet they were. He'd pulled them down before he started teasing her. Just knowing he was here had caused her to cream. His cock bucked at the thought. His balls had to be a delightful shade of blue by now. He'd never been this hard before.

He crawled off the end of the bunk and she started kicking. The frantic scissoring of her long supple legs offered him teasing peeks at her slick pussy. Raising her panties to his face, he inhaled her scent, his gaze boring into hers.

"How long has it been?" She didn't respond. He didn't expect her to. "Do you lie in bed aching for me or have you found a way to fill the void?"

She panted, her breasts quivering with each ragged breath.

"I won't pretend I haven't tried," he told her, "but everyone I fucked just made me more desperate for you."

"I'm here." Her voice cracked and she parted her thighs.

Fury shredded his discipline. This opportunity was too valuable to squander. Even as his mind registered the fact, his passion-deprived body took control. Launching himself at her, he lifted her legs, spread them wide, and thrust home in one violent drive.

She cried out, but her cunt clenched him rhythmically. Her wet heat assured him he wasn't hurting her. *Home*. This was home. His body knew it. His being craved her. Regardless of

the forces keeping them apart, on an elemental level he recognized his mate.

Draping her legs over his shoulders, he cupped her breasts, greedy for their weighty feel, their heat and softness. Her nipples stabbed his palms, pebble hard and deeply flushed.

He rolled one between his fingers. Her pussy fluttered in response. "Yes! Gods, you feel good."

Her tight passage caressed him as he pressed and stroked her nipples. Tears swam behind her long lashes and her lips trembled. She didn't speak. Wise decision. He teetered on the brink of violence, ready to fuck her brutally for the six years of hell she'd put him through.

"Please."

Raw anguish infused her tone and his rage dissipated. The need to comfort her followed in the wake of his anger. His mate was in pain. She needed him as badly as he needed her.

Shifting her legs to his waist, he balanced on his knees, grazing her breasts with his chest. He pressed his mouth to hers. She yielded, lips parting in silent invitation. Exploring boldly with his tongue, he relished her taste, her texture, her heat. She wrapped her legs around him, keeping his cock deeply imbedded in her body.

He pushed into her mouth with his tongue. She moaned. Pulling his hips back, he savored the silken cling of her pussy. Then reversing direction, he entered her with sweet deliberation.

She trembled beneath him, her legs flexing against his back. Her cunt fluttered wildly. She was almost there. Did he have the strength?

*Could he be so cruel?*

Savage determination cleared his head and restored his control. Crystal could give lessons in cruelty. Easing his hands to the backs of her knees, he shoved her legs toward her chest and pulled out.

"No," she cried out desperately.

"Where the fuck is Lorrان?"

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### Chapter Three

The blissful orgasm, which had just begun to form, sputtered out. Her cunt pulsed emptily. Crystal let out an exasperated cry. "I hate you. Gods, how I hate you!"

"Say the words and I'll fill you again." He passed his thumb teasingly over her clit. She kicked at him. "I'll give you pleasure like you've never known." Pushing two fingers into her pussy, he taunted her with a fraction of what she really needed. "I'll make it better than anything you remember."

"Why? Have you learned new tricks in the past six years?" Sarcasm was the only weapon at her disposal. He held her legs wide, his fingers gently stroking. The stockings bound her wrists to the wall, preventing her from accessing her power.

"What I learned in the past six years is what a sadistic bitch you are." He launched himself off her and manifested black leather pants. "Keepers bond for life! Mine has been a shambles since you left me. I—"

"We had an intense affair. That doesn't make—"

"Are you really that naïve?" Raking his hands through his hair, he stared down at her from beside the bunk. "I don't know who activated *Pim Noctar*, but you are my bonded mate. Are you going to pretend you don't feel—"

His features froze mid-sentence, his eyes clouded, and his body stilled. Even his breathing ceased.

A distortion formed directly behind Jax. Seeing it Crystal went wild, frantically tugging on the stockings and twisting

against the bunk. The fabric of space bowed, bubbled, then separated. Two figures emerged from the rupture and she screamed.

Identical in face and form, the Time Master's sons moved with purposeful speed. One extended his hand toward Jax, while his twin stood at the foot of the bunk. The rupture closed and oppressive silence descended on the small cabin.

"What have you done? Why are you here?" Her voice sounded shrill and alien in her own ears.

"Karrick is holding him in the moment. No harm will come to him—yet." The Time Keeper at the foot of the bunk stared down at her dispassionately. His bright green gaze never left her face despite her nudity. If Karrick restrained Jax, then Warrick was speaking to her.

Mentally scrambling to decipher the situation, Crystal looked from Warrick to his brother and back again. Karrick was a Future Keeper. Warrick controlled the past.

"Let him go!"

"Answer his question." Warrick's gaze bore into hers. His classically handsome features revealed nothing but impatience. She was spread before him like a sacrifice and he didn't so much as glance at her body. This was not about her. They were after the Flame Princess!

"What question?"

"Where the fuck is Lorrان?" Warrick perfectly replicated Jax's ruthless tone.

"I don't know!"

Karrick looked at his brother and fear twisted through Crystal. "Clearly she wants to play."

Emerald fire erupted in Warrick's gaze and sensation surged through her body. Scalding desire seared her skin, her core clenched, and her clit throbbed. Crystal screamed, turning her face away.

"You'll only make yourself hoarse ... What did he call you? Oh yes, sunshine. This cabin is in flux. We've created a temporal bubble where only we exist."

She forced herself to look at him. "You are so far beyond regulations—"

"You'll have to report my conduct to the Time Master. He responds to any abuse of Time Keeper abilities with swift and definitive action."

His tone was sincere, his expression earnest, which made his mockery all the more bitter. They were the Time Master's sons!

"Don't do this to me," she gasped, tossing helplessly on the bunk.

"I'm not doing anything. The Shadow Keeper created these sensations. I'm just allowing you to experience them again—and again." He laughed as she writhed. "I can loop this moment for as long as it takes."

"Why?" she yelled, pressing her thighs together as her muscles contracted. "I can't tell you what I don't know. Don't you think I would have told Jax?" Crystal moaned, tears streaming from the corner of her eyes. She would not be responsible for them finding Lorrان!

"This isn't working," Warrick grumbled, releasing her from his control.

She sobbed, sagging against the mattress as the intensity receded.

"Who did she call?" Karrick maintained his hold on Jax while he studied her thoughtfully.

Warrick manifested Time *iède* in the palm of his hand and watched the scene. Shame heated her face as her half-naked image moved provocatively inside the crystal.

"You're a heartless cock tease, Light Keeper. No wonder Jax was so rough on you." A smile tugged at one corner of Karrick's mouth. His amusement compounded her indignity. "What was the extension she used?"

"One-four-six-nine-five."

Karrick moved to the phone on the nightstand and punched in the number. He hung up the receiver without saying a word. "What is a green room?"

She just glared at him.

"Let's go." Warrick nodded toward the door.

"—the connection, the desire?" Jax snapped. Anger churned within his belly.

"Untie me now! Alrick's sons were just here. They've gone after her."

Crystal's face was pale and streaked with tears, her body trembling. Jax shook his head, trying to dispel the odd buzzing in his ears. "What are you talking about?"

She licked her lips and turned her face away. In a split second she had turned from a spitting hellcat to a terrified ... What had frightened her?

Resting one knee on the bunk, he quickly unbound her wrists and pulled her into his arms. She clutched his back,

molding herself against him, shaking. She'd said something about Time Keepers.

He brushed her hair back from her face and kissed her gently. "Did they hurt you? What happened?"

With obvious reluctance, she pushed him away and scrambled off the bunk. "We have to get to her before they do."

Her avoidance escalated his fear. "Why are you crying? What did they do to you?"

"I'm fine. We have to warn Lorrان." She grabbed the sundress off the bunk and pulled it on over her head.

"Why the games?" He would insist she tell him what the Time Keepers had done, but for now Lorrان must take priority. "What's really going on?"

"You were a decoy. They followed you through the Veil. Matriarch Flame sent you on what she thought was a futile search. Unfortunately for all of us, she underestimated you."

"I led them right to..." His mouth went dry. "Shit, I led them to you. Do they know where Lorrان is?" He manifested a shirt and shoes and followed her from the cabin.

"No. I knew you were listening when I called Lori. They took the bait. They're headed in the wrong direction."

He smiled. "Lori isn't Lorrان?"

"Please." She tossed her hair over her shoulders and hurried down the corridor. "Do you really think I'd be that obvious? Lori's sister is Lorrان's cabin mate. Lori will figure I couldn't get a hold of Julie or Renee, so I left the message with her."

"Is Lorrان Julie or Renee?"

"Renee."

"We can move faster as shadows. Take my hand." Mistrust flashed in her pastel-blue eyes and he wanted to shake her. He wasn't the one who'd disappeared. "I untied you, remember? I won't leave you powerless any longer than it takes to reach her."

She took his hand and Jax drew her into the Shadow realm. Her hand tightened around his as their physical surroundings dematerialized. He hardly noticed the shift from one dimension to another after so many years, but she was unaccustomed to the disembodied sensation. He could still feel her hand in his, yet he couldn't feel the floor beneath his feet.

"Where to?" he asked, wishing they had more time.

She squared her shoulders and took several deep breaths, obviously fighting for composure. "There's a workshop near the Showcase. Lori is in the cast, but Julie and Renee both work behind the scenes. Renee manages the costumes."

"The Flame Princess is managing costumes on a cruise ship? How does Matriarch Flame feel about this?" Holding tightly to her hand he let her lead the way. "Don't forget you can project yourself up and down as well as forward and back."

"Matriarch Flame has insisted that I divulge as little information to her as possible. Time Keepers are often clairvoyant, so her caution seems justified."

"Warrick and Karrick were actually in that cabin? Why don't I remember any of it?"

"Karrick trapped you in the moment. He's a Future Keeper, so he simply kept you from progressing along the time continuum."

"While Warrick tortured you?" She didn't even glance at him. Anger and protectiveness grappled within his chest, making him restless and anxious for the day he would meet the Time Keepers face to face. "Does Renee have any idea who she is?"

"We need to go up three decks. I don't know how to do it."

He smiled and slid his hand up to her wrist. "Grab my wrist as well. This might feel odd." She held on tightly as he launched them vertically through the translucent remnants of Dimension 939-3. They could see and hear what transpired around them, but they were invisible.

"OK, across the atrium and to the right. We're almost there."

Following her directions, they hurried past a throng of unsuspecting humans.

"Renee started manifesting abilities at a very young age, so she had to be trained. I know very little about the two guardians who protected her before me, but I've—"

"How long have you been guarding her?"

She looked at him meaningfully. "Six years."

"What?" His stomach muscles constricted as if she'd sucker-punched him. "You left me to—"

"We don't have time for this right now. It won't take the twins long to figure out they were duped."

Pausing in the empty corridor outside the workroom, Crystal released her hold on Jax and solidified. He followed suit, waiting to see what she had in mind.

"Renee believes that she is being pursued by the ambitious staff of a nonexistent organization called the Foundation for Paranormal Research. I'm not going to correct that misconception at this point. She'll respond without question if I stick to the masquerade."

"You do the talking. Let's just get her out of here."

Nodding, Crystal pushed open the door to the cluttered workroom and walked in. Costumes hung on neat racks and shelves filled with baskets and bins lined one entire wall. Behind a wide worktable sat a lovely young woman. Jax stared at her suspiciously. Her hair, which was parted down the middle and French braided into two neat plaits, was an ordinary shade of brown. This couldn't be Lorrان. Both Lorrان's parents were Flame Keepers. Her hair should be shot through with bright red strands.

"Renee," Crystal called and the young woman looked up over the rim of her narrow glasses. Glasses? A Keeper with poor eyesight? Impossible.

"Hi, Crys. Is this your date? Lori just stopped by."

Her wide hazel eyes combined shades of green, gold, and the bright cinnamon of the Order of Flame. Was Crystal somehow altering the princess' appearance?

"My date has been postponed. They're here. I don't know how they found us but I just saw two men from the Foundation. They're identical twins. Have you seen them?"



Lorran pushed back her chair and stood, shifting her glasses to the top of her head. "You're not joking, are you? What do we do?"

"We get the hell out of here. Now."

"I should let someone know—"

"Absolutely not. We can't risk it. We walk off the ship now and don't look back."

"But Lori and Julie will—"

"They'll forgive you." Crystal motioned her forward with an urgent wave of her hand. "You can explain what happened once we get you to safety. But we have to leave now."

She didn't argue after that. Glancing curiously at Jax, she followed Crystal from the workroom. Jax fell into step behind them. They emerged into the sunlit atrium and heard, "Halt! You have no right to take her!"

Acting on instinct, Jax grabbed the wrist of each woman and dragged them into the Shadow realm. Lorran screamed. Crystal cursed.

So much for the masquerade.

\* \* \* \*

"Renee, you have to calm down. Jax is not going to hurt you. He just saved your life back there."

"What the hell is he? How did he make us disappear? We sank through the floor like..."

Knowing the Time Keepers could sense them, perhaps even see them, Jax had dragged them through the deck and quickly found a vacant cabin before allowing them to solidify.

"We should lure them into Nassau," he said, ignoring Lorrان's outburst. "The more area they have to search the less likely they'll be to find us."

Crystal shook her head. "That's what they'll expect us to do. This ship leaves port in less than an hour. If we can leave them in Nassau—"

"What is going on?" Lorrان's face was flushed, her eyes wide and frightened.

"We'll explain everything as soon as we lose the Time Keepers."

Jax gave her a quick kiss. "All right. Stay with Lorrان and I'll get them off the ship. I'll keep them busy until after the ship leaves port and then catch up to you. Wait fifteen minutes and then contact Malik Cendar in New Orleans. His mate had things she needed to do before they leave Earth, so they may not have departed yet. Ask Malik to send Minuette. She's a Veil Keeper."

He stepped into the Shadow realm and disappeared.

Lorrان stared at Crystal with wide, unblinking eyes. "Did you understand any of that?"

How did she even begin? Crystal took her friend by the hand and led her to the full-length mirror beside the bathroom door. "I'd like to introduce you to someone." She moved the younger woman in front of the mirror and disabled the illusion she had painstakingly maintained for six years.

Lorrان's hair flowed to her waist in gleaming waves of red-streaked chocolate brown. Her features morphed subtly, becoming more angular, more distinctive. The cinnamon

speckles in her hazel eyes expanded until her irises shimmered with the reddish color.

"Renee, meet Lorrان of the Order of Flame. The people pursuing you are not from a secret government foundation. They're from our home dimension."

Their eyes met in the mirror. "*Our* home dimension? You are not ... You're from another dimension?"

Giving her shoulders a reassuring squeeze, Crystal moved to the center of the cabin. "Unfortunately we don't have time for details right now. I'll answer all your questions as soon as Jax lets us know we're out of danger."

"What is Jax?"

"He's a Shadow Keeper." Crystal longed to finally say the words. "He's my bonded mate."

Lorrان turned back to the mirror, clearly fascinated by her true appearance. Taking advantage of her distraction, Crystal manifested Light *iede* and formed a comm crystal. Establishing communications with Keepers she'd never met could be tricky. She needed to concentrate.

Breathing on the crystal, she infused it with what little information she had, New Orleans, Malik, and a Veil Keeper named Minuette. The crystal shimmered and then began to glow. Each fragment of information narrowed the scope of the search and intensified the crystal's radiance.

The image of a handsome Frost Keeper materialized within the crystal.

"Your signal is rather hesitant. Are you trying to contact me?"

"Are you Malik Cendar?"

"I am."

"I'm Crystal Yancy of the Order of Light. Jax told me to contact you. We're in dire need of a Veil Keeper. Is Minuette still with you?"

"Yes, but escorting Jax through the Veil weakened her far more than she realized. She's been meditating in preparation for our departure."

"I'm with Lorrان and she's in danger."

"Transmit your exact location. I'll send Minuette to you."

The crystal disintegrated into sparkling dust.

Lorrان was watching her closely. "What was that?"

Whiping the *iede* sediment off on her skirt, she debated what to tell her friend. Lorrان had to be feeling completely overwhelmed and they had so little time. "That's called a comm crystal. They're one of the first things you'll learn to manifest. There is so much for you to understand, but we have to stay focused on your safety. Jax should return soon and hopefully Minuette will arrive shortly."

"Jax is a Shadow Keeper. You called Minuette a Veil Keeper." Lorrان smiled despite her anxiety. "What sort of Keepers are we?"

"I'm a Light Keeper." Crystal was suspicious of Lorrان's apparent calm. No one could accept all of this without batting an eye. "My primary skill is manifesting illusions."

"That's how you disguised my appearance, even from me. Am I a Light Keeper too?"

"You are the rarest of the rare. Your *iede*—the essence of your power—is neutral. You can manifest the abilities of all the Keepers. You are virtually omnipotent."

Lorran laughed, a short burst, a nervous release. "Is that why they're trying to kill me?"

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## Chapter Four

The Bahamas had become indistinct shadows on the watery horizon when Jax returned to the cabin. "That was fun." He stretched, twisting his torso and rolling his shoulders. "Karrick is definitely precognitive. I'm not sure about Warrick."

Crystal crossed the cabin and wrapped her arms around him, surprising him with an enthusiastic hug. He tucked her head beneath his chin and stroked her long silky hair.

"Do you think they know where we are?" Lorrان sat on the sofa in the large stateroom. Jax noticed the change in her appearance and smiled. Now she looked like a Flame Princess.

"We played hide-and-seek in the Straw Market until Karrick realized it was only me. They stormed off together, but the ship had already left."

"They can't teleport like you do?" Lorrان sounded rather dazed. That was understandable. How much had Crystal been able to explain in the short time he'd been away?

"I don't actually teleport. Only Veil Keepers can move instantaneously from one point in space to another. It's hard to explain exactly what the Shadow realm is, but it frees me from the physical constraints of this dimension."

"You can fly?"

"I guess that's as good a description as any."

Crystal turned within his embrace, facing Lorrان. His arms lightly circled her waist. "He basically turns himself into a ghost."

"Were you able to contact Malik?" he asked, rubbing his cheek against her hair.

"Yes. Minuette is on her way."

"Where will she take me? Are we all going?"

Crystal didn't immediately respond, so Jax said, "It's probably best if we don't know."

"I agree." Crystal crossed to the sofa and sat beside Lorrان. "Your grandmother is the leader of the Order of Flame. She is the one responsible for keeping you alive and safe all these years. But part of her strategy has been to never know your exact whereabouts."

"The Time Keepers are psychic?"

"Psychic is a broad term that can mean almost anything." Crystal spoke calmly, her gaze intent on the younger woman's face.

There was something almost maternal about her demeanor. Six years was a long time to spend protecting someone. Jax envied their obvious closeness. Lorrان had stolen six years of his mate's life, six years Crystal should have spent with him.

"Warrick is a Past Keeper. He can access and manipulate memories. I've heard it said that he can travel to any point in the past, but I don't know if he's able to affect events once he gets there."

"What can his twin do?"

"Karrick is a Future Keeper. He's aware of things to come. Time Keepers are supposed to work in teams of three. The twins are operating without a Present Keeper. They're breaking every rule known to Time Keepers."

Lorran's face drained of color and she fiddled with the bottom edge of her blue T-shirt. "What do they want with me? Aren't there Time police or something to keep them from breaking all these rules?"

Crystal looked at Jax, clearly uncomfortable with her next admission. "The Time Master is their father. The only hope we have of curtailing their behavior is to keep you out of their hands until the Steering Committee can intervene."

"What's the Steering Committee?"

"The ultimate authority in our dimension. Sort of like the United Nations here on Earth." She gave a little chuckle. "Only they actually enforce their decisions."

A flash of light preempted Lorran's response. Minuette materialized with a soft cry and sank to her knees. Jax rushed to her side, helping her stand. "Are you all right?"

"Don't touch me!" she yelped and he immediately let go. Trembling visibly, she struggled to remain standing. "I think you guys are trying to kill me." She panted harshly, her hair streaming across her face.

"What's wrong with her?" Lorran asked, her voice barely more than a whisper.

"I'll be fine as soon as my levels stabilize." Minuette combed her fingers through her hair, revealing her pale face. Dark circles ringed her eyes and her lips pressed into a grim line.



"What's Plan B?" Crystal asked. "She's obviously in no shape to take Lorrان anywhere."

Jax had to agree. "Are you ill or just fatigued?"

"I'm not sure. I've done multiple maneuvers before and never had this reaction. I don't know what's wrong with me."

"Can you escort her to a different location without leaving this dimension? Would that be easier on you?"

Minuette straightened, her gaze seeking out Lorrان. "She doesn't look much like Cayenne."

"Who is Cayenne?"

"Your sister," Crystal responded.

"I'll take her—"

"Don't tell us where. It's vital that we not know."

"I have a sister?" Lorrان digressed, her angry gaze focusing on Crystal. "You've known all along that I have a sister? Why was I kept in the dark about all of this?"

"Everything has been done for your protection. You have to believe that. You aren't out of danger yet. We have to get you away from the Time Keepers."

"Fine." Minuette rolled her shoulders. "I'll take her somewhere nearby until I can recover enough to navigate the Veil."

"You can't take her home." Jax wasn't sure he was comfortable with Minuette attempting even a short-distance maneuver. She looked terrible. "Maybe we better wait until—"

"I'm fine, really."

"I can retreat with her into the Shadow realm."

"Don't patronize me. If I didn't think I could handle this, I'd tell you."

"All right. When you arrive at your final destination, contact me without revealing your location."

"I understand."

"Well, I sure as hell don't," Lorrان snapped. "Is someone going to explain what the hell's going on?"

"The Time twins are here?" Minuette asked, a bit of the color returning to her face.

"Yes. We've managed to elude them for now, but they can't be far behind," Jax told her.

"Okay, Princess, let's get going. I'll answer your questions as soon as we arrive at our temporary destination. It may take me a day or two to recuperate enough to navigate the Veil."

Lorrان looked at Crystal. "Why did she call me Princess?"

"Your grandmother is Matriarch Flame. She has no other progeny. You and Cayenne are joint heirs to the Order of Flame. You are, in essence, a princess."

Lorrان shook her head. "This just gets better and better."

\* \* \* \*

Crystal stood on the private balcony staring out at the endless ocean. Vivid blue stretched as far as the eye could see. Billowy clouds helped distinguish the water from the sky. The sun had just started its lazy descent into the far horizon.

After Minuette departed with Lorrان, Crystal and Jax fell into an awkward silence. He wanted to give the Time Keepers until morning to reappear. If they hadn't seen the twins by then, they'd head to New Orleans. He'd gone to change the ship's registry, assuring they wouldn't be interrupted.

Letting the breeze play through her hair, she thought about the hours to come. Happiness waited; a shimmering promise on a distant shore. Between her and that shore stretched a vast sea of misunderstanding and distrust.

A warm tingle danced down her spine and Crystal smiled. Jax. He hadn't materialized yet, but she didn't need to see him. Her being recognized him, longed for him.

"Are we official passengers now?" she asked without turning around.

"Mr. and Mrs. Smith joined the cruise while the ship was docked in Nassau. I also sent a message to Julie letting her know that you and 'Renee' had a personal emergency and had to leave the ship. So, Mrs. Smith, shall we order room service? It's complimentary, you know."

Smiling despite the anxiety churning within her, she turned to face him. He lounged against the door leading back into the cabin. A violent shiver shook her whole body. Sensory overload. His dark gaze consumed her, his handsome face muddled her thinking and focused her attention entirely on him.

"What happened in the cabin? What did Warrick do to you?"

She closed her eyes for a split second and he moved, pressed her against the balcony with his warm body. Why wouldn't he let it go? He couldn't change the past. Another distinct shiver escaped her, but this time revulsion inspired the tremor.

"I will kill him if—"

"He ... used what you were doing to ... He took the moment in time when I was ready to kill you and replayed it over and over."

Cupping her cheek with his palm, he stared deeply into her eyes. "I am so sorry."

She laughed. "I said that to you and you looked like you wanted to hit me."

"I would never hurt you. Surely you know that. Are you still willing to explain?" His thumb brushed her lower lip. "I'm ready to listen."

She nodded and his hands moved to the railing on either side of her. Did he fear she'd run away? She'd waited six years to tell this tale. There was no way she was going anywhere until he understood what had really happened.

"My family isn't rich and powerful like yours," she began, "but my abilities brought me to the attention of some very influential people. Before my training was even complete, I was recruited by your uncle, Tilden."

"You're not a Death Keeper. What did Tilden recruit you for?"

"You don't think it would be beneficial for an assassin to work with an illusionist? Odd, the Death Keepers were more than happy to exploit my abilities."

He absorbed this for a moment. "How long did you work for the Death Keepers?" He didn't try to touch her, just remained near, his gaze intent upon her face.

"Until I was given to the Shadow Master."

Jax's eyes widened and his lips trembled. "My father—"

"For an *assignment*, Jax. I didn't mean it like that." She laughed and shook her head. "Has it really been so long that you've forgotten our first night together?"

He scrubbed his eyes with his fingertips, shaking away his momentary panic. He was such an ass! She'd been a virgin the first time they made love. How could he have forgotten? "What assignment did my father have for you?"

She didn't answer for a long, strained moment. "He wanted me to spy on his son." She paused. "I was told he suspected you of conspiring with Alrick to overthrow him."

Jax pushed off from the rail and spun away. It was worse than he ever imagined. Anger and betrayal tore through him, shredding his calm and ripping open half-healed wounds. "I was an assignment? My father paid you to sleep with me?"

Anger sparked within her light blue eyes. "I'm not a whore. Your father paid me to monitor your activities and that's what I did. The rest ... just happened."

Memories, bittersweet and intense, assailed him. He couldn't speak, couldn't think, could only remember.

"Why did he mistrust you? Two weeks into my assignment I knew his suspicions were unfounded, and told him so. Still, he insisted I continue."

"My mother had an affair around the time she became pregnant with me. Jerreth has never been completely convinced that I'm his son. I knew he resented me, but this..."

"You said something while you had me ... tied up that started me thinking."

He leaned against the cabin door, too upset to touch her.  
"What did I say?"

"You claimed that we are bonded mates. I've been in denial about that aspect of what happened. Is it possible that your father activated *Pim Noctar* to make sure we couldn't resist each other?"

Hating the dead was such a waste of time, but every word she uttered only deepened his resentment of Jerreth Severn.  
"Not only possible, likely. He knew I wouldn't keep secrets from a lover, so he sent me a woman I couldn't resist. Gods, I never realized what a bastard he really was."

She turned back to face the ocean. Her pale blonde hair rippled in the breeze. He wanted to bury his face in the silken strands as he undressed her slowly. But the story was only half-told. She'd explained what brought them together, not what tore them apart.

"Why did you leave without saying goodbye? Why let me wonder what happened to you for six long years?"

"What was the first thought that crossed your mind when I explained that I worked for your father?"

He'd accused her of being a whore, paid to seduce him.

She didn't make him admit it. Still facing the ocean, she said, "And that was after six years. Think how much more passionate your reaction would have been if I'd told you at the time." She finally turned around. The setting sun created a golden nimbus out of her hair. "Matriarch Flame approached me with this mission. She said it was 'a cut all ties and disappear' assignment. I had to make up my mind right there

and then. I knew no matter how I tried to break it to you, you would never forgive me, so I accepted her terms."

It all made perfect sense and yet it did nothing to eliminate the aching loss they had suffered during their years apart.

"I'd never been in love before." Her voice caressed him, but her gaze darted away. "I thought it was that intense for everyone. It was only after I came through the Veil and the cravings began that I suspected I'd made a horrible mistake."

"You honestly didn't realize we had bonded?" He had experienced casual sex. He recognized the difference immediately. She'd had nothing to compare it to.

"I figured the depression and the loneliness would have happened when you ended our relationship, so I just concentrated on the job and toughed it out."

"And you're so sure I would have ended our relationship?"

"Your father hired me to spy on you. You would have tossed me out on my ass."

So much had happened in the past six years, Jax was inclined to agree. It wasn't until after Jerreth's death that Jax had begun to mature and mellow. When his brother, Jarek, took over as Shadow Master, Jax had finally been able to put the past behind him and move on. At least the portions of his past that his father had influenced. The thought brought him up short.

This was all Jerreth's doing. His father's irrational suspicion had set this fiasco in motion.

"You never tried to contact me. Not even once."

"It was forbidden. My broken heart was nothing compared to Lorrان's life."

"Was your heart broken? Did you mourn for me?"

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## Chapter Five

Crystal took his hand and led him back into the cabin. "I know that we can't actually change the past. But for tonight I want to pretend. I want to go back to our last night together and rewrite the ending. Then we can continue on in the direction our lives were meant to go."

He smiled and her heart lurched within her breast. Gods, how she'd missed his smile!

She let go of his hand and summoned her power, centering her energy and coating her palms with a thick layer of Light *iede*. Searching her memory for every detail, the tiniest nuance of their lover's hideaway, she meticulously constructed the illusion. The *iede* coalesced, rapidly expanding until the silvery sphere encompassed the entire room.

She took a deep breath and released the illusion, allowing it to take shape and solidify.

Jax turned around in a slow circle, his handsome features alight with wonder. "It's identical." He strolled to the window and gazed out into the starry night. "You even got the view right."

"How could I forget?"

"I remember everything about that night." He crossed the room, his gaze locked with hers. "I've relived it hundreds of times in my dreams."

"We'll revel in the good parts. But you won't wake up alone."

He seemed hesitant to touch her. Desire burned brightly in his gaze but something held him back, kept him just out of reach. She nervously licked her lips, overcome by a sudden rush of awkwardness.

"I don't want to relive the past." He took her hands between his and raised them to his lips. "We aren't the same people we were six years ago. That's not good or bad, it just is."

With a silent nod, she burst the illusion, showering the room with flecks of Light *iede*. He held out his hand, admiring the sparkle. "I'd like to see you in this, and only this."

She could disperse the glitter with a wave of her hand, but the silver specks glistened in his dark hair, making his eyes appear endlessly black. Pulling the sundress off over her head, she manifested more *iede* and tossed it into the air above her head. With no mental command to power it, the powdery substance dusted her naked body, making her skin shimmer.

He disintegrated his clothing with the blink of his eyes and grinned. "There's nothing between us now. My father is gone and your mission is complete. Let's make new memories." His gaze roamed over her body, intense with desire and male appreciation. "You are so beautiful covered in *iede*, I'm afraid to touch you."

"Touch me. I'll make more."

With just his index finger he drew an undulating pattern across the upper swell of her breasts. "What does it taste like?"

Capturing his gaze, she smiled. "What do you want it to taste like?"

"Sweet. No, spicy—"

"Done." She arched her brows challengingly.

Intrigued, Jax lowered his face and licked her nipple. Cinnamon and sugar, sweet and spicy, just like he'd requested. "Damn, you're good," he murmured against her skin.

"Tell me when you're ready for something else."

"I haven't even begun to enjoy this flavor yet." He trailed his tongue up her throat, pausing to explore the underside of her chin before tracing her sparkling lips. The brighter the glitter, the more pronounced the flavor. This could be fun.

He caressed her with his lips, absorbing her heat and softness. Then he pushed into her mouth with his tongue, sharing the sweet/spicy *iede*. She made a muffled sound in the back of her throat and returned his kiss with equal fervor.

His hands stroked her breasts, fascinated by the fine sediment coating her smooth skin. Tingles erupted in his palms and his lips. "Are you doing that on purpose?"

"Doing what?"

"Your *iede* is making me tingle."

Her chuckle was low and wicked. "Are you sure it's the *iede*?"

She had a valid point. Parts of his body not yet touched by *iede* were tingling like crazy. A sudden rush of desire made him dizzy, desperate to be inside her, to reestablish the connection they had lost six years before.

He lifted her in his arms and placed her on the bed.

"At least this one is big enough for both of us," she said as he stretched out beside her.

"You don't like having me on top of you?"

"Not when you're determined to ... or rather determined not to let me come."

"I never apologized properly for my boorish behavior." Slipping one arm under her neck, he kissed her deeply, slowly, while his hand descended along her body with obvious intent. Her skin was so soft. He would never tire of touching her.

Her thighs parted, making room for his hand. They were both beyond pretense. They had waited too long, they needed too much to be anything but eager. Hot and slick with desire, her body told him explicitly how much she wanted him. He parted her folds and traced her slit with his middle finger, all the while savoring her sweet mouth.

He dipped into her pulsing core with his middle finger and groaned at the wet heat awaiting him. It would be heaven.  
*Not yet!*

Moving his slick fingers to her swollen clit, he circled and flicked. She groaned, clutching at his shoulders, oblivious to her long nails. He welcomed the pain. Knowing she was desperate for him was worth a few scratches.

"Come for me, sunshine. Let me feel you melt." A few more circles and her body arched into his hand, shaking as her orgasm burst within her. Hot cream soaked his fingers and Jax grinned. The scent of her arousal sped his pulse and stirred his hunger. "I want to taste you. Bring that sweet pussy over here."

She hesitated only a moment, then moved to straddle his face, positioning herself directly over his eager mouth. He inhaled deeply, prolonging the anticipation. He'd waited so long to touch her and taste her. He didn't want it to end. Parting her with his thumbs, he found her clit with his tongue then moved his hands to her hips.

A soft cry escaped her with his first persistent stroke. His chest tightened, the wave of tenderness almost painful. Each gasp and moan made him more determined to take his time. Her essence coated his tongue and filled his mouth. Honey. She tasted like warm honey. He drove his tongue into her cunt, finding cream unaffected by the illusion. Honey was nice, and he was ravenous for her!

Crystal arched backward, bracing herself against his thighs as his mouth adored her aching pussy. He licked and sucked, devouring her cream as fast as her body produced it. Abandoned completely to the pleasure, wild with sensations she had suppressed for six years, she spread her legs wide and angled her hips, giving him access to anything he desired.

"Turn around." He spoke the words against her heated flesh, his breath a distinct caress.

They'd only done this once before, but the memory sent tingles all through her body. Giving pleasure made receiving it even sweeter. She reversed position and bent over him, keeping her sex aligned with his mouth.

His cock arched away from his body, begging for attention. Closing her lips around the head, she slowly sucked him into her mouth, savoring his throaty groan. He tasted of cinnamon

and sugar. Nothing had ever tasted sweeter or thrilled her more. *Jax*. They were finally together as they were meant to be. She swirled her tongue around and around. She hadn't realized her mental command had transformed all the *iede* in the room.

Keeping her lips firmly sealed, she slid her mouth up and down along his thick shaft, pausing at the end of each stroke to suck firmly on the sensitive head of his cock. He groaned again, praising her efforts.

His mouth moved against her folds, tongue burrowing, lips gently sucking. Tender. He touched her so tenderly. She was so close to the edge. One light touch would trigger her orgasm, and he loved to make her wait, to prolong the pleasure until they both ached for fulfillment.

He rubbed her ass, delving into the crease with his fingers. She moved faster, knowing what he intended, wanting it, yet fearing it. He raised his knees, spreading his legs, offering his body in the same way he intended to take hers.

She quickly licked her fingers, and waited for him to begin. He pushed two fingers into her throbbing cunt, then moved the moisture back to her tightly puckered anus. The ultimate intimacy, absolute surrender. Positioning her finger, while she worked his cock, she pushed as he pushed, and they breached the tight rings of muscle at exactly the same time.

His cock bucked wildly and feminine power intensified her pleasure. He shook with his need for her, making her shake in return. Gradually he relaxed. His tongue settled over her clit. He pulled his finger nearly out while he flicked her with his tongue. She matched the slide of her mouth to the movement

of her finger, desperate for more of him, needing all of him. He moved faster. She pushed deeper. Wet mouths slid, insistent fingers thrust, their movements perfectly synchronized. They breathed as one. Their heartbeats aligned.

Twisting his hips, he dislodged his cock from her mouth. "Too much." He panted, but his mouth resumed its tender assault.

She left her finger inside him, unwilling to lose the tangible connection of being part of him. Resting her cheek against his thigh, she concentrated on the sensations unfurling inside her. His finger moved, while his tongue alternately flicked her clit and rimmed her core.

Hard spasms of pleasure released and she pressed her face into his thigh, muffling her scream. He licked and sucked until he wrung the last tingle from her trembling body.

"Let's go into the Shadow realm."

"Why?" Feeling replete and lazy, she didn't want to move. Easing her finger from his body, she smiled at his groan.

"You'll see." He lifted her off him and stood beside the bed, eyes shining with warmth and mischief. Holding out his arms he said, "Wrap yourself around me, arms and legs."

She grasped his shoulders and lifted one leg to his waist. He pulled the other into position and she locked her ankles behind him. His whole body was so warm. She wanted to rub against him like a cat.

"Ready?"

"I guess. Why can't we just..." Her protest trailed away as his cock sank into her pussy. Hard and incredibly hot, he filled

her emptiness. Blissful pressure. She welcomed the fullness, craved it.

The cabin faded, dimmed until only they existed in the velvety Shadow realm. All she could see was Jax. His scent filled her head. She felt only his hands, his lean hips and his thick cock, stretching her, filling her.

Intensified by the absence of other stimuli, each sensation focused exquisitely. The brush of his hands sent heat swirling through her torso. Pleasure lanced through her pussy with each firm thrust.

"Keep your legs wrapped around me, but let go with your arms."

She hesitated only a moment. Unfettered by gravity, she floated in midair as he surged deeper. Closing her eyes, she concentrated entirely on the steady slide of his shaft, the elemental blending of their bodies and souls.

Perfect.

Complete.

Tension mounted and pleasure built.

He angled her downward, his hands firmly grasping her knees. Her hair floated around her face, silky and ticklish. Spreading her legs wide allowed him to thrust more aggressively. She clenched her inner muscles, unable to touch him in her upside down position. She offered him everything. He gave back just as generously.

Harder and harder he thrust. She reveled in the freedom, the precious luxury of having no one dependent upon her.

Jax was her equal and opposite—her mate.

They would take care of each other.



His cock thickened, throbbing wildly. She caressed him with her cunt, absorbing each thrust with her whole body. He ground against her, crying out sharply as he came in shuddering waves. The hot jets of his release triggered her orgasm and she followed him into the sensual void.

Long moments later, Crystal felt a bed beneath her and Jax expanding within her. "That was incredible," she whispered against his lips. They lay on their sides facing each other. He held one of her legs up around his waist while he slid in and out with lazy, teasing strokes.

"The Shadow realm offers all sorts of possibilities."

"I see that now. Feeling nothing but you is amazing."

He stilled, lodged as deeply as their position allowed.

"What do you feel right now?"

"I feel the missing piece to my puzzle. I feel my mate right where he belongs."

He kissed her softly, slowly, communicating all the tenderness swelling within his heart. "'I love you' seems almost inadequate after craving you for so long."

"'I love you' is a very nice place to start, and we have the rest of our lives to indulge our cravings."

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## Epilogue

"You don't know where they went?" Malik grumbled, arms folded over his chest. Cayenne didn't look any more at ease with the news. She sat beside him in their cozy living room, her hand resting lightly on his thigh.

Crystal recognized Malik from their brief comm, but her gaze kept drifting to Cayenne. As Minuette said, the sisters had very different features. Cayenne's delicate face could only be described as beautiful, while Lorrان's true appearance was striking, exotic.

"She's lost before I even got to meet her," Cayenne complained with a half-playful smile.

"She isn't lost. Minuette will contact us as soon as they're settled," Jax told them.

"But even then we won't know where she is. Why are the Time Keepers after her?"

Crystal hesitated. She'd guarded Lorrان's secrets for so long it felt odd to speak about her openly. "Your mother was born with neutral *iede*. It's very rare and very powerful."

Cayenne looked at her bonded mate, confusion obvious in her expression. "Translation, please."

"A person with neutral *iede* can be trained to manifest the gifts of any of the Keepers," Malik said.

"It's actually more complicated than that." Crystal scooted to the edge of the loveseat she shared with Jax and said, "If a person's *iede* is truly neutral they can manifest the gifts of *all* the Keepers. It's not like they have to pick one."

"If my mother was so powerful, how were they able to ... Why wasn't she harder to kill?"

"I don't know the details surrounding your parents' death. I do know that she was never trained. Your father was a Flame Keeper with only rudimentary—"

A blinding flash of light preempted the rest of Crystal's explanation.

Matriarch Flame and High Priestess Sacha of the Sacred Order of the Veil solidified in the middle of the living room.

What would necessitate two of the most powerful leaders in Dimension 290-2 visiting Earth? This couldn't be good.

"Grandmother." Cayenne stood and embraced Matriarch Flame.

"We meet at last. I only wish it were under better circumstances. This is my sister, Sacha."

Cayenne inclined her head, careful not to touch the high priestess. "It's an honor to meet you."

"You must pardon our brusqueness, but something is dreadfully wrong," Sacha said. She turned to Jax. "Do you have any idea where Minuette may have taken Lorrان?"

"No, Your Eminence. Knowing Karrick's abilities, we thought it best if we didn't know."

"Ordinarily I would have agreed with you, but I received an emergency transmission from Minuette this morning. It was garbled and incomplete, but she was clearly terrified."

"What were you able to learn?" Jax asked carefully, his dark gaze darting to Cayenne.

"Lorrان is alive, or was when Minuette sent the message. But they're in trouble. We have to find them immediately."

"They could be anywhere. How do we even begin such a search?" Malik asked, clearly distraught.

Sacha's gaze collided with her sister's, the conflict between them crackling. "There is only one way, but Sierra won't hear of it."

"I will not ask *that man* for help!" Matriarch Flame reinforced.

"Then ask his sons. They have a legitimate reason for seeking out Lorrان and you know it. You've been wrong to hide her from them."

"What are you talking about?" Cayenne asked, her tone demanding.

"Tell her," the high priestess prompted.

Resentfully, Matriarch Flame provided the information. "When Alrick realized that Lorrان had inherited Kayrin's neutral *iede*, he enacted the right of substitution."

"Here we go again," Cayenne muttered. "What does that mean?"

Sacha moved to stand directly in front of Cayenne. "Alrick signed a contract with your grandfather giving him the right to court Kayrin. My sister in all her romantic wisdom allowed her daughter to run away with her lover before the Time Master had the opportunity to execute the contract. When an Order is in breach of contract it is within the wronged party's rights to demand restitution. Alrick has chosen to substitute his broken betrothal agreement with one for Lorrان."

"But how did the Time Master even know about Lorrان?" Crystal asked passionately. "I've spent half my life guarding the secret of her existence."

"The same way they trailed Jax," Sacha said. "Karrick has powerful precognitive abilities. Even for a Future Keeper his visions are unusually accurate."

"The Time Master wants to bond with Lorrان?" Crystal shuddered. She had only met Alrick once, but that was enough to chill her to the bone. He was a ruthless man with the coldest eyes she had ever beheld.

"No. The contract is between Lorrان and his sons."

"Sons?" Cayenne nearly choked on the word.

"Time Keepers work in teams of three, past, present, and future. Alrick's twins are past and future. They are hoping to mold Lorrان into their present." The high priestess spoke in a calm, informative tone.

Crystal felt nearly as stunned as Cayenne looked. "I've never heard of a bonded triad."

"They are very rare and incredibly powerful."

"They are not going to mold my granddaughter into *their* anything!" Matriarch Flame asserted.

"Is it better that she die?" her sister challenged. "They're in trouble, Sierra, and we can't find them without Karrick's help."

"He had my daughter killed!"

"You're talking about his father, not Karrick; besides we can't prove it. One of my Veil Keepers is involved now. You're not keeping me out of this any longer. If you don't ask Karrick for help, I will!"

Matriarch Flame glared at High Priestess Sacha, and silence descended upon the room.

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## **Mystic Keepers 3: Lorrان**

**Aubrey Ross**

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## Prologue

King Sef of Zylott groaned as his beloved closed her lips around his rampant cock. Her supple body spread before him, her head angled back over the side of their massive bed. For the past eight years he'd been with no woman but Dori. He'd desired no other, a fact that surprised Sef, given his wayward youth. She had truly bewitched him.

Standing beside the bed, he pushed deeper into her mouth and cupped her breasts. Exploring her soft, warm body while she caressed him with her mouth was one of Sef's favorite pleasures. He rocked his hips, sliding in and out. She tightened her lips, forming a snug circle around his shaft, while her tongue tormented his tip.

He twirled her nipples between his fingers and thumb, smiling as they puckered. Their color darkened from rose to scarlet. Each of her throaty murmurs sent a thrill through his body. After eight years, she still burned for him. Tenderness swelled within his chest. Dori was his haven, the serene eye in life's hurricane. Though she couldn't calm the storm raging around them, here Sef found peace.

She bent her knees and spread her legs wide, an unmistakable invitation. Her delicate folds gleamed, evidence of her arousal. Continuing to stimulate her nipples with one hand, Sef covered her silky mons with the other. The absence of pubic hair allowed him to see and feel, touch and taste without hindrance. He sank three fingers into her slit. His cock bucked wildly as her wet heat closed around him.

Finding her swollen clit with his thumb, he moved his fingers in and out. She sucked harder, making mewling sounds in the back of her throat.

*Oh, this is bliss!*

Hot tingles swirled through his belly. His ass clenched and his balls tightened. Obviously sensing his urgency, Dori grabbed his hips and arched her neck, taking him deep. The distinct contraction of her throat shattered his last fragment of control. Pleasure pounded through him. His legs trembled and his cock jerked rhythmically. Shaking and gently caressing her face, Sef loosed his seed.

The pounding continued.

Not until Dori released him and scooted off the bed did Sef realize the pounding was not an echo of his pleasure.

"Who goes there?" she called out as she scrambled for their dressing gowns.

"I would never dare intrude, Your Majesty, but Lord Nyx insisted."

Passion's haze dissipated. Sef recognized the muffled voice of Mercer, the captain of the palace guards. "I'll be there directly."

Dori proffered his robe, but he shook his head. "Nyx wouldn't be here unless this was dire. I better dress." She helped him into fresh garments, then Sef paused at their chamber door. "I'll return as soon as I can. Keep the bed warm."

Sef's younger brother waited for him in a secluded antechamber reserved for a select few. Nyx stood with his



back to the hearth. Firelight accented the red tones in his dark hair and cast eerie shadows across his rugged features.

"Are we under siege?" Sef smiled, attempting to ease the tension crackling in the atmosphere.

Nyx's lips pressed into a grim line, his expression inscrutable. Sef closed the door and joined him before Nyx spoke. "This threat is more insidious."

"Speak plainly. What brings you here in the middle of the night?"

"Perhaps it's best if I show you." He gestured toward an adjoining door across the room from the entrance.

The lack of urgency in Nyx's manner mellowed Sef's anxiety. Compassion twisted through him as he walked to the door and eased it open. He couldn't remember the last time he'd heard Nyx laugh or seen him smile.

*Damn the Veil Keepers!*

Sef pushed the door wide and stepped into the connecting chamber. The room had a number of uses. A smile tugged at the corners of his mouth as Sef remembered some of the more creative ones. More of his misspent youth.

He emerged into a small observation area. A larger room lay beyond, separated from them by a transparent wall. From the other side, the wall appeared to be stone, so any occupant wouldn't realize they were being watched.

Nyx waved his hand toward the wall and light illuminated the room beyond. Glancing at his brother, Sef shook his head. The effortless ease with which Nyx wielded his magic never failed to amaze Sef.

"The Frost Keeper is stirring," Nyx stated. His tone revealed nothing of his feelings.

Turning his attention back to the holding cell, Sef crossed his arms over his chest and scowled. There lay not one, but two young female Keepers, a Frost Keeper and a Flame Keeper, from the look of their hair.

"Where did they come from?" He shot Nyx a sidelong glance. "Don't tell me Dimension 290-2 or I'll hit you."

"A team of trainees were practicing in the meadow beyond my fortress when—according to them—these two fell out of the sky."

Padded benches extended from the walls on three sides of the room. A table and stationary chairs shared the fourth wall with the door. The Flame Keeper lay on her side on the bench directly in front of them. She faced away, leaving only an impression of red-streaked brown hair and long shapely legs. Across the room, the Frost Keeper struggled to sit.

"Were they unconscious when your trainees found them?"

Nyx shook his head, his gaze fixed on the Frost Keeper. "No. The trainees said there was a short struggle and the Frost Keeper managed to dispatch some sort of signal. The team leader then cast them into a sleep thrall."

"Then why is the Frost Keeper stirring?"

"She shouldn't be." Nyx moved closer to the observation wall, clearly fascinated. "Unless..."

"Unless what?"

"Unless she isn't a Frost Keeper."

Sef looked at Nyx, amazed to find emotion burning in his gaze. It had been years since he saw his brother's expression

so animated. He didn't pause to consider which emotions were driving the expression. He was thrilled Nyx was feeling anything at all. "What are you talking about?"

"They didn't fall out of the sky. They came through the Veil."

"You think she's a Veil Keeper?"

"She must be." Nyx clasped his hands behind his back, his gaze never leaving the blonde woman. "Nothing else makes sense. She's young. She must have lost control of the navigation."

Sef chuckled. "She was only one dimension off."

"What are you going to do with them?"

"That depends on who they are. If they have connections to the Steering Committee, I'll ransom them. If not..." Sef looked at Nyx's profile. The expressionless mask had returned. "What would you like me to do?"

"Do whatever you want with the Flame Keeper, but the Veil Keeper is mine!"

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## Chapter One

Searing pain pierced Lorrان's brain jarring her from oblivion with a scream. She clutched her head and tried to curl into a ball, but the surface supporting her was too narrow. She toppled to the floor, landing hard on her hands and knees.

"Nothing more subtle had any effect on you. I apologize for the discomfort."

"Discomfort?" Anger and confusion propelled the word, but it still sounded like a croak.

She pushed her hair out of her eyes and blinked until the room came into focus. Stone. The walls, the benches, everything appeared to be constructed of stone. Even the table and chairs near the door had been fashioned from the same gray material.

Searching her muddled memory, Lorrان tried to understand the bizarre situation. Where was Minuette?

The burning pain receded and her heart began to pound. How had she gotten here? Where was *here*? They'd emerged from the Veil in mid-air and fallen into a grassy field. But Lorrان couldn't remember...

She moved her head gingerly and located the man who had spoken. Dark hair, with just a hint of red, swept straight back from his sharp-featured face and brushed his shoulders. His simple black robe was decorated around the hem with elaborate embroidery. The pattern sparkled like emeralds

when he moved. The color perfectly matched his cold gaze. He stared at her with expressionless detachment.

"Where am I?" she asked.

"Why do you not know?"

A strange tingle erupted in her brain as he spoke. The compulsion to answer nearly overwhelmed her. "How did I get here?"

"I can repeat the sensation that awakened you. Do you really want to experience that again?"

"I'm not trying to be difficult. Just give me a minute to sort things out." She reached for the bench behind her, meaning to pull herself off the floor. Her fingers sank into the spongy surface and she gasped. The substance looked like stone, but the top was thickly padded.

Deciding the floor suited her after all, she focused on her last clear memory. Minuette had zapped them from the cruise ship to a tropical island, then fallen into delirium. No one knew where they were. Crystal and Jax had insisted on it. Lorrان had been terrified that Minuette would die.

"How did you get off the island?"

Lorrان's gaze shot to the stranger. *He was reading her mind! Holy shit. Who was this guy?*

"You have the look of a Flame Keeper, yet you make no attempt to shield your thoughts. Why have you not been trained?"

She forced her tight throat to swallow and debated what to say. What difference did it make what she said when he could read her mind? "You know about Keepers? Am I ... Is this the Keeper planet?"

His eyes narrowed and he stalked toward her. "You are in the kingdom of Zylott. The Keepers refer to this as Dimension 290-3."

"What number is the Keeper dimension?"

"Why do you not know the answer to these questions? Who are you?"

He reached for her. Not knowing what to expect, Lorrان braced for an attack. His hands hooked under her arms and she yelped, but he only lifted her onto the bench and stepped back.

Did she dare ask him about Minuette? Even if he didn't intend to keep her prisoner, she was trapped in this dimension without the Veil Keeper.

"Then she is a Veil Keeper. I thought as much."

Helplessness threatened to overwhelm her. Tears warred with the urge to claw out his cold green eyes. How could she hope to control the situation if he heard her every thought?

"You have no control and the sooner you accept that fact the easier this will be. As you've realized, you don't even need to speak. Questions are curious things. Our minds are naturally programmed to answer them. What's your name?"

"Renee."

He glowered. "A familiar lie, but a lie nonetheless. What's your real name?"

The tingling returned, more intense this time. The harder she resisted, the more intense the sensation became.

"Lorrان." She gasped. "My name is Lorrان."

"Think carefully before you answer this next question." His cold gaze bore into hers. "If you have potential value to the

kingdom of Zylott, the king is more likely to keep you alive and treat you with respect. If you are nothing but a stray Keeper, you will find yourself chained to the wall in a pleasure den."

A vivid image manifested in her mind. She saw herself naked, crouched in the corner of a filthy room like an animal. A thick collar circled her neck and a chain ran from the collar to a metal loop pounded into the wall.

"Why would you do *that* to anyone?"

"We are at war with the Keepers. Now answer me truthfully. Is there anyone in Dimension 290-2 who will pay to ransom you?"

Rebellion bubbled up within her. God, she hated bullies. Letting her thoughts spin out of control, she filled her mind with chaotic bits of trivia and fractured images. The second a rational thought started to solidify, she forced herself to think of something else.

Heat flared like a torch, searing her brain. She moaned, rocking back against the wall. "Matriarch Flame. Send a message to Matriarch Flame. She'll ransom us."

"Us? Then the Veil Keeper is elite as well?"

"Where is she?" Panting harshly, she glared at her tormentor. "I want to see her."

He made a sound part snort and part snarl. "What makes you think I care what you want?" He turned and left the chamber without another word.

Taking slow deep breaths, Lorrان relaxed and dispelled the lingering effects of his mind probe. If he could read her

thoughts so easily was it possible Minuette could hear her as well?

*Minuette? Can you hear me?*

Nothing.

*I don't know if I screwed up or not, but they know who we are. I'm sorry. I couldn't keep him out of my mind.*

The door opened and a tall, broad-shouldered man strode in. "You will come with me."

"Where are you taking me?"

"To your companion."

The hairs on the back of her neck prickled. He was lying. "Bring her to me."

With a casual shrug, he turned to leave. "Fine. I'll tell King Sef you didn't want to see her."

"Wait." She hurried after him. "Where is she?"

"I'll show you."

She had to jog to keep up with his long stride. Why was he in such a hurry? They rounded a corner and he clasped her wrist, dragging her along behind him.

"Let go of me!" She tugged against his hold and dug in her heels.

"I'm here to rescue you, Lorrان. Don't fight me!"

His bright green eyes shone with sincerity, but her instincts wouldn't quit. Fear tingled down her spine. "Who sent you? What about Minuette?"

"There's another team here for her. Now we must hurry."

Anything was better than that cold-eyed bastard and his mind probe. Lorrان had experienced many unbelievable things in the past few days, but he took the cake. She'd never



been so defenseless in her life. And the only time he touched her had been to lift her off the floor.

"Team?" The word registered belatedly. "There are others with you?"

"Yes."

Her questions were obviously making him impatient, so she concentrated on keeping up. He had a spectacular body. His supple brown leather pants and form-fitting shirt displayed every ripple and bulge.

*Jesus, Lorrان, what a time to notice his package.*

He chuckled and her gaze shot to his.

"If a package is what I think it is, I'll be happy to let you unwrap mine. But we have to get you out of Zylott first."

*Shit. Can everyone in this dimension read minds?*

"Most can, so guard your thoughts."

He pulled her around one final corner where two men anxiously waited. A blond man nodded toward her and the dark-haired man in front of him turned around.

Twins! The dark-haired man looked identical to the man holding her wrist.

"Well done, Karrick." Warrick turned back to the blond.  
"Get us out of here."

Suspecting she would panic, Karrick pulled Lorrان against his chest and trapped her flailing arms against her sides. He covered her mouth with his hand, muffling her shouts and screams. Heat radiated off her body. He buried his face in her red-streaked brown hair, inhaling the sweet scent. His body ached, his being yearned for the joining soon to come.

The hunt had been spectacular. Crystal had been the most formidable Light Keeper they had ever faced. Her illusions kept them from Lorrان far longer than either he or Warrick expected. But the hunt was over now. The prize was in his arms!

He dragged her toward Warrick and the Veil Keeper. Shrouded in Light Keeper illusion, the Veil Keeper's true identity was known only to the Time Master. Karrick didn't care who he was as long as he could skillfully navigate the Veil.

"Hold her tightly. Her efforts are counterproductive to mine," the Veil Keeper told him.

"Put her in a time trance. We can't afford a mishap now."

Karrick had to agree with his brother. "Relax, this won't hurt, I promise." He whispered the assurance into her ear, then froze her time strand, sealing her in the moment.

She remained tense, but her struggles ceased, even her breathing stilled. Warrick moved in close, pressing Lorrان between them. Karrick grinned. She better get used to this. She was going to be sandwiched between them a lot.

The Veil Keeper placed his hands on the twins' shoulders and immersed them all in the Veil. Prickly sensations stung Karrick's exposed skin. Color faded to gray. Individual sounds melded until nothing remained but hissing static. Cloying. Suffocating.

It wasn't unlike riding a time strand, but the blackness wasn't quite so overwhelming when he was in control. Muttering voices reached Karrick's ears. He welcomed the point of reference within the endless fog. Searching for other

sounds, he scanned for indications that they would soon emerge. A clatter, a startling bang, they were nearing the hem of the Veil. Colors returned one by one. Karrick thrilled at each new shade.

They emerged in the grassy yard behind their forest cottage. Snatching his hands back from their shoulders, the Veil Keeper inclined his head and disappeared back into the Veil.

"Talkative sort." Warrick reluctantly eased his body away from Lorrان. "So, how do we do this?"

Karrick laughed. "Do you want to negotiate logistics or—"

"We've been completely focused on her capture. Now that we actually have her, how do we make her understand what we need from her?"

"We don't *make* her do anything. Father activates *Pim Noctar* and if she's meant to be our bonded mate, as we all believe, nature will do the rest."

Warrick moved Karrick's hand away from her mouth. His gaze caressed her motionless features. "I think you're deluded if you honestly believe it will be that easy. She knows nothing of our ways and she's been taught to fear us."

"So we overcome her fear and educate her in our ways."

"Ever the optimist." Warrick paused. "I think we should use the gold room. It will make things easier in the long run."

Karrick wasn't so sure. "It might also terrify her."

"She's terrified now. We need to strip away her misconceptions and show her the wonders of our world."

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## Chapter Two

Awareness returned by degrees. Lorrان felt cool air waft across her bare skin. *Bare skin?* Why was she naked? She opened her eyes and gasped. Where the hell was she? Decorated in shades of ivory and gold, the room was tasteful and understated—except for the chains!

Golden chains attached to padded cuffs encircled her wrists and ankles. A narrow hammock supported her butt, keeping the pressure off her bound limbs and suspending her in midair.

*Oh my God!* Her stomach cramped and nausea rolled through her abdomen. *This can't be real!*

A huge bed and a wedge-shaped cushion were the only furniture in the room. Unless you counted the contraption in which she was suspended. Cabinets marched along one wall. She shuddered to think what they contained. Sex toys? Aphrodisiacs? Whips? A half-hysterical sob escaped her. This certainly made clear what her captors had in store for her.

Heat spiraled through her entire body, settling with undeniable urgency between her thighs. What the hell was wrong with her? She was definitely *not* into pain!

"And we would only hurt you if it heightened your pleasure. This is not about pain."

Turning her head as far as her neck allowed she couldn't quite see the door. Her heartbeat thundered and she slowly licked her lips. "Then release me." Her voice sounded brittle and thin.

"It's too late for that. *Pim Noctar* has begun."

He strolled into her line of vision and Lorrان's mouth went dry. Naked and fully aroused, he was the most glorious male she'd ever seen. Smooth skin covered his perfectly sculpted muscles. His fluid, graceful movements fascinated her. As if in a trance, she watched the bunch and flex of his thighs and the bob of his erect cock.

Her pussy throbbed in silent demand. They must have drugged her. Why else would she feel so ... hot? Desperate to escape the unwanted sensations building within her body, she tugged against the chains and twisted her hips. Useless! She let out a frustrated cry.

He touched her knee, warmth shining in his gaze. "We'll not hurt you, Lorrان. A true bonding cannot be forced. When we join there will be no mistaking the act for rape."

Brushing his fingers along her calf, he paused to rub her foot, and inspect the cuff restraining her ankle. The tender caress so contradicted his subtle tug on the chain that Lorrان almost laughed. "I'm supposed to believe that as I'm hanging here in chains." Tingles erupted everywhere he touched. She squirmed, fear driving back the unwanted desire. "Which one are you?"

"Does it matter?"

"Yes."

He continued his insidious attack on her senses. Trailing feather-light caresses up her leg, he stood beside her and skimmed her belly with his fingertips. Her muscles quivered and tension built in her core. "Warrick tends to be more aggressive. I like to savor my pleasure."

In between bouts of delirium, Minuette had explained—*Minuette!* How could she have forgotten about Minuette? "Was there another team, like you said? Did they rescue Minuette?"

"The Veil Keepers know where she is." He cupped her breast.

She tried to avoid his warm hand, but the restraints held her firm. "What does that mean?" Focusing on the other woman's peril helped calm her raging hormones—somewhat.

"Minuette belongs to the Sacred Order of the Veil. It's not our place to interfere." He traced her areola, taunting her nipple with his neglect. "We provided the high priestess with all the information she needs to rescue your friend."

"That's not an answer." She tried again to twist away. Her nipple gathered into a tight aching knot, begging for his touch, his kiss. *Damn it!* She didn't want this. Something was seriously wrong here. Why couldn't she control her own body? "Do you know if they rescued her or not?"

"The Veil Keepers are a secretive lot."

"Which means they didn't?"

"It means I don't know."

She thought of the cold-eyed interrogator and shuddered. Was he with Minuette? Was...

"Do you understand why we pursued you?" Covering her breast with his hand, he waited for her reply.

He'd dismissed the topic. Okay, back to the present. *I'm hanging here in chains!*

Neutral *iede*. Supposedly, it gave her the ability to assimilate any and all Keeper powers. But the words were

nothing more than a foreign phrase to Lorrان. Her abilities were random and spontaneous. How could something so useless drive these men to such—he shifted his hips and rested his cock on her tummy—lengths.

"Your thoughts are spinning in circles, but I'll try and clear up some of the confusion." Leaving one hand covering her breast, he cupped her mound with the other. His long middle finger sank between her slick folds, grazing her clit. Lorrان bucked and wiggled, trying to dislodge him. He ignored her antics and continued his explanation.

"Identical twins are extremely rare within the Order of Time. It is even more unusual to find identical twins with opposite orientations." Her eyebrows scrunched together and he smiled, giving her clit a little flick. "Not sexual orientation, my sweet. Warrick is a Past Keeper. I'm a Future Keeper."

"Most twins are the same?" She didn't know why she was encouraging him. She should scream the heavens down until he let her go.

He rocked his hips, sliding his cock against her stomach. He matched the subtle rhythm with his finger. She whimpered. Her pussy pulsed, needing the fullness of his thick shaft. Somehow she didn't think he intended to release her. Just give her release. She shuddered helplessly.

"Most twins are the same, so they pair with other Time Keepers."

"What does this have to do with me?" It all seemed surreal. Less than a week ago she'd been sewing costumes for the cast on a cruise ship. Now she was in another dimension at the mercy of...

They hadn't really hurt her. They rescued her from Zylott. And despite her helplessness, Karrick hadn't raped her—yet.

"We aren't villains. We have the legal right to court you."

She laughed, straining against the restraints. "This is how courting is done here? Do I have the 'legal right' to refuse?"

He didn't respond to her questions. Instead, he delved deeper with his finger, dipping into her core. "We need a Present Keeper to complete our Time triad, but because our *iede* is identical it is extremely potent. Twice we've tried to form temporary unions with a Present Keeper. Both were damaged by our—"

"I don't want to be damaged," she cried, more upset by her body's unwanted arousal than by his confusing words.

"If your *iede* is truly neutral, as Father believes, you will be more than a match for us."

Her core rippled around his finger. The heel of his hand rubbed her clit. "Stop it. Please, stop touching me."

"Your body has accepted my touch. But your mind resists what it doesn't understand. We are meant to bond. Your neutral *iede* makes you—"

"How do you even know my *iede* is neutral?" Her question sounded shrill. Despite her determination to resist, his teasing held her teetering on the brink of an orgasm, an orgasm she wanted desperately. "I have no significant powers."

His sexy smile made her shiver. "Everything about you is significant."

He obviously intended to fuck her. There was no other reason for her position, but she didn't understand why he—



"I'll fuck you when there is no doubt in your mind that you want me and not before. You will never equate our joining with rape." He stepped away and she choked back a moan. "I would never take a woman by force, but the longer we delay the more demanding our need will become. You're feeling the effects already."

"You did drug me." Accusation made her voice sharp.

"*Pim Noctar* isn't a drug, it's ... There is nothing to relate it to on Earth. It's a force enacted by the elders to determine the compatibility of a potential bonding."

She turned her face away. He was too compelling, too distracting. She couldn't think when she looked at him. His light caresses had driven every thought from her mind but one—having his cock inside her, now!

"Tell the elders to deactivate this force. I won't be manipulated like this."

"It's not that simple. *Pim Noctar* doesn't create attraction, it only heightens it. If you honestly didn't want me, your body wouldn't respond. This is meant to be."

Tears burned behind her eyes and she dragged in a ragged breath. She had never been so miserable. Her nipples ached and her pussy throbbed, and all he'd done was touch her.

Sensing her distress, he returned to her side, caressing her cheek and brushing her lips with his thumb. "Before we attempt the joining, we'll make sure your *iede* is neutral. Regardless of how attractive we find you, we can only bond successfully with someone of equal power. Equal and opposite, it is the Keeper way. Will you feel more at ease knowing our actions were warranted?"

She glared at him. "I don't care if I'm the most powerful Keeper in the universe. Nothing justifies your hunting me like prey!" He leaned down and kissed her. His lips stroked, soothed, and coaxed a response from her. "I don't want you," she whispered as his tongue traced her lower lip.

"Yes, you do."

"I don't want to want you."

Sealing his lips over hers, he tasted her. His tongue delved into her mouth, exploring, caressing. She curled her hands into fists, despising her helplessness, resenting the surge of desire pounding through her blood. Oh God, how she wanted him!

"Can you manifest *iede*?" His lips teased hers with each word he formed.

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"That's too bad," Warrick said from behind her. "We'll have to make you come over and over until your body releases it spontaneously." He moved to her other side, trailing his fingers along her arm and teasing the outer curve of her breast. "Doesn't that sound horrible?"

Lorran squirmed. Tingles erupted in the wake of his touch and goose bumps rose on her forearms. She looked from Warrick's fierce expression to Karrick's compassionate gaze and back again. Their features, the rippling contour of their bodies, even the size and shape of their jutting cocks were identical. How would she ever resist two of them?

Her body thrummed with anticipation. She ached to the marrow of her bones, wanting, needing. Both of them? At the same time?

"I can't do this. You can't..."

"We'll prepare you carefully." Warrick circled her nipple with his fingertip. "You'll experience only pleasure, but we must check your *iede* first."

Karrick ducked under her leg and situated himself between her thighs. Warrick framed her face with his palms and rubbed her lips with his. It wasn't so much a kiss as a caress. Warm fingers glided over her hip, her mound, her thigh. Karrick kept his touch light and playful.

"Do you want to taste her first? It's your right as eldest."

Warrick shook his head, his lips brushing hers with the motion. "I'll claim her virginity. You may have first taste."

"Stop talking about me as if I'm not here." Should she tell him she wasn't a virgin? Would he be angry once he realized—

"You *are* a virgin where my cock is going, but I appreciate the concern." Warrick captured her startled gasp with his mouth. Angling his lips over hers, he pushed into her mouth with his tongue, demanding a response. After a moment of futile resistance, she curled her tongue around his, sliding, dancing, dueling.

Karrick eased her legs wide and scooted her toward the edge of the sling. Warm and gentle, his hands stroked her inner thighs, swirling ever closer to her damp folds. The heat of his breath stirred her feminine curls, escalating the tension low in her belly.

God, she burned. She needed his fingers, or better yet his cock, filling the void inside her.

Parting her folds, Karrick traced her slit from anus to clit with one sustained stroke of his tongue. Lorrان moaned. Heat rose, crawling across her skin in a tingling flush. He circled her entrance, but didn't push inside. Her pussy throbbed in painful protest and she dragged her mouth away from Warrick.

"Please! I need..."

"Not yet," Warrick said sharply, his gaze on his brother. "We take her together and she's not ready for me."

"Then watch for *iede*."

Karrick's meaning didn't register until his mouth settled over her pussy. He parted her folds with his tongue and found her swollen clit. Flicking and circling, he stimulated her relentlessly.

Warrick unfurled her fingers and examined her palm, distracting her from the pleasure building at Karrick's command.

"What are you looking at?"

Karrick sucked her clit into his mouth. A spike of pleasure/pain shot deep into her cunt. She cried out. *Okay, I get it. Ignore Warrick's sudden fixation with my hand.*

Relaxing his hold, Karrick tongued her gently as if to apologize for his rough treatment. A giggle built in the back of her throat. She'd been closer to coming when he sucked on her.

Karrick caught her swollen nub between his teeth and flicked it rhythmically with his tongue. *Damn!* She was her own worst enemy. There was no hope of resisting if she couldn't keep them out of her thoughts.

Tension burst within her, expanding until her whole body trembled and pulsed. Lorrان cried out, shocked by the intensity of her orgasm.

"Well?" Karrick looked at his twin across the quivering expanse of her body.

"Nothing."

"She tastes fantastic. Do you want to try?"

"I'm not a toy!" She jerked against the restraints, embarrassment rushing in on the heels of her staggering release. "Get me out of this thing! I want down, now."

Warrick touched her cheek gently. She turned her face away. "Will you allow the joining if we release you?"

Already pulsing desire echoed through her core. She closed her eyes, willing the ache away. "No! Get away from me."

"Is that what you really want?"

His smug tone felt like a slap, releasing her pent-up fury. With an exasperated yell, she arched and bucked, twisted and kicked. She knew it was useless, but she was too overwhelmed to care. Nothing made sense here. Everything was—alien! She wanted to go home! She wanted to go back to the comfortable safety of her ignorance.

Warrick stalked toward her feet. Shoving Karrick out of the way, he took his place between her legs. "Look at me."

The command only heightened her defiance. Stubbornness averted her face. "Go to hell."

"I am in hell, and so are you! The only way out is to join our bodies as they were meant to join. Do you deny wanting us?"

She tossed her head and clenched her teeth.

He pushed two fingers into her cunt. Lorrان screamed. Like a match to tinder, her senses ignited. Hard throbbing spasms attacked her inner muscles. "Make it stop! I don't want this! I don't want to be your fuck toy! I want..." Her sentence ended in a moan as he withdrew his fingers.

"This is what you want, what you need." Slowly at first, then firmly, deeply, he fucked her with his fingers. His thumb brushed her clit at the apex of each thrust. Lorrان spread her legs wide, arching into his hand. Tears trailed down her cheeks, but pleasure shimmered through her body. He was right and she hated him for it.

This was exactly what she needed, the friction, the fullness.

She cried out. Her back bowed and her core squeezed his fingers in rippling spasms of pleasure. Panting harshly, she finally looked at Warrick through her tears. "This isn't going to stop, is it?"

"No." Had there been a hint of regret in his tone? She didn't want to credit him with a shred of decency, but his next statement contradicted the role she'd set for him. "Our desire for each other will increase steadily. If we could give you more time to adjust to our world, we would."

Her chin quivered and she blinked away her tears. "I thought time was your specialty."

"Warrick, look at this."

Lorrان turned her head, surprised to find Karrick holding her hand. Her fingers sparkled and her palm was filled with a glistening powder. "What is that?" She glanced at her other hand and found it coated with the same substance.

"That, sweetheart, is *iede*," Karrick said with a beaming smile.

Warrick joined his brother. "It's colorless."

"So is Light *iede*."

Rubbing his finger against her palm, Warrick lifted it to his mouth. Lorrان grimaced. Was it meant to be ingested?

"It's tasteless, too." He sounded thrilled with this discovery.

"Well, *rijnna mi*." Warrick kissed her brow. "You officially possess neutral *iede*."

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### Chapter Three

Warrick moved around Lorrان, smiling when he discovered her other hand was sparkling as well. "Coat my cock with your *iede*."

"What?"

Wrapping his fingers around hers, he rocked his hips forward and closed her hand around his cock. His flesh tingled and stung as it absorbed her power. "Tighter." When she obeyed, he pulled his hand away and moved within the firm circle of her fist.

She turned her head and Warrick saw his twin guide her other hand to his cock. Warrick set the pace, knowing Karrick would follow. Each firm stroke accented the heat, intensified the sting. *Prazot!* It hurt like hell. No, it felt wonderful!

Her fingers tightened, her thumb teasing their tips each time they pulled back. Spinning in chaotic circles, her thoughts were nearly impossible to comprehend. Warrick sensed her arousal, but fear remained, hampering her response.

"Enough!" he snapped. "She's still afraid."

With an audible groan, Karrick ceased as well. They rubbed their hands against her sparkling palms, manifesting Time *iede* and mingling it with hers.

"That tingles."

Warrick hid his smile. She wasn't just referring to her hands. He could sense her arousal building, spreading heat through her body. Scooping their combined *iede* off her palm,



he rubbed it into her breast, thickly coating her nipple. Karrick mirrored his actions on the other side of her body.

Returning to her palm, Warrick coated his hand, then moved between her legs.

"What are you doing?"

"Preparing you, blending our *iede*. This will strengthen our bonding."

Fear lingered in her mind, but curiosity and fatigue eroded the other emotion. She was tired of battling herself. Complete surrender was still a ways off, but her inhibitions weakened with each passing moment, each gentle caress.

"As your bonded mates it becomes our duty to protect, provide for, and satisfy you." He painted her clit and coated her anus as he spoke. "We will cherish you with our bodies and our minds. Your well-being becomes our top priority, your happiness our goal."

"Pretty words from the mouth of my captor? You can read my mind. You're just saying what I want to hear."

"What you want has nothing to do with pretty words." He pushed his *iede*-coated fingers deep into her pussy. Her wet heat enveloped him, dragging a groan from his throat and rushing blood to his already turgid cock.

Twisting his hand, he pushed in as far as his fingers could reach. Her muscles fluttered, caressing him. Should he finger fuck her again? He loved the way her body grasped him and the throaty sounds she made when she came.

No, anticipation would make their joining sweeter.

He returned to her anus, gently circled the tightly puckered hole. Her anxiety surged. "Relax. I'm not going to

hurt you." Her eyes were wide and luminous, staring at him with cautious expectation. He breached her with his middle finger. She gasped, but didn't struggle. "Push against me, take me deeper."

She hesitantly arched, pushing her body onto his finger just as he'd instructed.

"Very good."

"But that's just your finger."

"Concentrate on how I feel inside you." Her body's need for fulfillment warred with her uncertainty. She had to accept that he would penetrate her here. It was his duty to make sure she was ready. He shot her an encouraging smile. "And try to trust me just a little. Karrick, get the wands."

"Wait!" A renewed rush of fear obliterated her momentary lethargy. "What wands?"

Warrick slowly drew his finger out, knowing the sensation was strongest as he pulled away. She moaned and lifted her hips, panic receding in the wake of pleasure. "Magic wands. But not the sort for conjuring rabbits out of hats. These are different."

Karrick opened one of the cabinets and retrieved a black case.

Lorran's soft chuckle drew Warrick's gaze to her face. "What's amusing?"

"Now I feel like we're playing doctor."

Warrick had no idea what that meant, but at least she was relaxed and cooperative. Karrick unfolded a stand and placed the open case upon it before returning to Lorran's side. Warrick picked up the smallest of the wands. One corner of

the case formed a reservoir containing light green lubricant. He dipped the wand in the gel and turned back to Lorran.

"Have you ever used those before?" She was clearly disturbed by the idea.

"The kit is disposable," he assured her. "The wands are as virginal as your ass."

A tremor shook her. Warrick scanned her thoughts and grinned. Excitement not fear had caused the shiver.

He held her open as he carefully inserted the first wand. About half the circumference of his cock, it was still significantly thicker than his finger. Her face flushed, her body tensed. He wanted to pull the damn thing out and rock her in his arms like a child. *Ridiculous*. This was necessary. It would keep him from hurting her during their joining.

His cock bucked as he pictured himself replacing the wand with his flesh, stretching her, filling her. Gods, he needed to be inside her. Pulling back on the wand, he watched it slowly emerge from her body. A distressed sound escaped her.

"Do you want me to stop?" He couldn't believe the question passed his lips.

"No. It just feels really strange."

"Kiss her, Karrick, she's upset."

Karrick shot him a startled glance, but happily obliged.

*What is wrong with me?* His cock pounded, demanding release and all he could think about was her. He'd never felt such overwhelming protectiveness for a female. Would it always be like this or was this tenderness part of *Pim Noctar*?

Karrick kissed her with a patient skill Warrick would never possess. His brother mastered women with seduction, while he specialized in conquest.

Dragging the wand out, he paused a full second before pushing it back in. He had to stretch her, train her tight sphincter to relax, open, and accept him. She held her emotions back, determined to feel nothing. The unconventional nature of his task fueled her uncertainty.

He had no choice. This had to be done, and she would benefit in the long run. He inserted the wand over and over until her body accepted it without resistance, then he moved. His long, slow strokes hinted at what was to come. Her folds darkened and pearly essence seeped out of her pussy. Thank the gods! She was surrendering to her body's demands.

Without halting the smooth slide of the first wand, Warrick prepared the second. Karrick continued to kiss her, cupping her breasts and teasing her nipples. Warrick pulled out the first wand and inserted the second. Lorrان's hips twisted and her thighs flexed. Her breasts heaved, her breathing harsh. He maintained the steady rhythm, waiting for her to adjust to the new, thicker invasion.

His arousal was so acute he could no longer judge her responses. She seemed ready for the final phase, but he hesitated. That damn protectiveness again. He laughed inwardly. How could he protect her from himself?

*This will make it easier for her. It's necessary.*

Renewing his determination, he pulled out the second wand and positioned the third. "Push onto this, like you did with my finger." She remained motionless. Karrick was still

kissing her, so Warrick couldn't see her face. "Are you all right?"

Reaching for her mind, he trembled with the intensity of her desire. She was desperate for release, aching, burning. He hadn't intended to let her climax until he was inside her, but he couldn't leave her like this. His cock echoed the persistent rhythm of her desire.

He pushed the wand deep with firm, steady pressure. She moaned and whimpered, but Karrick didn't release her mouth. Warrick dipped his fingers into her core. *Prazot*, she was wet, and hot. Using her cream to ease the way, he stroked over and around her clit. Her body jerked with each pass.

A shimmer drew his attention to her hand and Warrick smiled. More *iede*. They had vanquished her fear, at least for now. He rubbed her clit and drew out the wand, watching her palms sparkle as her body shook with release.

Dazed and tingling, Lorrان relaxed in the sling while the Time twins coated their cocks with her *iede*. If someone had described what was happening to her, she'd have thought they were crazy. Each orgasm they triggered was more powerful than the last. And this was foreplay!

Part of her brain refused to accept the events as reality. She felt as if she were floating in a dream, a vivid, intensely erotic dream, but a dream.

"It's time, *rijnna mi*. This can be delayed no longer." Warrick unfastened her ankle cuffs while Karrick released her wrists. Warrick lifted her in his arms and started toward the bed.

"Crystal honestly believed you meant me harm. Why did Matriarch Flame hire her to protect me? Karrick said you have the legal right to claim me. What gives you that right?"

"We have many questions too." Warrick stood her beside the bed, combing his fingers through her hair. "But I burn for you. Is your need any less demanding?"

Karrick moved in close, molding his body to her back and cupping her breasts. "We'll explore the mystery once we ease our hunger."

She wiggled between them, excited, aching, overwhelmed. Warrick tightened his hand in her hair and angled her face to his liking. Parting her lips, Lorrان met the bold thrust of his tongue with enthusiasm.

Lying to herself was pointless. She wanted this. She needed them as desperately as they needed her.

*As your bonded mates it becomes our duty to protect, provide for, and satisfy you.* Had Warrick meant what he said? Would they cherish her and do everything in their power to make her happy?

"Yes." They whispered the word in unison.

Her heart lurched within her breast. Blood sizzled through her veins, speeding heat throughout her body.

"Don't we have this backward?" Karrick lifted her hair and nuzzled her neck.

Dragging his mouth from hers, Warrick chuckled. "I suppose we do."

Karrick sat on the edge of the bed. Warrick lifted her onto his brother's lap, helping her kneel on the bed, straddling Karrick's hips.

Guiding her hand to his cock, Karrick looked deeply into her eyes, communicating his yearning, revealing his great need. "I will not force this on you. I long for you with every fiber of my being. If you feel the same, take me." He lay back across the bed, folding his hands behind his head.

Karrick wanted her to participate, not merely submit to this joining. She trembled, torn between the sensations surging through her body and a lifetime of misunderstanding.

Stepping up behind her, Warrick cupped her breasts, his fingers lazily rolling her nipples. "Surrender, *rijnna mi*. End this torment."

She lifted her hips and positioned Karrick's cock. Her slick folds surrounded him. Anticipation vibrated the air.

"That's it, sweetheart," Karrick encouraged. "Take me."

Warrick's hands squeezed her breasts, his body shifting restlessly against her back. "Take him now. I can wait no longer."

Savoring every blissful inch, Lorrان sank onto Karrick's cock. Sensation swirled up through her body making colors dance before her eyes. She gasped and then moaned.

"Oh, gods, that feels good!" Karrick beat her to the words. She clenched her inner muscles and watched him squirm. "Fuck, she's tight and I'm not even in her ass."

A cold shiver chased away the building heat. Her pussy could barely accommodate Karrick. How was Warrick going to join them without tearing her apart?

"The wands have made you ready, *rijnna mi*. There is nothing to fear." Warrick whispered the assurance directly into her ear as he urged her forward. Reeling from the

blissfulness of being filled by Karrick, she braced her hands against the bed. Karrick pulled her flush with his chest, stroked her hair away from her face, and kissed her lips.

Warrick eased her ass cheeks apart and pressed against her anus. She waited for his brutal thrust and the searing pain sure to follow.

"As soon as you're ready, push back against me and I'll do the rest."

A rush of tenderness accompanied his words. Warrick, aggressive Past Keeper, was waiting, depending on her to complete the joining, to make them one. His patience dissolved the last of her inhibitions. She could do this. She wanted to do this. Pushing back firmly, she arched her back as he drove his thick cock up her ass.

Stinging pain assailed her and she cried out. They held her pressed between them, stuffed full of them, surrounded by them. The sting receded, leaving her shaken, stretched—joined.

No one moved. Lorrان was afraid to breathe, afraid she'd shatter, ending their bonding before it began. Clutching Karrick's shoulders, she trembled, unsure how to continue.

Warrick caressed her back, her shoulders, her arms. "I don't have to move, if this hurts too much. Just squeeze me a few times and I'll come."

"No." She reached back with one hand and found his arm. "I want us to move. I just don't know how."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes."



His hands returned to her hips and he pulled her up until only the tip of Karrick's cock remained inside her. "As you slide off him, you slide onto me. Do you understand?" He kept his hands on her hips for a few repetitions, but Lorrان easily found the rhythm.

She'd never imagined anything could feel so good. As she dragged herself off Karrick's cock, Warrick thrust in, then they reversed direction. Warrick pulled back as she impaled herself on Karrick. Over and over, together yet opposite, moving as one.

Higher, tighter, faster, they climbed together. Lorrان gasped and strained, enveloped in their heat and flexing muscles. She splayed her fingers against Karrick's chest. Her pulse echoed the rhythm of his pounding heart. She didn't want this to end, but an orgasm swirled through her.

"I—can't—stop—it!" She cried out sharply. Her muscles contracted in shuddering spasms. Karrick thrust to the hilt into her pussy as Warrick filled her ass. Tingling heat erupted deep inside her as they released their seed, completing the first stage of the bonding.

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## Chapter Four

Lorran squirmed away from Karrick's soapy hands and he laughed. "You're ticklish."

"You think?" She squealed and twisted as his fingers found a particularly sensitive spot along her ribs.

Warrick banded her waist with his arm, holding her still while Karrick explored her full breasts, scrubbing her tender nipples far longer than necessary to rid them of their shiny residue. When he'd finished, he pulled her forward, holding her arms against his chest, while Warrick went to work on her back.

Warrick's sudsy hands glided over her hips. She sighed, resting her forehead against Karrick's shoulder.

"Spread your legs," Warrick directed.

"I can wash ... myself."

Karrick nudged her legs apart with his knees, sharing a conspirator's smile with his brother. Her body belonged to them and theirs to her. More lessons for their mate to learn. So many lessons and so little time. *Pim Noctar* would elapse with the sunrise. They must have bonded with her body, mind, and spirit before that time.

Warrick rubbed lather across her nicely rounded ass. She only protested when his long fingers slipped into her crack.

"Enough already!"

Warrick ignored her. Bending to one knee, he lathered her folds and pushing his soapy fingers gently into her pussy.

"Are you sore?"

"Not there."

"Ah. I have a salve that will help ease the sting."

Warm water drizzled down upon them from countless holes in the bathing chamber's ceiling. Karrick increased the water pressure with the foot control. The drizzle became a torrent. He smoothed his hands along Lorrان's supple body, needing to touch her far more than the water needed help rinsing away the soap. He would never tire of touching her.

Now it was their turn to be touched.

"That smile is just plain wicked, Mr. Future. Are you contemplating mischief?"

Her playfulness pleased Karrick more than her surrender. Having a mate who accepted them would have been bearable. Having one who enjoyed them would be bliss. He held out the liquid soap. "You must wash us."

"It would be my pleasure." She took the soap from him. "Turn the rain back down, then put your hands against the wall and spread 'em."

Karrick decreased the water pressure to a mist and faced the wall. Warrick took longer to comply. "Like this?" Karrick asked, resting his palms on the wall and widening his stance.

"Perfect. You too, Mr. Past."

Reluctantly, Warrick emulated Karrick's pose.

"Now that I have you at my mercy," she made it sound very dramatic, "I have some questions I'd like answered."

"Our cocks are exactly the same size." She smacked Warrick on the butt and he gasped in surprise. "You struck me."

"And if I disapprove of your answers, I will likely strike you again."

Karrick laughed. It was so refreshing to see a woman who wasn't intimidated by Warrick. "Better keep the cabinets in the gold room locked. Sounds like she'd enjoy your flogger."

It was Lorrان's turn to gasp. "There really are whips in those cabinets?"

"A flogger is different than a whip. Antagonize me too much and I'll demonstrate the difference."

Lorrان's eyes widened owlshly. Karrick laughed again. "He's teasing you. But you did hit him first."

"I'm not getting clean and I am getting annoyed."

"Right." Lorrان squirted soap into her palm and set the bottle on the narrow shelf lining the entire chamber. Shooting Warrick a mutinous glower, she rubbed the soap into Karrick's shoulders and back. He closed his eyes at the pleasure. Strong and sure, her hands worked the tension from his muscles as she cleaned his skin. "What are we going to do about Minuette?"

"The Veil Keeper?" Warrick asked.

"Yes. If she's still in Zylott, we have to go back for her. That ... creature who interrogated me was horrible."

"What creature?" Warrick glanced at him for the answer.

"Lord Nyx. I've heard him called worse."

Her warm soapy hands curved around Karrick's body, rubbing his chest and abdomen. "How were you able to find me so quickly?"

She circled his cock with her slick fingers and Karrick groaned. He didn't think she meant to arouse him, but he

rapidly hardened within her grasp. "A fragment of Minuette's message reached Matriarch Flame." He rushed on, trying to distract himself from her teasing. "We knew where to start the search and without Crystal's Light Keeper illusions to conceal your trail, you were easy to track."

She cupped his balls with one hand and traced the crease of his ass with the other, pausing to circle his anus. Karrick trembled. "Do you know where Minuette is?"

"I have a pretty good idea."

Snatching her hands away, she left his cock soapy, and erect enough to brush the wall without moving his feet.

Warrick threw back his head and laughed. "I don't think she liked your answer."

Karrick turned up the spray and rinsed himself while she mechanically washed Warrick.

"We can't help Minuette," Karrick told her.

"You *won't* help her!" She tossed the soap bottle in the general direction of the shelf. It slid halfway across the chamber, then tumbled to the tiled floor. "How did you manage to stroll into a guarded fortress and casually unlock that holding cell?"

With her hands on her hips, her lush breasts quivering with indignation and accusation burning in her eyes, she had never appeared more desirable. Karrick fought back a smile. If she had been foolish enough to focus this tirade on Warrick, she would have found herself tossed over his shoulder and the defiance fucked out of her.

Warrick took a menacing step forward, but Karrick stopped him with a telepathic warning. *We've come too far to frighten her now.*

*Your bonded mate is treating you disrespectfully. Are you going to allow this?*

"High Priestess Sacha has all the information she needs to rescue Minuette. We cannot interfere with things pertaining to the Sacred Order of the Veil."

"You didn't answer my question."

Her tone was conversational, so he replied. "Father's Veil Keeper got us within the palace compound and I put the guards into a time trance."

"How did you open the door?"

*She needs to be spanked.*

Karrick disguised his laugh with a cough. "A person in a time trance is locked within the moment, but the other time strands proceed normally. I turned one of the 'frozen' guards toward the scanner and was able to unlock the door. When I brought you out of the cell, I rushed you in the opposite direction, so you never noticed the motionless guards."

"Are they still 'frozen'?"

"Why would you care if they were?" Warrick demanded. "They were holding you hostage. Their master tortured you. They deserved to be—"

"A time trance is always temporary," Karrick broke in. "They likely emerged before we entered the Veil."

"Does this High Priestess person know about Lord whatshisname?"

"You can either dress while we have this conversation or I'm going to fuck you against that wall. Your choice."

Karrick couldn't have said it better himself! Gods, she was delectable.

With an indignant huff she turned toward the sliding door enclosing the bathing chamber.

"The more times we join, the stronger our bonding."  
Warrick grinned now that her back was turned.

Karrick shook his head. Lorrان and Warrick were going to butt heads. And he was going to enjoy facilitating the battle of wills. Lorrان snatched a towel off the shelf and dried off as quickly as she could. She donned a calf-length dressing gown and folded her arms over her breasts.

"Is Minuette still in Zylott?"

"Minuette is far better prepared to defend herself against Lord Nyx than were you." Warrick's tone should have warned her not to push.

"Is it too much to expect a simple answer from either of you?"

"Yes."

As Karrick knew he would, Warrick tossed her over his shoulder and headed for their bedchamber, not bothering to don his robe. Karrick wrapped a towel around his waist and hurried after them.

A tray of warm bread, wine, and fruit wedges had been left for them. Warrick ignored the repast and tossed his sassy mate onto the bed. She bounced, rolled, and scurried off the other side. He narrowed his eyes and growled.

"Oh, that's charming. You've been reduced to a snarling animal!"

"*Pim Noctar* will elapse with the sunrise. Each time we join the bond grows stronger, but once the sun rises the level is set for all time."

"Meaning, shut up and let me fuck you?"

Karrick clamped his hand over Warrick's mouth before he could respond with a resounding 'yes.'

"Meaning, we can do nothing about Minuette tonight, but the necessity of our joining is legitimate." Karrick seemed determined to be diplomatic.

Warrick wanted to fuck her until she couldn't walk. Her fiery spirit called to the warrior in him, challenged the conqueror. He wanted to feel that sassy mouth sucking his cock. He wanted to thrust into her burning cunt until he was consumed by the fire!

"That's what I just said."

That was it! He wasn't putting up with her belligerence. Rounding the bed in four long strides, Warrick grabbed Lorrán and sat on the bed. He bent her over his lap, flipped up her robe, and returned the stinging slap she had dealt him in the shower.

She shrieked and twisted, but his gaze fixed on the distinct handprint forming on her smooth white ass. "Tonight belongs to us! No one exists but we three. Say it."

"Fuck you!"

Gods, she had a fabulous ass, generously rounded, yet firm. He traced the hot, red handprint with his index finger. "Karrick, get my salve. I might as well tend her injury while



she's in such a delightful position." He traced her crack with a teasing touch, making sure she knew exactly what he intended.

"I hope you enjoyed our joining, because *you're* never going to touch me again."

"Is that so?"

Holding her down with his forearm, he wedged his other hand between her thighs. A quick scan of her mind confirmed desire simmered beneath her defiance, and something darker. Part of her hungered for his mastery, longed for his aggression. She wanted to be overwhelmed.

He pushed two fingers into her pussy, amazed by her wet heat. His cock bucked against her belly. "Do you want me here?"

"No."

"Little liar." He thrust into her twice, hard. "Why are you soaking wet?"

"Because I want *Karrick* there!"

He laughed at her clever insult. Gods, she was a delight. He glanced up. Karrick clutched the jar of salve and glared at him. *Don't let her defiance fool you. She's so aroused she's dripping.*

*You didn't need to hit her.*

*She hit me!* He found her clit with his little finger. She moaned, wiggling against his fingertip. *That isn't pain, brother dear. She needs this.*

"I will tend her wound," Karrick said stiffly.

"No. I caused the pain, I will ease it." Warrick removed his fingers and she cried out.

"Would you like Karrick's cock inside you while I tend your wound?"

She turned her head and glared at him. "Yes! Please. I want Karrick."

He chuckled despite her rebellion. She wasn't afraid of him. An unexpected wave of heat surged through her body, momentarily searing his legs. Her parents had been Flame Keepers. Perhaps he better not push her too far.

"Stand up."

She struggled up from his lap and stared at him, frustration and need sharing her expression.

"Remove the robe." He softened his tone as some of the anger melted from her gaze.

Shrugging out of the garment, she averted her face.

"Come here." Warrick rose and took her in his arms. "I will request an audience with High Priestess Sacha. If she refuses, I will repeat the request through my father." She nodded and he brushed her lips with his. "Now kneel on the bed with your ass in the air."

She gaped at him. "As if! You kneel on the bed with your ass in the air."

Ignoring her protests, he picked her up and positioned her on the bed. Pulling her arms behind her back, he crossed her wrists at the small of her back and urged her shoulders toward the mattress. Karrick stood beside him, holding the small jar of salve. "Part your thighs and we will soothe you."

Miraculously she didn't argue. She moved her knees apart and spread her legs. Warrick just looked at her for a moment.

Long legs folded beneath her, pink ass brazenly offered, silken pussy waiting for his touch, his kiss, his cock...

"Are you going to apply this, or shall I?" Annoyance radiated off Karrick in waves.

*I would never hurt her. You must know that.*

*Look at her ass! It's bright red.*

*I didn't hit her that hard. I felt a flash of heat while she was across my lap. She might have a build up of Flame iede.*

"I feel really strange," Lorrان murmured.

Warrick released her wrists and gingerly cupped her mound. "She's burning up."

"What do we do?"

"Get her to release the Flame *iede*." Warrick raked his fingers through his hair. "I didn't use the fourth wand. Go grab the case."

"Go fetch the salve, go grab the case. Am I your errand boy?"

"Go!"

Warrick turned his full attention to Lorrان once Karrick stomped from the room. "Turn over, Lorrان. Can you do that for me?"

"Something's wrong, isn't it?" She rolled to her side and then her back, drawing up her knees and resting her hands across her stomach. "Why am I so hot?"

"Your parents were Flame Keepers. Now that your *iede* is flowing, we think this is a build up of Flame *iede*."

"Then why did Karrick leave? Don't I need to come to release it?"

"If he tried to fuck you right now, you'd scald him."

She whimpered, shifting restlessly. "I don't want anyone else. Please tell me he didn't go get a Flame Keeper."

"Never. You will only join with us. He went to get the fourth wand."

Meaning to touch her face, to soothe her, Warrick extended his hand. Heat radiated off her entire body.

What was taking so long!

Karrick burst back into the bedchamber, the black case tucked under his arm. "Miles had taken it to the kitchen when he tidied the gold room."

Moving with frantic speed, Warrick flipped open the case and retrieved the slender silver wand. "You're going to have to help me, sweetheart. I can't touch you."

She expelled a ragged breath and let her legs part.

"More. Keep your feet together and open wide."

Lorran was too miserable to care that she was acting like a brazen slut. She reached down and parted her folds, showing him exactly how desperately she needed release. Her clit pulsed relentlessly, and her entire pussy felt raw.

Warrick held something long and silver. Not even as big around as a ballpoint pen, was this one of the wands? "I don't think that's going to help."

The warmth in his smile penetrated straight to her heart, which would have been lovely had her body not been on fire.

He snapped the wand against his knee. It chimed like a tuning fork.

"This is exactly what you need."

The tone resonated as he gently circled her clit with the vibrating wand.

"Oh, oh God! It feels just like a..."

Heat flashed through her body and her core constricted, the rhythm painful, demanding. She cried out as the wand continued its vibrating orbit. Shaking helplessly, she arched her back and lifted her hips. Her orgasm ripped through her with violent intensity. Pink *iède* gushed from her palms. Humiliated and confused, she rolled away from him, trying desperately to suppress her sobs.

"Do you need more? Didn't that ease the burning?"

"Why does everything have to be so extreme?"

His hand hesitantly touched her shoulder, then slid down along her arm. "It's not always this extreme. But this is a different dimension. Things will feel strange for a while."

"Can we touch her now?" Karrick asked.

The blazing heat had subsided, but her body still ached.

"There was a reason I made you kneel like that, Lorrán." Warrick's voice was surprisingly gentle. "In that position Karrick can fill you, while I tend your wound."

That was as close to asking as he was likely to come. She rolled to her stomach and pulled her legs beneath her.

Someone grasped her hips. She presumed it was Karrick, but in that moment she didn't really care if it were Warrick instead. Carnal hunger had returned with a vengeance. Her wrestling match with Warrick had stimulated more than her temper.

The man touched her gently, almost hesitantly. Definitely Karrick.

"Do you want salve here too?" He traced her slit with his fingertips.

"No. I want you there, now."

He chuckled and surged into her. She clasped the bedspread, bracing her legs. "More. Harder."

"Not yet."

Damn Warrick. She needed more than just this teasing fullness.

Warm fingers separated her ass cheeks. The salve! She'd completely forgotten about the salve. Warrick coated her anus with the promised remedy while Karrick began to move. He matched each slow, deep thrust with a teasing circular motion.

She squirmed and her inner muscles rippled hungrily. Strong and steady, Karrick's thick cock moved in and out of her aching pussy. The rhythmic flutters intensified. Had they ruined her for regular sex? Could she now find release only with dual penetration?

Karrick thrust harder. It wasn't enough. She needed his weight pressing her down, his hands tangled in her hair. *What the hell is wrong with me?*

He pushed deep and paused. Warrick gave her one last swirl then pulled his hand away. No! Why had they stopped?

*I don't need your advice. Shut up or I'll lock you out!*  
Karrick's exasperated voice sounded inside her mind. *I will not hurt her.*

*I'm not suggesting you do. Just grab her arms and hold them like I was holding them. She needs it hard and fast.*

Warrick! She could hear Warrick too.

They were arguing about how to fuck her, while she slowly went insane. Shifting her weight more fully to her knees she reached behind her and crossed her hands.

Karrick grabbed her wrists, helping her balance, pushing deep. "You heard our thoughts?"

"Yes. Warrick is right. Don't hold back. Your gentleness is killing me."

His grip tightened and he thrust hard, then harder. She arched and trembled, taking him deeper. Clenching her inner muscles, she squeezed him with greedy abandon.

As he pounded into her, his balls slapped her mons, stimulating her clit with each forceful lunge. She shattered, shuddering violently with her pleasure. He kept right on pounding. Another climax built, but he didn't stop. He fucked her hard and fast, claimed her, possessed her.

Lorran tossed her head, tugging against his grasp, reveling in his strength. She drove her hips against his, offering everything. Cream spilled onto her thighs. Her inner muscles tightened. She soared, exhilarated and dizzy.

"Had ... enough?" he panted.

"For now." She laughed.

His next series of wild thrusts drove them over the edge. She pressed her face into the mattress, muffling her screams. His cock jerked inside her, as he finally surrendered his seed.

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## Chapter Five

"Whose room is this?" Lorrان accepted a glass of red wine from Warrick as she studied the richly decorated room. After another shower, with Karrick alone this time, they'd returned to the bedchamber. Warrick awaited them, as patiently as Warrick did anything.

"This is your room," Warrick told her. "We will always join with you here."

"Do you each have rooms of your own?"

"Yes, but we agreed that it's best if we meet on neutral ground."

She smiled, understanding the reference to her *iede*. "Does that mean I have to sleep alone?"

"He didn't say that." Karrick took the glass of wine his twin proffered. "There are no specific rules. We can do whatever pleases us. We've just tried to anticipate potential problems."

"Like jealousy?"

"Jealousy shouldn't be a problem," Karrick said with a secretive smile. "Warrick and I share a telepathic link that allows us to transmit sensation. That's how he knew you needed me to be more aggressive. I can often hear your thoughts, but Warrick is far more sensitive to emotions."

Warrick emotionally sensitive? That seemed ironic, but she didn't comment. The flare of annoyance in his gaze warned her he'd heard the thought. "You felt everything Karrick felt?"

"Nothing compares to the real thing, *rijnna mi*, but it's damn close."



"You've called me that before. What does it mean?"

He glanced away and her stomach fluttered. He seemed almost ... embarrassed? Impossible.

"It's just an endearment." He dismissed the issue by changing the subject. "Before we move on to round two—"

"Round two?" She laughed. "My count is a little higher than that."

"We have only actually bonded once."

"All the other times didn't help strengthen the bonding?"

"The bond is formed by the exchange of *iede* and energy. The most effective way is actual intercourse. You and Karrick have done this twice. You and I only once. Karrick tasted you. We've rubbed your *iede* into our skin and our *iede* into yours."

"I interrupted you," she reminded him, embarrassed by the inventory. "What were you about to say?"

Warrick narrowed his eyes and pressed his lips together. "The exchange is uneven. You will bond more closely with Karrick unless I—"

"I'm exhausted. Can't we just talk for a few minutes? Eat some of whatever is on the tray."

He didn't seem happy about it, but he pulled out one of the three chairs next to the small round table and filled a small plate with various items from the tray. Warmth and tenderness rolled through her as she watched his strong hands perform the simple task.

"Let's compare notes." He slipped into the chair facing her and Karrick took the other.

"Regarding?"

"Life in general and your past in particular. What reason were you given for being hidden from us?"

She sighed. Why had she suggested they talk? She didn't want to get into all of this right now. "I don't remember my parents at all. I've never had so much as a picture of them. I was told they died in an automobile accident when I was five. I was adopted by a woman named Carla Yancy, but she disappeared one day a little over six years ago. That's when Crystal was appointed my guardian. I was led to believe Crystal was Carla's cousin and my only hope at anything resembling a normal life." The hollow place inside her yawned, expanding until her being ached.

Warrick reached across the table and cradled her hands between his, lightly stroking her fingers. "You never knew Crystal was a Light Keeper?"

"She changed my appearance and I didn't realize it until she released the illusion. Crystal was damn good at what she did." She'd considered Crystal her friend, the closest thing to family she'd ever known. "My entire life has been one lie after another."

"Crystal followed orders. You're right to feel betrayed, but not by Crystal." Karrick rested his hand on her knee, a casual, supportive touch. "Why was Matriarch Flame so determined to keep your existence concealed? That's the real question. There must be more to the story than you know."

"I know nothing," she snapped bitterly, shoving her plate to the side. "Doubtlessly there is far more going on than I know."

"The Light Keeper kept you continually on the move. Didn't that make you suspicious?" Warrick asked.

"Crystal was the best friend money could buy." Tears stung her eyes. She blinked them away. Warrick gave her hands a gentle squeeze. "She had a plausible explanation for everything we did. When my abilities began popping up—"

"Abilities?" Warrick refilled her wine glass with one hand, maintaining his comforting touch with the other. "I thought you were unaware of your power?"

"If you can call what happens to me power. I'm sporadically psychic. Like what happened a little while ago."

"That could be part of the bonding. It's not unusual for bonded mates to share thoughts especially while they're joining."

"I see."

"What else have you been able to do?"

She shrugged. "Create magnetic fields, move small objects, and start fires." Avoiding his gaze, she rushed on before he could question the specifics. "When I was sixteen, much to Crystal's horror, I had my psychic abilities tested. I'm sure the foundation's staff was singularly unimpressed with my performance, but Crystal cleverly used them as an excuse to keep us on the run."

"What did you set on fire?" Warrick asked.

She should have realized she couldn't slip that by him. "During the testing, I had some sort of power surge. I caught the examination room on fire and singed the tester. I was terrified they'd have me arrested or worse, so I ran. Crystal

capitalized on my fear. She used the incident at the foundation for an excuse to keep us moving."

"She claimed these scientists were after you?" Warrick sounded doubtful and she couldn't blame him. It sounded pretty lame in the telling.

"Yes. It was always 'the people from the foundation have found us again.' Then we'd change our names, move to a different city, and start all over again."

"We need to have a long, serious talk with Matriarch Flame." Warrick glanced at his twin when he said this and Lorrان suspected some telepathic comments accompanied his spoken words.

"You immediately point the finger at Matriarch Flame, but Crystal and Minuette had nothing good to say about your father. There are two sides to every story."

Warrick took her untouched plate and placed it back on the tray. "We will investigate all the facts, but not tonight." He took her wine glass from her next. "Tonight is for joining. And I have some catching up to do."

Crossing behind his brother, Warrick pulled out her chair and took her hand. She glanced at Karrick feeling awkward all of a sudden. Was he just going to sit there and watch?

A sensual smile parted his lips. "I'll be there in spirit, sweetheart. But Warrick's right. The bonding must be balanced."

Her apprehension mounted as they neared the bed. When Karrick had taken her earlier, she'd been wild with desire, so desperate for release it hadn't mattered that Warrick stood there watching.

"We are united through our link. Only I will touch you this time, but Karrick will experience what I feel."

"Did watching him touch me bring you pleasure as well or was it just the link?"

"Watching Karrick move inside you excited me nearly as much as if my own cock had filled you. Look what the memory has done." His robe literally disintegrated into silvery dust.

Lorran gasped. "How did you do that?"

Stroking his hand up and down his thick length, he drew her attention to his cock. "You did this, not me."

She laughed. "Your robe. How did you make it disappear?"

"*Iede* can be manifested in a variety of ways. Forming a layer that appears to be clothing is a rudimentary skill. You'll be sporting *iede* garments in no time."

"Unless we decide to keep you naked indefinitely," Karrick teased.

Warrick unfastened the belt at her waist and eased her robe from her shoulders. She let it slide down her arms and drop to the floor.

A hissing breath escaped Warrick. "You're exquisite. It really is a crime to cover you with anything but me."

He swept her into his arms and pressed her to his chest. His cock throbbed against her belly and her core pulsed in response. Tenderness built alongside her desire. His possessive growl made her feel indispensable, essential to his happiness.

His mouth settled over hers and she focused on the sensations igniting within her. Their first joining had been

purely physical. She had guarded her emotions even as they overwhelmed her with stimulation.

Her soul longed for more than physical pleasure. She wanted to trust and be trusted, love and be loved. Wrapping her arms around his back, she splayed her fingers against his warm flesh, and hesitantly lowered her defenses, revealing the depths of her feelings for them. Their bonding had to be emotional as well as physical or she would never be satisfied.

Heat radiated off him as his hands cupped her behind. She rubbed her breasts against his chest and hooked her foot around his leg, trying to get closer, needing more.

A teasing foreshadowing of the deeper penetration to come, his tongue moved in her mouth. He tasted of wine and passion. The clean scent of soap clung to his skin. She wanted to taste all of him, to give pleasure as well as receive.

Suddenly, Warrick turned her, bringing her back against his body and guiding her head to his shoulder. He angled her face and resumed the deep, demanding kiss. Cupping her breasts, he stroked her nipples with his thumbs, making her squirm.

They faced Karrick. The realization sent tingles skittering along her spine. Their telepathic link might be open, but Warrick wanted Karrick to see exactly what he was doing to her.

*Are you trying to make him jealous?*

He released her mouth and nodded toward his brother.  
"Does he look unhappy?"

Karrick had turned his chair to face the bed. He sat with his legs spread wide, his hands resting on his thighs.

Somewhere along the way he'd dissolved his robe. She glanced from his erect cock to his passion bright eyes.

"I'm not jealous, sweetheart. Warrick's hands may be on your breasts, but I can feel the softness of your skin and how fast your heart is pounding. When he moves inside you, I'll feel that too. Stop worrying about me. Let Warrick pleasure you."

"I want to feel your mouth on my cock," Warrick whispered into her ear. "Will you do that for me? Will you do that for us?"

He sat on the bed, his gaze caressing her body as she knelt before him. Each time he asked instead of demanding he earned another piece of her heart. She circled his thick shaft with her hand and kissed the very tip, keeping her lips tightly pursed. "Like this?"

He glowered playfully. "Open for me, *rijnna mi*. Let me feel your clever tongue and those warm lips."

Wetting her lips with her tongue, she closed her mouth around the head of his cock and sucked firmly. He gasped, his hands sinking into her hair. His hips arched, pushing his cock deeper into her mouth. Grasping his hips, she swirled her tongue, thrilled by his ragged gasps and strangled groans. He seemed to like this *a lot*. Heated desire surged through her, making her pussy ache.

She slid her mouth up and down the length of his shaft, giving the crest a tongue swirl before taking him deep again. He tried not to buck and his restraint pleased her. His hips flexed beneath her hands as he resisted the impulse. But part of her wanted him to lose control, to surrender himself to her.

*Not this time, but soon.* She heard his throaty voice inside her head, just before he eased her away.

He stood and led her to the foot of the bed, turning her to face the high mattress. "Brace yourself against the bed and widen your stance."

That wasn't much better than 'kneel on the bed with your ass in the air' but his urgent tone made her smile. "Say please."

"Please." He relented without hesitation. "I need to be inside you."

She moved her legs apart and he drove into her wet passage in one violent thrust. A cry tore from her throat.

"Oh shit, did I hurt you?" His arm circled her waist and his mouth gently nuzzled her neck.

"No. You're just so damn big. I wasn't ready for—"

His fingers touched her slick folds, circling her swollen clit. "You feel more than ready to me."

Pairing each deep thrust with a light flick of his finger, Warrick proved how ready she was. Her breasts jostled, her nipples tight and needy. Karrick could see everything. Warrick had positioned them to give his brother an unobstructed view.

She closed her eyes, imagining what Karrick saw. Her body arched over the bed, Warrick's hands clutching her hips, his cock sliding in and out of her wet pussy.

She trembled.

"That's right," Warrick whispered. "You're beautiful. We're beautiful together. This is where we belong."

She tightened her inner muscles, rocking back to meet his forward thrusts. His hands cupped her breasts, squeezing



firmly, while he filled her again and again. Tension gripped her core, tingling, burning. Lowering her shoulders toward the bed, she took him deeper.

He released her breasts and grabbed her shoulders, pounding into her as his climax neared. She arched, offering herself completely, lost in the storm. Pleasure sliced through her, coiled, then released. She cried out and Warrick's cock jerked rhythmically.

He stayed inside her for a long time, stroking her arms and her back. Lorrان relaxed against the bed, wishing the night would never end, reveling in his tenderness.

\* \* \* \*

Lorrان stared at her sister in silent wonder as the conversation swirled around them. They sat on matching sofas in the front room of the forest cottage. Cayenne and her Frost Keeper mate, Malik, faced Lorrان and the Time twins.

Cayenne's shoulder-length hair was the same red-streaked brown as Lorrان's, but their eyes differed dramatically. A sparkling combination of cinnamon, green, and gold still startled Lorrان each time she looked in the mirror. Cayenne's gaze was entirely the unusual cinnamon color.

This was her *sister*. Lorrان couldn't quite grasp the reality.

"Matriarch Flame and High Priestess Sacha have been unavailable since we arrived," Malik informed them. This was Minuette's brother. Somehow that fact was easier to accept.

"How long have you been back?" Warrick asked.

Tension crackled in the room. Her bonded mates framed her like bookends. Their hostile gazes seldom strayed from the Frost Keeper.

"We arrived rather late last night." Malik wrapped his arm around Cayenne's shoulders. His gaze darted to Lorrان before he went on. "I accepted their initial refusal as a reflection on the inappropriate timing of the request. When they were unavailable again this morning, I knew something serious was developing."

"What does this have to do with us?"

Karrick remained silent, apparently content with his brother's rudeness.

"There are two separate issues here. They are unique and yet connected. First, I have confirmed that no attempt has been made to free Minuette."

"Then we must rescue her ourselves." Lorrان scooted to the edge of the sofa, her pulse racing as she thought of Lord Nyx. "We can't leave her—"

"I've already dispatched capable people to bring her back. I would go myself, but Shadow and Light Keepers are more qualified for this sort of mission."

"Jax went after Minuette?" At least someone was taking action, but she wasn't sure Jax was the best choice. He had only just been reunited with Crystal.

"The Shadow Master himself has agreed to spearhead the search."

"Good," Warrick commented. "I'm sure your sister will be returned to you soon."

Malik accepted the comment with a nod. "Several questions remain. Why is High Priestess Sacha refusing to take action? And what accounts for Matriarch Flame's outlandish behavior regarding Cayenne and Lorrان?"

"Protecting us from *him* was not outlandish," Cayenne objected. "Grandmother honestly believes the Time Master is responsible for my parents' murder."

"Our parents were murdered?" Lorrان pressed her hand to her stomach, feeling as if she'd been punched. Would the delightful surprises never end?

"This is preposterous," Warrick flared, shooting to his feet. "You come into our house and accuse our father of murder?"

Malik stood as well, automatically shielding Cayenne with his body. "We've come to investigate a story that becomes more convoluted with each telling. I'm not convinced Matriarch Flame is being entirely honest, but there are other indications that your father was involved."

"There is no proof that Kayrin and Larot were murdered." Karrick joined the conversation. "These accusations have been circulating since news of their accident reached this dimension."

"It was no accident," Cayenne said firmly. "They were already dead when the collision took place. I was only ten at the time, but I saw it happen."

"Literally or in a vision?" Warrick wanted to know.

"What difference does that make?"

"If you witnessed the accident, I can guide you back to that moment in time and expand upon it. If the images were

transmitted telepathically, then I would only be able to show you what you already know."

"It was a vision."

"Do you know the exact date and time of the accident?"

Cayenne looked at Malik, her expression guarded. Malik nodded, encouraging her cooperation. "They were driving on River Road. It was May twenty-fourth, mid-morning, eighteen years ago. You can travel back in time and investigate the accident?"

"It's easier for me to regress along a particular time strand, but it can be done."

"I'm sure that makes sense to you and I don't need to understand it. Are you saying you're willing to help us find out what really happened? Even if it implicates your father?"

"It's because my father is implicated that I'm willing to investigate. The past can't be changed but misconceptions can alter the future."

"We welcome your assistance." Malik held his hand out to Cayenne.

"I know you're in the midst of your bonding, but when things settle into a routine, I'd like to spend some time with Lorrان."

Warrick inclined his head. "Of course."

Lorrان laughed. "I'm so glad we have your permission."

Cayenne smiled and gave her a quick hug before the Frost Keeper hurried her out the door.

"Why does Matriarch Flame hate your father?"

"That's what we need to find out." Warrick paced the room, anxiety hardening his angular features.

"Rumors always start somewhere." So many of the people she knew and trusted resented and suspected Alrick. It was hard to believe everyone was wrong. "How did your father's name get connected with my parents?"

Karrick pulled her onto his lap, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. She didn't resist, but she was too distracted to fully enjoy his affection. "Father had the Flame Master's permission to court your mother."

"Like you two courted me?" She raised her brow in challenge.

"Contrary to the impression we've given you, courting is not that different in this dimension. Our situation was unique."

"To say the least." Her insides quivered as she remembered just how unique their situation had been. She traced his firm jaw line and smiled. "Go on. Did my mother spurn your father or something?"

"She already had a lover," Warrick informed her with his characteristic bluntness. "Your grandfather would have disapproved, but your grandmother allowed Kayrin to leave the dimension with her Flame Keeper lover."

"That had to be humiliating for your father."

"It was illegal. Father had negotiated a contract with your grandfather. Kayrin's defection breached that contract."

Lorran nodded, making several connections at once. "Any way you figure it, it adds up to motivation." Warrick didn't argue, so she looked at Karrick. "Was this breached contract what you were talking about last night? Is that what gave you legal rights to me?"

"Yes. It's called a substitution clause. Many contracts have them."

Scooting off his lap, Lorrان stood beside the sofa and scowled at Karrick. "Contracts shouldn't be able to substitute people."

"They generally don't. As I said our situation is unique. Marriage contracts are seldom used except among the elite. Keepers with direct connections to the Steering Committee are obligated to their entire order. Sometimes personal preferences are less of a priority than what is beneficial to everyone."

Lorrان let her annoyance melt away. Contract or not she didn't regret the outcome. For the first time in her life her being was at peace. She'd lived her life adrift on a meaningless ocean. Finally she felt anchored, secure. She belonged.

She glanced at Warrick's troubled expression, then returned her gaze to Karrick. If their father killed her parents, did she really want to know? How horrible for everyone concerned. Warrick was right, they couldn't change the past.

"But we can solidify the future." Warrick moved toward her. "*Pim Noctar* is officially over, but I know our bonding will benefit if we form our first triad while the effects still linger."

"I'm still—tender."

He grinned. "I'd love to join with you again, but penetration isn't required for a Time triad."

"What is required?"

Karrick chuckled as he pushed to his feet. "Lots and lots of *iede*."

Mystic Keepers (Collection)  
*by Aubrey Ross*

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## Chapter Six

"Can we go outside?" Lorrان nodded toward the door through which her sister and Malik had left. "I've seen nothing of this dimension except the inside of bedrooms."

"And the bathing chamber," Karrick reminded her.

"Is your sky blue? Are your trees green? How do you get from one place to another? When you rescued me you had a Veil Keeper with you. Are they the only Keepers who can move about at will?"

"Traveling through time is different than traveling through space." Karrick pulled open the door and motioned toward the yard beyond. "Time strands move through space, but when we ride one, we're like a train on a track. Our location is determined by our temporal destination. Does that make sense?"

"Mostly." Slipping into her sandals, she moved past him and onto the wide front porch. She looked up at the cloudless sky, disappointed to find it the same vivid blue as Earth's. In fact everything looked very much like Earth. The cottage was surrounded by lush green trees and grassy slopes. A silvery brook curved around the cottage and disappeared into the forest.

Time travelers, Flame and Frost Keepers. Lorrان smiled. Dimension 290-2 might look like Earth, but the inhabitants proved otherwise.

"Parts of this dimension look nothing like Earth." Warrick stepped up beside her. Placing his hands on her shoulders he



turned her slightly to the right and pointed at a glistening object suspended in the sky. Light and color reflected off the massive structure only partially visible through the trees.

"What is that?"

"Temple of the Veil. It can only be reached by a Veil Keeper. It's entirely encompassed by the crystal shield."

"It's beautiful."

"You should see the inside." Karrick's tone was hushed, reverent.

A breeze fluttered Lorrان's skirt, wafting against her bare legs. Not expecting to entertain guests, she'd donned a simple calf-length skirt and tank top when she woke up. She hadn't bothered with underwear or a bra, suspecting her clothes would be removed as soon as her mates awakened.

"How did Malik and Cayenne get here?" She shook away her momentary digression.

"In a skimmer, a small hovering craft that's easy to maneuver and light enough to propel with *iede*."

She glanced at Warrick. "When will I be able to manifest *iede* intentionally like you and Karrick?"

"It shouldn't take long for you to master the skill. Until you do, we'll be happy to assist you."

Vivid images erupted in her mind and Lorrان felt her face heat. Countless positions, shocking variations. She still couldn't believe everything they'd done together. Twice more they joined fully, filling her body at the same time. Tingling heat accompanied the memories, making her fidget and press her thighs together.

"What are you thinking about?" The laughter in Warrick's tone made it obvious he knew exactly what occupied her mind.

"Nothing I want to talk about."

"Why? Pleasure is meant to be shared. Tell me you were fully satisfied by our joining."

"You know I was."

"I want to hear you say it. Did you enjoy sucking Karrick's cock while you straddled my face? Or was it better when I straddled your face? Did you like having your mouth fucked, while Karrick ate your pussy?"

She turned and headed for the porch steps. "Why do you have to be so disgusting?"

He banded her waist with one arm, pulling her flush with his body. His cock pressed into the small of her back. His other hand swooped beneath her skirt and firmly cupped her mound. "Because it makes you crazy."

All she had to do was close her eyes and she could feel the thick slide of their cocks and the persistent throb against her tongue. And their tongues! The things they had done with their tongues.

His outer fingers parted her slick folds, his middle finger flicking her swollen clit. "Or did you like it when I used the silver wand right here until your palms filled with *iède*? I'm not ashamed to say you gave me great pleasure with those sparkling hands."

"You gave me pleasure too. There, I said it. Are you satisfied?"

"No, I was satisfied when I sank balls deep into your pussy and Karrick was stretching your ass. We touched you and teased you for hours. How many times did you come before we shared your last release?"

"I wasn't counting." It was a wonder she could walk.

"I'm sure you're enjoying yourselves," Karrick said impatiently, "but I thought we were going to form a triad."

Warrick reluctantly let her go.

A smile tugged at the corners of her mouth as she smoothed down her skirt. "How does this triad work?"

"We're equal and opposite forces." Warrick took her hand and led her to a flat, grassy area near the brook. Karrick followed close behind.

"Past, present, and future."

"Exactly. We need to track events in the past, so I'll navigate, but you and Karrick will support and sustain me. As I told your sister, it's easiest to follow a particular time strand. I thought we would ride your strand backward to the day your parents died."

"I was only five. I remember nothing at all about that day."

"Which is odd. Something that traumatic generally leaves an impression, even on a young child."

"Crystal said the same thing. She wondered if my mind had blocked it out intentionally."

"Or it was wiped clean by a Past Keeper."

"Shall we begin?" Karrick asked hopefully.

Warrick nodded. "Let me explain the configurations of a Time triad. As soon as you manifest, we'll need to move into

position without losing any of your *iede*. Karrick and I travel back to back. He faces the future. I face the past. To complete the triad, you will stand between us. If we travel into the future you will face the same direction as Karrick, molding yourself against his back. Today you will face my back and follow me into the past."

"I understand." This was the true purpose for their bonding. Spectacular sex was a phenomenal bonus, but they had joined hoping to become the first fully bonded Time triad.

"Good. Then all we need is your *iede*." Karrick sank to his knees in front of her, while Warrick untucked her shirt. She reached for Warrick's face but he shook his head. "Hold your hands out to the side."

Warrick bared her breasts with one hand and steadied her with the other. Bunching her skirt above her hips, Karrick paused to inhale her scent. He parted her folds with his thumbs and flicked his tongue against her clit.

Lorran groaned, her head dropping back on her shoulders. Never before had she been this uninhibited, this comfortable with her sexuality. Sunlight caressed her face, warmed her skin, reminded her that she stood in the open with her body bared, offered brazenly to the eager mouths of her lovers.

Her nipples hardened as Warrick moved from one to the other and back again. Karrick licked and lavished attention on her clit, causing her pussy to melt and heat, preparing for a joining she knew would have to wait.

She concentrated on the pleasure, waiting for the familiar tingle in the palm of her hands. Warrick continued to work her

nipples with his fingers, while he trailed warm, wet kisses up along her throat.

"Lift your leg to my shoulder," Karrick instructed. "I want to fuck you with my tongue."

The graphic phrase sent a hot thrill twisting through her core. Warrick was right. It made her crazy when they said outrageous things to her. She draped her leg over Karrick's shoulder. He angled her knee outward, opening her fully to his sensual exploration.

Warrick turned her head to the side and covered her lips with his. He surged into her mouth in the same instant Karrick thrust into her cunt. Pleasure unfurled with staggering intensity. Her knee buckled. Karrick grasped her hips, keeping her upright. They moved with perfect synchronicity, Warrick in her mouth, Karrick in her core. With her hands extended to the side, Lorrان surrendered to their mastery.

Her palms itched, then tingled, the sensations building in time to the pleasure in her pussy. She came in shuddering waves, miraculously remembering to cup her hands as *iede* manifested in her palms.

Without a word the twins righted her clothing and took their places. Warrick stood in front of her, Karrick at her back. They manifested *iede* and Warrick pressed his palms against hers, interlacing their fingers. Karrick covered the top of her hands, wrapping his fingers around hers and Warrick's. They pressed in tight and the grass beneath their feet disintegrated.

A thick, endless void swallowed them. Lorrان screamed, but the sound was lost in the inky blackness. Her mates

squeezed her hands, Karrick's thumbs stroking her in silent reassurance. Warrick's body felt rigid, his arms flexed, adjusting the angle at which they extended.

Why didn't it feel like they were moving? They just hung there, surrounded by nothingness.

*Concentrate on your past. Picture yourself growing younger.*

Shocked to hear Warrick's voice so clearly, Lorrان didn't think to reply. He sounded harsh and strained, obviously struggling.

She pictured herself as she had been before Crystal released the illusion. Plain brown hair, ordinary hazel eyes, features lacking the angular definition to which she had yet to adjust.

They moved, subtly at first, then with greater momentum as Lorrان relaxed and allowed the images to regress. Her life flashed through her mind in reverse, years peeling away like layers.

Her memory went blank without warning. She scrambled to retrieve the images. One minute she was being pushed on a swing by her adopted mother, the next nothing.

Warrick's hands tightened painfully, but their movement continued, deeper into the darkness. Lorrان gasped and struggled, feeling suffocated by the void. Sagging to his knees, Warrick dragged her down with him. Karrick followed, maintaining the connection of their hands.

Blackness still surrounded them, but they knelt on something solid. Texture emerged next. Prickly grass rasped against her bare skin. Verdant scents filled her nose and she

heard the distant chirp of a bird. Light crept into the darkness, revealing shapes and faint colors. Lorrان blinked rapidly, impatient for her vision to clear.

Sunlight spilled through leafy trees and into the walled garden. Muffled laughter drew her attention to the house. The sharply angled roof, multiple gables, and railed porch struck a familiar chord deep within her mind.

"I've seen this house before."

"Good." Warrick panted harshly, releasing his hold on her hands. "Then I didn't lose control entirely."

He slumped to his hands and knees. Lorrان rubbed his back and shoulders. "Is it always this difficult?"

When he didn't answer, she glanced at Karrick, who had turned to face them. He shook his head. "You didn't do it intentionally, but your mind was resisting the regression the entire way. Frankly, I'm surprised he got us here."

"I'm so sorry." She sat beside Warrick, pulling his trembling body against her. "I didn't mean to resist. I didn't realize—"

"You weren't doing it consciously." He wrapped his arms around her, accepting the comfort of her embrace. "It felt like a Mystic compulsion. You were not meant to revisit this memory."

"Can people see us?"

"Not unless I want them to." He eased her away and accepted his brother's outstretched hand. Pausing to roll his shoulders, he motioned toward the house. "This looks like the house Cayenne owns in the present."

"How do you know where Cayenne lives?"

"Our search for you first led us to her," Karrick admitted.

For the first time the mention of their search didn't trigger a spark of resentment. Their bond was solidifying. "Does she have neutral *iede* too?"

"No, your sister is a Flame Keeper, or will be once she completes her training."

Lorran followed Warrick toward the house. "Are you sure no one can see us?"

"Yes. I always stop slightly out of sync with the time strand. No one can see or hear us." He pulled open the screen door and eased the back door inward.

"Everything is solid. I thought we'd be able to pass through walls and," she shrugged, "I don't know."

Karrick chuckled. "You've got us confused with the Shadow Keepers. They're the living ghosts."

Warrick led them through a small kitchen and down a narrow hall. Slightly garbled conversation sounded in the room to their left. He stepped through the open archway, but Lorran came up short. Karrick collided with her back.

An elderly woman sat in a padded rocking chair holding a dark-haired girl on her lap. A book lay open across the child's legs and the woman read from the pages.

"Why is she so hard to understand?"

"She is slightly ahead of us on this strand. We're hearing echoes of her voice."

The red streaks in the girl's hair glistened in the sunlight as she moved her head to speak to the old woman. Lorran saw the child's distinct multi-colored eyes and knew she was looking at herself. "Why don't I remember this?"



As if summoned by her question a flash of light momentarily blinded Lorrان. Her pupils adjusted just in time to watch three women emerge from the Veil. The old woman clutched the child to her chest, her expression fierce and protective.

Lorrان felt tenderness and caring pulse around her. This woman loved her dearly. *Who is she?*

"That's Matriarch Flame and Maudllyn Cendar," Warrick supplied, misunderstanding her question. "Maudllyn was High Priestess eighteen years ago. I don't know the other one."

Lorrان dragged her gaze away from her childhood self and gasped. "That's Carla Yancy."

Warrick raised his brow, his eyes narrowing as the scene unfolded. "Looks like you're about to be adopted."

If she concentrated really hard, Lorrان could make out their muffled words well enough to understand what was going on. The one with red-streaked hair must be Matriarch Flame, so that meant the one with silver/gold hair like Minuette's was the high priestess.

Matriarch Flame called the old woman Olivia and Lorrان felt another pang of memory. Olivia Dover, her mind filled in her last name. "The danger to Lorrان has never been so great ... hard this must be for you ... best for the child."

Obviously upset by what Matriarch Flame told her, Olivia shook her head, tears welling in her eyes.

Sensing her loved one's distress, the little girl began to cry. Lorrان had to look away. Pity and sorrow drove the breath from her lungs. Warrick slipped his arm around her shoulders and Karrick encircled her waist.

Olivia reluctantly passed her frightened charge to Carla Yancy as young Lorrان twisted and writhed, reaching frantically for her friend.

The Keepers retreated into the Veil, taking the hysterical child with them.

Lorrان wanted to scream at the injustice of it all. She had been safe here, nurtured and cared for. What possible reason could there have been to take her from this and force her into a life filled with uncertainty and fear?

Alrick hadn't wanted her dead. He'd wanted her to bond with his sons. This didn't make sense. Where was the danger?

Burying her face in her hands, Olivia wept. Lorrان longed to console her, to rock her in her arms and ease her anguish.

A telephone rang and Lorrان started, thankful for the distraction from all the pain.

Wiping her tears on the back of her hand, Olivia crossed the room and picked up the phone.

"Oh my goodness. You can't calm her down? She's saying what? Tell the dear girl I'm on my way."

Olivia rushed out the front door.

"What was that about?"

"Cayenne said she witnessed the accident in a vision. My guess is her school just called home."

"Olivia must have known Matriarch Flame. There is no way she would have given me over to strangers. I remember her now. Olivia was the kindest, most protective soul you can imagine."

"Do you remember anything else?" Warrick asked.

"Not really. They must have done something to my memory like you said. They tore apart my family. Why? Why did they do this?"

Warrick raked his hair with his hand, his expression tense and frustrated. "If Cayenne just had her vision then the accident has already happened. We need to go further back. She said the collision took place on the River Road. Do you know where that is?"

She didn't, so Karrick manifested *iede* and formed it into a glittering ball. He addressed the comm crystal to Malik Cendar with a mental command and sent it into the future. Malik's image appeared within the crystal.

"Where are you? You sound like you're in another dimension."

"Nearly." Karrick smiled. "We need to know the exact location of the accident."

"You're in the past?" He sounded as amazed as Lorrان felt. They were communicating through time! "*Prazot*, I'm impressed. I had no idea you could send comm crystals along a time strand."

"It's not easy. Could you please hurry?"

"Sorry. Hold on. I'll ask Cayenne." His image returned a few seconds later. "A quarter of a mile beyond San Francisco Plantation. That's all she knows."

Lorrان felt an odd jolt as Karrick disintegrated the crystal. "What was that?"

"He just brought us in sync. We need to call a cab. We don't know where the plantation is and he's too weak to experiment."

By the time the taxi arrived and drove them out to River Road, the vehicles had been towed away, but broken glass and twisted debris marked the exact location of the collision.

"Are you sure you want out here?" the cabbie asked. "The plantation is just around that bend."

Karrick assured him they had reached their destination. Lorrان and Warrick hurried to the other side of the street while Karrick accelerated the time strand sending the taxi off without his fare.

"That wasn't nice." Lorrان chuckled despite her criticism. "Gas is expensive."

They crossed to a clump of trees set slightly back from the road. "Now what?"

"Now we run the time strand backward and see how the accident really happened."

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## Chapter Seven

Lorran sat on the tree stump and watched the narrow expanse of road where her parents had died. No, they hadn't died here, she reminded herself. Cayenne was certain they were dead before the accident happened.

With her face pressed against Warrick's broad back, she had been unable to watch the events rewind. For that she was grateful.

"Here comes the car."

Dread grabbed her stomach like a fist, but she forced herself to rise. A green sedan pulled over to the side of the road not one hundred feet from where they stood. Warrick had stopped the regression out of sync, so the driver couldn't see them.

The car door opened and a tall, lanky youth got out from behind the steering wheel.

"I don't believe it." Karrick took an unconscious step forward. "That's Tavon Delmont."

"Who is Tavon Delmont?" Lorran studied that young man more closely. He couldn't be more than twenty, probably more like eighteen. His bright blond hair angled across his forehead and she caught the flash of his gaze. Light eyes, blue maybe or perhaps gray.

"He's a Life Keeper. This can't be right."

Tavon opened the car door and lifted an unconscious woman out of the backseat. Lorran's heart slammed into her

ribs. That was her mother—and she wasn't unconscious, she was dead.

Lorran's stomach heaved and she covered her mouth with her hand, gagging. Warrick turned her toward the weeds and said, "Don't fight it."

She retched, tears flowing freely as she purged her body of shock and grief. *Dead*. Her parents had been murdered.

Tavon had finished positioning her mother's body by the time Lorran returned her gaze to the roadside. Lorran looked at the passenger seat and realized a second body slumped there, held in place by the seat belt. She was too numb to do more than register the fact. Tavon released the parking brake and pushed the car into the middle of the road.

"We don't have to watch this," Warrick said, turning her away from the scene. "I saw it in reverse. I know what happens. But I wanted witnesses to the identity of their murderer."

"What happens?" Lorran still didn't understand.

"He creates an illusion that hides the car from view. The driver of the SUV had no way of avoiding the collision."

"But what about Tavon? Where does he go?"

"A Veil Keeper reaches out and pulls him into the Veil, never revealing more than slender arms. My guess is a woman, but I can't be sure."

"I've seen enough. Get us out of here." She looked at her hands. They still sparked from their recent regression. "Is this enough?"

Karrick nodded. "We're moving along a familiar strand in a direction we all want to go. That should be sufficient."

They got into formation, Lorrان molding herself to Karrick this time, while Warrick pressed his back against hers. She surrendered to the darkness, refusing to hinder their progress with any thought or deed.

Swift and effortlessly, they soared along the time strand. Lorrان hadn't realized how encumbered their first passage had been until she experienced how it should have been. She clasped her mates' hands, her pulse racing right along with their speed.

They landed in the grassy clearing beside the brook and Lorrان laughed. "That was wonderful!" Warrick crumpled into a heap behind her, his hands slipping from her grasp. She spun around. "Karrick! Something's wrong."

Karrick knelt at his brother's side, frantically reaching for him telepathically. "He's unconscious."

"What happened?"

Scanning his energy levels, Karrick groaned. "He's completely depleted." Framing Warrick's face between his hands, Karrick saturated him with energy.

"Can I help? How can I help?"

"Can you manifest *iede*? That will do him more good than anything."

Panic clawed through her. What did he expect her to do? Stand here and masturbate while one of her mates lay dying?

Warrick was not going to die! She had seen enough death and dying to last a lifetime. Kneeling next to Karrick, she closed her eyes. She imagined herself in the sling with their hands and their mouths moving over her helpless body. Her nipples tingled in response. Good. Something more graphic.

She pictured the wands sliding in and out of her ass, remembering the sensation, but imagining it from Warrick's perspective, seeing it, feeling it.

Her palms tingled. Oh, thank God! She looked down, but only the faintest of dusting had materialized. She squeezed her eyes shut and pictured their first joining. She saw Karrick's cock sink slowly into her pussy, felt his thick shaft stretch her tight. In her mind he pulled her forward and Warrick positioned himself against her ass.

Flutters erupted in her pussy and her palms stung. She felt the burn, the sweet pleasure/pain as Warrick filled her for the first time. He had been so careful, so tender. His expressions took over her imaginings.

She saw the sexy half-smile he tried so hard to hide, the possessive passion that threatened to consume her. His protectiveness sheltered her. His gentle touch comforted.

"How did you do that?"

She opened her eyes and found her palms heaped with sparkling *iede*. "I thought about how much I love him."

Her whispered confession held him spellbound for a second, then he shook away the stupor. "Coat his lips, his chest, and his cock, and then get naked. As soon as he stirs we'll fuck some life back into the old man."

"Old man? What does that make you?"

"He's older than I am." Karrick laughed. "By almost an hour."

Karrick grasped his brother's shoulders and dissolved his garments with a cleansing pulse. Lorrان coated Warrick's lips, massaged the powder into his chest and abdomen, leaving



plenty to cover his cock. She shed her clothes before completing the task.

His cock thickened and lengthened as soon as she touched him.

"Can I wake up like this every morning?"

His groggy voice sent a tingle down her spine. "As long as you don't scare me witless every night. Why didn't you warn us your levels had gotten so low? We could have taken time to recharge you before we left New Orleans."

"You were upset. I wasn't going to ask this of you."

"She said she loves you, bro." Karrick chuckled. "Should I be jealous?"

He sat up and pulled Lorrان onto his lap, straddling his hips. "You love me?"

"I just said that to make Karrick jealous." She grinned.

"Little liar. Love is radiating off you like sunbeams. Gods, what did we do to deserve you? She doesn't just love us, Karrick, she's crazy about us!"

She kissed him, trying to shut him up, but he continued the conversation telepathically.

*She's decided to forgive us for hunting her and she will never admit it, but she enjoyed the sling.*

"Do I get to put you in that contraption some time?" She whispered the words against his mouth.

*Absolutely!*

Lifting her hips, she guided his cock to her pussy and he impaled her in one hard thrust. She gasped and then giggled.  
*It feels so fucking good!*

*I couldn't agree with you more.*

Clenching her inner muscles, she made him moan. He lay back in the grass, dragging her down with him and offering her ass to Karrick.

*Do you love me, sweetheart? Or just my brutish brother?*

Warrick had already told him what he sensed in her heart and mind. Apparently Karrick needed to hear it from her. *I'm not complete without you. We are three.* She pushed back eagerly as he drove into her ass. *And we are one.*

They moved aggressively from the first thrust, famished for each other.

Lorran arched and bowed, taking and giving, each sensation heightened by the emotions overwhelming her.

*I love you, sweetheart,* Karrick's thoughts conveyed.

*I love you, rijnna mi.*

*Tell me what that means?* She knew he hadn't begun to explain its full meaning.

*It means we're lost without you, that you're the missing piece of our soul. It means we're only complete when we're inside you. It means Mystic unity.*

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## Epilogue

"You are absolutely certain of what you saw," Matriarch Flame demanded.

Lorran had never wanted to shake another person as badly as she wanted to shake Matriarch Flame. The old bitch might be her grandmother, but she had a lot to answer for! "We all saw it. Why would I lie to you?"

The matriarch's nostrils flared and she pressed her lips together so hard they disappeared. "You are one of them now. This does not clear Alrick, it only identifies his henchman."

Warrick shook his head, snorting in disgust. "You will believe what you want to believe regardless of the facts. The Steering Committee cleared our father decades ago. You have heard from your own granddaughter that Tavon Delmont is the culprit. He did have an accomplice, by the way. Have your sister figure out which one of her Veil Keepers helped Tavon murder your daughter!"

"Oh, I assure you, this investigation is far from over."

"How did you erase my memory?" Lorran demanded her grandmother's attention with her sharp tone.

"All was done to protect you."

"To protect me from what? My heritage? My home dimension? My bonded mates?"

"Alrick wanted you dead!"

"I am very much alive. He wanted the resolution to a conflict you created by allowing my mother to—"

"Cayenne had already been conceived when they left for Earth."

She couldn't believe she was defending her father-in-law. She hadn't even met him yet. "Was Alrick told?"

"He would have demanded that the pregnancy be terminated and the contract fulfilled. You don't know who you're dealing with, young lady. His sons may have been redeemed by the genetics of their mother, but Alrick is one ruthless bastard."

"I've heard enough." Karrick sounded even more angry than his twin.

"Shall we report our findings to the Steering Committee or would you prefer to continue demonizing our father?"

"I will speak with the Steering Committee. This mystery has just begun to unravel, but one thing is certain already. Tavon Delmont must die."

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## **Mystic Keepers 4: Rammi**

**Aubrey Ross**

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## Prologue

Tantalizing and sweet, the scent of wild flowers drifted to Rammi Severn. She turned her face to the sun and pulled her skirt higher, keeping the hem from the cool water swirling around her knees.

"Did you miss me?" a husky male voice asked from behind her.

She glanced over her shoulder and found Gaverel watching her from the shore. Trees lined the stream, their ancient branches reaching toward the clear blue sky. He leaned against one thick trunk, arms folded over his chest, mischief in his leaf green eyes.

"Not at all." She flashed a flirtatious smile. "I just started without you."

Sexual awareness leapt between them. Her nipples hardened against the sheer fabric of her underdress. She wore nothing else, having dissolved her Shadow *iede* garments before wading into the stream.

"Did you now?" He licked his lips, his gaze focused on her mouth. "Did your fingers bring you as much pleasure as mine?"

"More." She turned and kicked water at him, laughing as droplets showered his tall form.

He strode into the stream fully clothed and scooped her up in his arms. "You little tease." His mouth sealed over hers, his tongue delved deeply. Rammi pushed her fingers into his thick golden hair. *Gaverel!*

Without separating their mouths, he carried her to the shore and placed her gently on the grassy bank. "Well, I missed you," he whispered against her kiss dampened lips. He stretched out beside her, one of his legs angled over hers, his arm her pillow. "I could think of nothing else."

She smiled into his eyes. "You've only been gone five days."

"It felt like five years. *Prazot*, did you not miss me even a little?"

Guiding his hand to her breast, she pressed his palm against her rapid heartbeat. "Does this feel like I missed you?" She whispered the words with all of the longing in her soul.

He moved his hand lower, his thumb skimming her hardened nipple. "*This* feels like you missed me."

With a weary sigh, she pushed his hand to her waist. "We have to wait until the elders decide."

"I don't need the elders to tell me how I feel." His gaze narrowed on her face and his hand returned to cup her breast. "Do you need some ancient ritual to make you want me? I burn for you without *Pim Noctar*."

It was forbidden and he knew it. Why was he pressuring her? "I'm tired of waiting too, my love, but there must be a reason for the elders' hesitation."

He sat and raked his fingers through his hair, staring off into the distance. "Aren't you going to ask how the assessment went?"

In her excitement to see him, she had nearly forgotten the reason he'd been gone. Each year the twelve most promising

Light Keepers were tested. One was chosen to be trained as a Life Keeper, the most honored of all Keeper gifts. His posture and tone told her the answer before she posed the question.

"Who was chosen?"

"Who else? Tavon!" Bitterness hardened his handsome features.

"The Death Master's son is to be the new Life Keeper?" She sat as well, moving closer. "How is that possible?"

"His mother is a powerful Light Keeper. The Light Master is his uncle. Why are you surprised?"

Rammi sighed. Gaverel had grown up in Tavon's shadow, continually finishing second to Tavon's first. Gaverel wanted this honor, had trained long and hard with one of the existing Life Keepers in preparation for the assessment. "I'm sorry. I know how much this meant to you."

He stared at her for a long moment. A wealth of longing and uncertainty shone in his eyes. "You are the Shadow Master's sister." He looked away. "Perhaps I'm not worthy of—"

"That can't be it." She turned his face back toward hers. "You are elite. There have been seven Light Masters in your ancestry." Pressing herself against his side, she wrapped her arms around his waist. "We only need to wait a bit longer and—"

"You don't know that." He pulled her into his lap, his expression tense, urgent. "What if they deny our petition? I have wanted two things in my life, *only* two things. One was stolen from me today. I will not lose the other!"



Fear tingled down her spine. He couldn't mean what he seemed to mean. Without *Pim Noctar* it wouldn't be a true bonding. The ritual strengthened Keeper joinings, allowing them to meld on a mystical level. She wanted Gaverel as her bonded mate not just her lover. "I love you. Nothing can change that."

"Then join with me now." He took her hand and pressed it to the bulge straining the front of his pants. "I need this, Rammi."

Their gazes locked. Her heart ached as his expression revealed a staggering mixture of pain and expectation. She licked her lips, tension coiled deep in her belly. Her mate was hurting. He needed her comfort. How could she refuse? When the elders approved their joining, and Rammi knew they would, *Pim Noctar* would only strengthen the union they forged today.

She turned, her underdress bunching high on her thighs, and straddled his lap. Framing his face with her palms, she kissed him softly, slowly, communicating her tenderness, her love.

He parted his lips and welcomed her tongue. She filled her lungs with his breath, slid her tongue against his, caressed him. At her urging, he sent a cleansing pulse along his torso, dissolving his tunic as she dispatched her underdress in a glistening burst of powdery *iede*.

Sunlight bathed her naked skin. Rammi paused, reveling in the freedom and the warmth of the late summer sun. He combed his fingers through her long, thick hair. She arched her neck so the curling ends brushed his thighs.

"You have such beautiful hair, like blue/black silk. Never cut it. I want to feel it slide all over my naked body."

She laughed, exhilarated by his praise. "Won't you have to be naked for that?"

"Good point." Clutching her against his chest, he disintegrated the rest of his soggy clothing. "You make me crazy. I've wanted you for so long."

He kissed her then, his mouth moving over and against hers, his tongue thrusting boldly. Cupping her breasts and stroking her back, he explored her supple body. They had kissed and brought each other to orgasm with their hands, but their love play had always stopped short of penetration.

Supporting her back, he eased her to the grass and spread her hair. She gazed up at him in awe. Heat curled from her core to her heart and back again. Tall and sleekly muscled, Gaverel's body made her ache, made her impatient to touch. His cock rose thick and proud from its golden nest of hair, his heavy balls promising virility.

She licked her lips. Would he let her taste him? He had used his mouth to pleasure her once, but they'd been interrupted before she could return the favor. He parted her thighs and knelt between her legs. Maybe next time.

"I'll do my best not to hurt you, but it will probably sting."

If she were burning with the mystic fires of *Pim Noctar*, it wouldn't hurt. Her senses would be so desperate for their joining even the rending of her hymen would have been a blessed relief. He stroked her thighs, easing them wider, making room for his hips between her legs.

They shouldn't be doing this! The elders never denied a petition without good reason. Trepidation ran its icy fingers down her spine. "Maybe we should wait. I'm not sure—"

He silenced her protest with his mouth, one hand tangling in her hair. Each thrust of his tongue foreshadowed his intentions. He was beyond caring that she was unsure. Concentrating on the heated slide of his naked body against hers and the familiar movement of his tongue in her mouth, Rammi suppressed her fear and responded to the raw hunger in his touch. He needed her. He needed *this*, and she loved him enough to surrender.

He cupped her breast, squeezing, rubbed the nipple until it stood high and tight. His fingers pinched lightly, then harder and she cried out.

"Sorry," he muttered, replacing his fingers with his mouth. He suckled urgently, forcefully. She arched, uncertainty surging again. Where was her gentle lover? The man who had touched her so tenderly?

His fingers parted her folds, moving immediately to her clit. Again his touch was rough, hurried. She was slick, her body trying to cooperate, but after only a few token caresses, he pressed his cock against her entrance.

"Gaverel, I'm not—" He thrust into her brutally and Rammi screamed. She'd expected a sting, but searing pain lanced through her entire body.

Grasping her hips with hurtful hands, Gaverel thrust again and again. "Damn him!"

His expression twisted with rage, his eyes squeezed shut. Rammi recoiled from the bitter hatred emanating from Gaverel. *He's not fucking me, he's fucking Tavon!*

She panted and gritted her teeth, waiting for the fiery pain to recede. He moved in her, his features contorted. Rammi turned her face away, choking back a groan. She could be anyone! This was not a bonding; she was Tavon's whipping girl.

Tears trailed down her cheeks, and a ragged sob escaped her mouth. "Stop it!" She punched his shoulder, trying to shock him from his hate-induced stupor.

"Gods damn him!" He grabbed both her hands, interlaced their fingers, and dragged them over her head. "I worked my entire life..." He thrust hard and deep. "It was all I ever wanted."

Fury surged through Rammi, a dark, strange stirring she'd never felt before. The sensation coiled tighter, gaining momentum, building velocity. Gaverel thrust to the hilt, crying out as he came. His hands clenched hers.

The dark coil sprung, twisting through her, bursting out through her palms. Gaverel screamed, his body jerking. Writhing beneath him, she frantically tried to disentangle their hands.

The smell of burning flesh filled her nose. Bile rose into her throat. Gaverel collapsed on top of her, their fingers still entwined. She screamed and screamed until her voice failed. His breathing shuddered, shallow and uneven.

"Help! Somebody help me!"

What had just happened? What had she done? Throwing all of her terrified frenzy into one mighty lunge, she rolled Gaverel off her and peeled their hands apart. Her stomach heaved and her head spun. His palms were charred and blistered, while hers, though blackened, appeared unharmed.

She pressed her trembling fingertips against his throat and released a ragged sob when she found a pulse. *He was alive.* Reaching out along the common telepathic link shared by all Shadow Keepers she screamed her anguish and fear.

Summoning Shadow *iede*, the essence of her mystic energy, she manifested clothing for herself and a tunic she draped over his nudity. With a flash of light the Veil parted. Her brothers Jax and Jarek rushed past the Veil Keeper, running toward her. Jarek reached her first and she threw herself into his arms.

"What happened? Are you injured?" The Shadow Master eased her away, his dark gaze searching her face. Her hands tightly fisted, Rammi collapsed against his chest, sobbing too hard to reply.

"He's alive," Jax said. He stepped over the unconscious man and joined Jarek at Rammi's side. "Did he hurt you? Is that why you burned him?"

"I didn't mean to!" she cried. "I don't know what happened. I was ... We were..."

"Let me see her palms."

Rammi glanced beyond her brothers and found Tilden Delmont standing on the other side of Gaverel. Tall, dark, and sinister, the Death Master's appearance perfectly suited his

gifts. She trembled. No! This couldn't be happening. She didn't want to be a Death Keeper!

Just as a select few among the Order of Light became the Keepers of Life, a select few from the Order of Shadow became the Keepers of Death.

"I'm *not* a Death Keeper!" she shouted, pressing her face against her brother's chest.

"Let me see her palms." Tilden repeated the directive and Jarek gently unfolded her hands. Glistening like black diamonds, Death *iede* coated her palms.

"No!" Tears streaming down her face, Rammi sank to her knees.

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## Chapter One

*Fifteen years later*

Stifling a yawn, Rammi Severn scrubbed her fingers through her short spiky hair and glanced at the massive, elaborately carved door behind which the Steering Committee argued. They had ten more minutes, then she was out of here. She had better things to do than—

The doors burst open and Tilden Delmont stood framed in the threshold. On a good day the Death Master looked ferocious. This was not a good day. Swept straight back from his sharp features, his gleaming dark hair flowed to the middle of his back. Eyes, the same inky black as his hair, pierced her with their intensity.

"Join us."

Rammi ambled past him, her boot heels ringing on the highly polished floor. She'd only been in this chamber once before, and that was a lifetime ago. Fifteen years before she'd sat here stunned and silent as the course for her life was detailed. She was told she would become a Death Keeper, an assassin, a spy. Everything she'd dreamed about, everything she'd planned for, died within her that day. Motivated by grief and bitterness, Rammi never looked back. She embraced her new destiny and became the best damn Death Keeper this dimension had ever seen.

A large oblong table dominated the room. Her gaze moved immediately to her brother, Jarek, but his expression offered no information. What did they want with her?

"Have a seat," High Priestess Sacha directed. A stunningly beautiful woman, the high priestess had always made Rammi uncomfortable. Beauty as a whole held no appeal for Rammi. She dealt in reality, justice, and death.

Choosing a chair directly across from her brother, Rammi pulled it out and sat. The Death Master lowered himself into the chair at her right and Rammi began to relax. As long as Master Tilden was on her side, she could deal with anything. Master Tilden was one of the few people in existence Rammi trusted without reservation. During the ten years of her Death Keeper training, he'd earned her respect as well as her friendship.

"We have a rather unique assignment for you." Matriarch Flame spoke from the other end of the table. Rammi's gaze moved from the high priestess to her older sister. Matriarch Flame looked more like the high priestess' mother. Time had not been as kind to Sierra Flame as it had to High Priestess Sacha.

Speaking of time ... Alrick, the Time Master, stared at her silently, his expression as inscrutable as Jarek's.

"I'm listening." Rammi returned her gaze to Matriarch Flame.

"Tavon Delmont has been accused of a horrible crime." The matriarch pushed a pink crystal toward her. "All of the details regarding the accusation are contained within this data crystal."

"There's no accusation about it. The murder was witnessed by three people, one of them your granddaughter, Lorrani!"



Alrick burst into the conversation, his deep voice echoing off the highly arched ceiling.

"Her mission is to apprehend Tavon, not assassinate him," Matriarch Flame shot back just as vehemently.

*Oh, this is fun.* Rammi watched the drama unfold as she tucked the crystal into the pocket of her uniform. The accused was her mentor's son. The Time Master obviously wanted Tavon dead, and Matriarch Flame was just as adamant he be apprehended alive.

"Who did he murder?" Rammi hadn't meant for her question to sound so amused, but damn, this was priceless.

"Who is he *accused* of murdering!" the Death Master snapped.

She cringed and inclined her head toward her mentor. "Of course, Master Tilden. I meant no disrespect."

"I requested you specifically for this assignment." His tone was grave, his gaze intense. "I trust you will not disappoint."

"I always do my best, sir."

"Tavon is to be apprehended and returned to Dimension 290-2 for questioning. Is that fully understood?"

Why was Matriarch Flame so insistent? Rammi would understand the condition coming from Master Tilden, but what was the matriarch's interest in Tavon Delmont?

"And if he resists?" Somehow Rammi didn't think a man accused of murder by the Steering Committee would throw his hands in the air and calmly follow her into the Shadow realm. "How much force is acceptable if I must subdue him? Search and destroy is more my style."

Master Tilden grabbed her arm, demanding her full attention. For the first time in her life, she saw fear flicker in his night-black eyes. Chills raced down her spine.

"If this were a simple retrieval mission, we would have summoned a Shadow Keeper. I love my son with my whole being and that is why I can trust no one but you. If there is any validity to these allegations—which I don't believe for an instant—Tavon will do everything in his power to avoid capture. It is imperative that you find out what really happened."

"We know what really happened!" Alrick boomed. "Your son and one of the Veil Keepers murdered Kayrin and her lover, Larot. That fact is not in dispute."

"But who was the Veil Keeper and upon whose *authority* did young Tavon act?"

*Ah ha.* Rammi glimpsed the true conflict. Matriarch Flame believed the Time Master had ordered the hit. Kayrin and her lover? Rammi searched her memory. Kayrin had been heir to the Order of Flame, Matriarch Flame's only child. Kayrin's two daughters had recently returned from Dimension 939-3 where Matriarch Flame had hidden them.

"How long ago was this supposed to have happened?" Rammi looked to her brother for the answer.

"Eighteen years," Jarek supplied.

"Before Tavon's Life Keeper training began?" Rammi's brow furrowed as she mentally assembled a timeline. "He would have been seventeen."

"Tavon began manifesting Light illusions as a toddler." Alrick folded his burly arms on the tabletop and glared at

Master Tilden. "With great power comes great temptation to misuse that power."

"The voice of experience?" Before the Time Master could respond to the provocation, Matriarch Flame rushed on. "The point is we have much to learn about the events of eighteen years ago. What the Time twins witnessed is but a piece of the puzzle."

"I have interrogated my Veil Keepers extensively." The high priestess spoke as her sister lapsed into silence. "Either the culprit is incredibly clever or the person involved was one of eleven Veil Keepers to pass on in the ensuing eighteen years."

Now wasn't that convenient. Rammi studied the high priestess. Damn, she was beautiful. It was hard to concentrate when you looked into her reddish brown eyes. Flame Keeper eyes.

Veil Keepers were chosen from the best and brightest of all the other orders. Only those with the most powerful *iede*, the basic essence of mystic energy, were trained to be Veil Keepers.

"Do you understand what we need from you?" Matriarch Flame dragged her attention back to the other end of the table.

"I understand."

Rammi wasn't surprised when Master Tilden escorted her from the room. "I know my son, Rammi. He couldn't have done this."

"Then what did the Time twins witness? I'd heard rumors of their investigation, but I had no idea your son had been

implicated. I know Warrick and Karrick. They are honorable men."

Master Tilden clenched his fists and turned his face away. "If Tavon is involved, there has to be more to the story than we know. You must learn what really happened before you deliver him to the Steering Committee."

"I'm an assassin, not an investigator. Why did you request me for this case?"

He grasped her shoulders, his grip nearly painful. His gaze bore into hers. "I trust you, as I trust no other. You must find my son and interrogate him. If you cannot learn the answers, then you know where to take him."

She looked around and lowered her voice, dread tightening her stomach. "You want me to take Tavon to *him*?" The situation was dire indeed for Master Tilden to even make the suggestion.

"We must learn the truth. I can't help but feel all of this is connected. He is already involved with our other investigation. As Matriarch Flame said, this is one piece of a much larger puzzle."

"And if it is revealed that Tavon was involved?"

"If I am blinded by a father's love..."

She spoke the words for him. "I will learn what drove him to murder. Then, I will end his life."

\* \* \* \*

"Master Tavon, when will you teach us to operate one of these machines?" Shifting the nondescript sedan into park, Tavon turned off the engine before he addressed his trainees.

"This was our first interdimensional exercise. Driving lessons will have to wait until you've mastered some of the rudimentary skills of being a Life Keeper."

"Why didn't the Veil Keeper bring us directly to the medical facility? Why bother with this machine at all?"

Two days into the training cycle Tavon realized Maling's incessant questions were going to be a challenge. If her potential powers weren't so impressive, he'd have recommended her termination from the Life Keeper program. The other trainees avoided her, which was counterproductive for everyone.

Focusing on his over-inquisitive student, Tavon rested his forearm on the steering wheel. "Being a Keeper comes with very specific responsibilities. Each of our assignments is crucial. There are no routine missions. We are the unseen guardians of countless dimensions."

"There are lots of humans who know we exist." Maling's tone snapped with derision. "We don't even attempt to conceal our abilities in dimensions—"

"Maling." The only thing more irksome than her tendency to badger him with questions was her delight in arguing with his answers. "Each dimension is different. We must avoid anything that draws attention to ourselves. Emerging from the Veil in plain sight of most humans would be a little hard to explain."

"So the Veil Keeper is going to meet us here?" Maling gestured toward the woods beyond the windshield.

"There's a clearing a short hike up that trail. We're scheduled for retrieval in," he glanced at his wristwatch, "fifteen minutes."

"What made the man at the hospital so special?" one of the other trainees asked.

"The Time Keeper council unanimously agreed that his life should be saved. That's all the information I was given."

"And it doesn't bother you to blindly obey the Time Keeper council?"

Tavon tried not to reprimand one trainee in front of the others, but Maling's attitude was seriously hindering her potential. "Many, if not most, of our missions are instigated by the Time Keeper council. Anyone unwilling to submit to their authority will fail as a Life Keeper." A soft snicker came from the back seat and Maling lapsed into silence. "Let's head for the clearing. I'll continue our lesson as we walk."

Tavon and his trainees piled out of the car and started for the trailhead. A brisk wind ruffled his hair. He inhaled deeply, enjoying the fresh scent of pine and the tang of impending rain.

Tingling awareness assailed his senses, making him restless and wary. *Someone was watching them.* He scanned their surroundings with his gaze, intensified his hearing, and sent out pulses of mystic energy. There had been no other cars in the small gravel lot, nothing to support his anxiety.

Keeping his senses attuned to the rhythm of the forest, he continued down the trail. "How many of you can manifest tangible illusions?" Maling and one other raised their hands. "Has anyone attempted a direct exchange of *iede*?"

They all shook their heads.

"Forming communication crystals is a basic Keeper skill but have any of you experimented with range? Can everyone contact other Light Keepers?" Their grumbling assured him the skill was beneath them. "Has anyone attempted interdimensional communication?"

The youngest trainee, a fresh-faced boy, admitted, "This is the first time I've been offworld."

"I've received a message from another dimension, but I've never sent one."

Maling was suspiciously quiet. "Have you tested your range, Maling?"

"My father is a Veil Keeper. We've been communicating interdimensionally since I was a child." A certain sadness in her tone piqued Tavon's interest. He needed to learn more about her father.

They reached the clearing and Tavon allowed the trainees to relax as they waited for the Veil Keeper. He scanned more intensively. Someone was out there, but he couldn't isolate their location. Someone or *something*.

"Gather around," Tavon called. They assembled facing him. "I spoke of the *iede* exchange. Offering *iede* is easier than absorbing it, but you will learn to do both. Let's begin with this." His gaze continued to sweep the clearing. "Everyone hold out your hands and manifest as much *iede* as you are able." He quickly arranged their hands on top of each other and clasped them between his fingers and thumb.

"What's wrong?" Maling asked, obviously sensing his anxiety.

Tavon boosted his Keeper awareness, drawing *iede* from his students' hands. Switching to the telepathic link shared by all Light Keepers, Tavon explained. *We're being watched.*

*I don't sense anything,* Maling objected.

*That's why he's the teacher!*

*Listen. This is what we're going to do. Cup your hands and fill your palms with iede as quickly as possible. On my signal toss it into the air.*

*What will that do?* Maling asked.

*You'll see.*

At least Tavon hoped they'd all see. *Now!*

They moved as one. Tossing Light *iede* high into the air, they showered the entire clearing. Turning in a steady circle, Tavon spotted a Shadow figure frantically shaking off the sparkling flecks. He cast a Light web around it and pulled the figure out of the Shadow realm.

Tangled in the Light web, the Shadow Keeper ended up on her hands and knees. Despite the Shadow Keeper's short spiky hair, the sleek black leather garments revealed lushly feminine curves.

"Who is she?" Maling asked.

Tavon crouched before the struggling Shadow Keeper. His hands itched to explore every swell and hollow outlined so temptingly by her uniform. He raised her head and felt surrounded by her liquid silver gaze. She glared furiously. Tavon smiled. Why wasn't he surprised? "Well, hello, Rammi."

"How the hell did you do that?" she demanded.

"Why are you following me?"

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## Chapter Two

"But, Master Alrick, you know I cannot."

The little Veil Keeper squirmed away from him, but Alrick was not deterred. "Your clever high priestess has imprisoned your virginity, but there are many other things we can do."

"The mystic shield is there to *protect* us, not imprison us," she objected.

Anger made her dark eyes shine, and color blossomed on her smooth round cheeks. Alrick could hardly wait to get his hands on her, to feel her writhe beneath him and cry out his name. This one had caught his eye several weeks before. He seldom waited this long to partake once his interest was aroused. *They are yours to do with as you will, so long as their mystic shields remain intact.* His bargain with the high priestess had served him well down through the years!

"Protect you from what? Pleasure? Why should you be denied what every woman in the dimension enjoys?" Ah, there it was. The predictable flicker of curiosity. Her dark gaze traveled from his face to the distinct bulge in the front of his pants. "Have you ever seen a man's cock?"

Shaking her head, she crossed her arms over her breasts, fidgeting visibly. She was so ready to be seduced, and seduction was Alrick's specialty. "You want to, don't you? You want to look and touch, perhaps even—taste." He added the last word with dramatic inflection. "Two years! You're expected to deprive your body of its natural desires for two full years. It's cruel. And so unnecessary."

"Master Alrick!"

He turned as a lovely blonde came sailing into the small chapel. Damn! He didn't want the dark beauty to bolt. He'd just begun to weave his spell. "Sister Celeste," he greeted the blonde. "What an unexpected surprise." The chapel was seldom used, but the potential for discovery always added to the excitement of Alrick's trysts.

Her high round breasts swayed beneath the diaphanous material of her multicolored robe. His mouth watered. He'd ridden Celeste's tight ass more times than he could remember. She'd been far too easy to tame, eager for everything he'd done to her. It was so much better when they resisted, when they had to be convinced.

"I didn't realize you'd arrived." Celeste's blue eyes moved over the younger woman, her disapproval obvious. "Surely you didn't come to see Sister Janna. She's not what you need at all."

Janna gasped, her dark eyes flashing. "Apparently, Master Alrick disagrees. He requested me."

"Oh really?"

Alrick bit back a grin. This was better than he could have imagined. It had been ages since two lissome beauties vied for his attention. Being Time Master had definite advantages. Few women dared refuse him anything. Still, nothing thrilled him like blazing a trail through *virgin* territory.

"There is a simple solution, my dears." He waited until they looked at him, then flashed his most charming smile. "I'll pleasure you both."

"But, Master Alrick," Celeste objected, producing a pretty pout, "I wanted this to be special. I passed my final exam last week. My mystic shield has been deactivated." She lowered her long lashes and whispered, "You can ravish my pussy at last."

Desire slammed into Alrick like a fist. He'd fuck Celeste's virgin cunt and then ream Janna's virgin ass! His cock bucked like a wild thing and his balls burned for release. "I'll make it special for you, sweet Celeste. I'll make it special for both of you."

*Does she realize what you're going to do?* Celeste used the private link he'd established during their repeated bouts of passion.

Alrick grinned. *Probably not.*

Celeste stared at Janna, a calculative gleam in her eyes. *She goes first, and I get to help you break her in.*

They pivoted to face Janna and the younger woman backed away. Her frightened gaze darted from Alrick to Celeste and back again.

"I'm not ready for this." Janna ducked under Alrick's arm and ran down the center aisle.

"Now see what you've done!" he snapped.

Celeste casually dissolved her robe and stood before him naked. Her boldness annoyed Alrick. He could bend her over the altar right now, fuck her senseless without any foreplay, and she'd love every minute of it. Where was the challenge in that?

Cupping her breasts, her thumbs rubbing her nipples, Celeste licked her lips in silent invitation. "Why bother with a skinny little waif when I can satisfy you so much better?"

She had fabulous breasts, high and full, crowned with large coral-colored nipples. Alrick watched as she caressed one into a tight peak. The musk of feminine arousal swirled around him. Already she was creaming for him.

The mystic shield reinforced a Veil Keeper's hymen during the first two years of training. Through trial and error, Alrick had discovered what he could and could not do with these mystically guarded virgins. Generally their clits were unaffected, but occasionally the shield was powerful enough to protect even that delightful little nub.

"Your shield is gone? I can fuck you properly?"

With a sultry smile she hopped up on the altar and spread her legs wide. "I've waited so long for this. Come, master, claim your prize."

Intoxicated by the sheer carnality of her offering, Alrick knelt beside the altar, ready to worship. Her pussy glistened with cream, deeply flushed and swollen, and her clit peeked out through her folds. He inhaled her scent, exhilarated by her arousal. "By the gods, look at this jewel." With just his fingertip, he circled her clit. Celeste jumped, then giggled. He leaned in close and flicked her with his tongue. She gasped, her thighs flexed. He slid his tongue between her folds, savoring her essence. Licking and suckling, he took her right to the edge, then quickly pulled away.

"Master Alrick," she cried.

He turned her, aligning her body with the altar. "Lay back." She didn't hesitate. Lifting her feet to his shoulders, he bent her knees and angled her legs outward. If she were lying about her mystic shield he'd whip her. He'd ventured too near her core three weeks before and her shield engaged. The blisters on his cock had finally healed; it was not an experience he cared to repeat.

Parting her folds with one hand, he eased his middle finger into her cunt. Tight, hot, wet. No stinging pain, no searing intensity. He panted. Desire twisted through him, making his balls ache. Each moment of anticipation made his release that much sweeter.

Celeste trembled, her inner muscles fluttering around his finger. One flick of his thumb against her clit and she'd come. He wasn't ready for that. He wanted her wild, desperate, for whatever he commanded.

"Sacha is looking for you," a deep male voice interrupted them.

Alrick knew who he'd find before he turned his head. Tall, dark, menacing, Brodi lounged in the open archway. Celeste gasped, covering her breasts. She tried to pull her legs together, but Alrick's hand was between her thighs.

"I'm a little busy right now." Alrick thrust his finger deep, illustrating his point.

"I can see that."

"Was it urgent," Alrick grinned, "or do you have time to join us?"

"Master Alrick, I—"

"You said you wanted this to be special." He covered her clit with his thumb, applying pressure as he gazed into her eyes. "What could be more special than this? Don't you find Brodi attractive? I've been told most women do."

"We don't have time for this," Brodi drawled.

"There's *a/ways* time for this."

Brodi's dark gaze moved over Celeste and a slow smile curved his lips. Celeste had deprived Alrick of his challenge, but now the challenge had returned. She was about to get more than she'd bargained for, a whole lot more.

"You will pleasure Brodi with your mouth, until I tell you to stop."

"But, Master Alrick—"

"You will do as I say or we both leave. Make your decision now."

She gazed at Brodi with interest and uncertainty. "Won't High Priestess Sacha disapprove?"

"Sacha will never know." Brodi unlaced his pants and freed his cock. Celeste's eyes widened and he smiled. Only semi-erect he was already impressive. He guided her arms above her head, holding both wrists with one long-fingered hand.

"Now part those luscious lips."

Alrick watched in fascination as Brodi's cock disappeared into Celeste's mouth. The idea of commanding her had excited Alrick. He hadn't expected to enjoy the actual act.

Brodi licked his fingers and teased Celeste's nipples. Alrick pushed a second finger into her core. She moaned, the sound hampered by Brodi's cock. Hot tingles erupted all over Alrick's

skin. Stars, this was thrilling! Why hadn't he thought of sharing a woman before?

Draping her legs over his shoulders, Alrick bent between her thighs. He wasn't the only one excited by this new situation. Cream literally dripped from Celeste's cunt. With his fingers still wet from her pussy, Alrick impaled her ass. She cried out and he chuckled, closing his mouth around her swollen clit. Her anal passage squeezed him so hard he feared she'd bruise his fingers. He licked and sucked, sliding his fingers in and out with tantalizing slowness.

Her strangled cries and rhythmic spasms warned of her impending orgasm. He withdrew in one smooth stroke and lifted his mouth from her clit. She could only whimper with Brodi still moving in her mouth, but Alrick knew he'd stopped in time.

"Enough," Alrick ordered. "I have something else in mind." Brodi pulled out of her mouth, his cock gleaming in the candlelight. Alrick felt his own cock jerk at the sight. "Grab the back of your knees, Celeste, and hold yourself open for me."

Brodi caressed her breasts, his cock resting against her side. Celeste did as Alrick instructed, her gaze fixed on his face. He coated his cock with her cream and pressed against her entrance. "You're very wet, but you're also tight. This may sting a little." Grasping her hips, he thrust to the hilt in one forceful lunge.

She screamed, back arching off the altar. Alrick stiffened, afraid he'd hurt her badly, then felt the deep pulsations ripple

around his cock. "You were supposed to wait for me," he chided and Brodi laughed.

Panting harshly, Celeste pushed her hair out of her eyes. "I've wanted you there for so long."

"Apparently." He slid in and out, amazed at how wet she was. If he hadn't felt her hymen tear, he would have doubted her virginity. She gasped and rocked her hips, already far too eager. Bored by the easy conquest, Alrick pulled out.

"Why do you keep doing that?" she shrieked. Brodi pinched her nipples and she groaned.

"Watch your tone," the other man cautioned and Alrick smiled.

"I want you to ride Brodi."

"But I want to ride you." Her voice was soft and pleading, but she still questioned his authority.

"Do you want to bring me pleasure?"

"Yes."

"Then do as I command."

He lifted her from the altar and Brodi took her place. Both men were fully dressed while Celeste was naked. The contrast amused Alrick. Everything about this amused Alrick. Brodi's long legs hung nearly to the floor and his hips were at the edge of the altar. He obviously knew what Alrick had in mind; this would position sweet Celeste perfectly.

Alrick lifted her atop the other man. She parted her legs and straddled Brodi's hips. Emboldened by a sudden rush of power, Alrick took Brodi's throbbing cock and guided it to Celeste's entrance. Brodi gasped, but didn't protest as Alrick manipulated their bodies to his liking.



"Now, slowly lower yourself onto him."

Spellbound by the erotic beauty, Alrick watched Celeste's delicate flesh stretch, accommodating Brodi's thick shaft. She made a soft mewling sound. Another wave of tingles coursed through Alrick's body. Her muscles flexed, her knees bent, and she sank onto Brodi's cock.

"Oh gods, this is amazing. Fuck her, Brodi. Fuck her hard!"

Grasping her hips, Brodi thrust up into Celeste's eager body. She leaned forward, her breasts brushing against Brodi's chest. Alrick moved to the foot of the altar and watched.

Unable to drag his gaze away from the sensual display, he reached into his pocket and withdrew a vial of oil. He liberally coated his cock, then drizzled some into Celeste's delectable ass crack. She glanced over her shoulder, eyes wide and concerned.

"Oh yes, sweet Celeste. This shall be special indeed." Brodi's deep chuckle encouraged Alrick. "Hold her, while I join the celebration."

Brodi thrust deep and held Celeste still. Alrick parted her velvety ass cheeks and worked the oil into her puckered hole. Determined to savor the moment, he pushed his cock just past the tight collar of muscle and paused. Heat and the firm clamp of her sphincter dragged a groan from Alrick's throat. He drove deep, burying himself to the hilt.

Trembling between them, Celeste let out a keening cry. "It's too much. I—"

Brodi ended her protests with a slow withdrawal. Alrick shivered. The subtle motion of the other man's cock nearly

buckled his knees. Never had he felt anything so erotic. Alrick pulled out as Brodi thrust in and Celeste went wild. She arched and twisted. Alrick wasn't sure if she was overwhelmed with pleasure or trying to dislodge them.

Reaching beneath her, he cupped her breasts, squeezing firmly to get her attention. "Calm down. Let us move. We will pleasure you." She expelled a ragged breath and relaxed. "Good girl."

Synchronizing their movements, they passed her back and forth. Slick with oil, Alrick's cock moved freely in her snug anal passage while Brodi deftly worked her core. She arched, taking them deeper, her hands clutching Brodi's shoulders.

Alrick gripped her hips and pumped into her ass. Heat, friction, and the counter-motion of Brodi's cock combined in a sensual storm. Alrick's head spun and lights danced before his eyes. Gritting his teeth, he let out a strangled moan.

Orgasm tore through Celeste. Her body shook and she screamed. Massaging his straining cock, her forceful spasms drove Alrick over the edge. His fingers dug into her hips as he thrust to the hilt. Pleasure crashed over him in thundering waves and he gifted her with his seed.

"You're taking advantage of my hospitality."

Celeste yelped as the high priestess spoke from the open doorway. Burying her face against Brodi's chest, she trembled.

"I've stayed within the boundaries you set. Has even one mystic shield been disturbed because of me?" Alrick stroked Celeste's smooth ass, her sleek hips, her slender back. His

remorseless actions taunted the high priestess. "We were celebrating her accomplishments."

"Get rid of her. We must talk." Sacha remained in the archway, her bearing rigid, yet regal. Alrick withdrew from Celeste and lifted her off Brodi. Trembling visibly, the Veil Keeper manifested a robe and rushed from the room.

"There is a bed in her private quarters. Why must you defile my altar?"

Alrick shrugged and righted his clothing.

"And you," she turned her angry gaze on Brodi, "I expected far better from you!"

"What is so urgent you must interrupt my pleasure?" Alrick drawled, his gaze moving over the high priestess. They'd been lovers once, ages ago, but their relationship was different now. They were bound together by forces that transcended physical desire.

"Rammi failed." She delivered the simple statement with the impact of a slap.

"What!"

"I just received word. Tavon outsmarted her."

"Impossible. Rammi is—"

"He used his trainees to bolster his power and snatched her right out of the Shadow realm. We seriously underestimated him. He sent the trainees back with the Veil Keeper and stayed on Earth to deal with Rammi."

Alrick just stared at her, stunned beyond words.

"My thoughts exactly." She shook her head, disgust clear in her cinnamon colored eyes. "Play time's over, boys. We have work to do."

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## Chapter Three

Rammi thrashed within the Light web, unwilling to accept that she was trapped. It was impossible. Only Shadow Keepers could see into the Shadow realm. Glistening fibers bit into her shoulders and thighs, stinging her exposed skin. Tavon had dismissed his companions, sending them back to their home dimension with a Veil Keeper. Now he stood in the sunny clearing, hands clasped behind his back, watching her writhe in the grass.

"Answer a few questions and I'll let you go," he said calmly.

Rammi lay on her side glaring up at him. Sunlight played through his wavy blond hair and curiosity gleamed in his sky-blue eyes. Had the Death Master really sired this golden, pretty boy?

"How were you able to see me?" She managed to sit, though the Light web restricted her movement and hindered her abilities.

He crossed his arms over his chest and tilted his head. His gaze narrowed. That stubborn jaw, those sculpted cheekbones, though softened by his mother's Light Keeper coloring, were evidence of the Death Master's stamp on Tavon's handsome face.

That's how he'd seen into the Shadow realm! She closed her eyes, shocked by her foolishness. He might look like a Life Keeper, but he was very much the Death Master's son. Could he manifest Shadow *iede*?

"Sometimes it pays to play nicely with others."

She opened her eyes. "What the hell is that supposed to mean."

"I sensed you watching me, but were it not for my trainees, I wouldn't have been able to locate you."

Bright and endlessly blue, his eyes scrambled her thoughts to the wind. What was wrong with her? She'd developed a permanent immunity to physical beauty fifteen years before. Averting her gaze, she gave herself a mental shake. Did Tavon have Shadow abilities or not? He was a Life Keeper. So how had he ... Why did she feel so muddled?

"Why were you following me?"

She ignored his question, staring off into the distance. Tavon Delmont. Just his name made her whole body stiffen. This man had systematically ruined her life without lifting a finger. She tried to focus on her bitterness, build her anger, and drive away the woozy haze, but the world spun faster. Her body swayed and a ringing erupted in her ears.

"If I leave you in the web much longer, you'll be unconscious. Answer my questions and I'll turn you loose."

"I can't answer your questions if I'm unconscious." She shrugged unsteadily. "Guess I'll wait it out."

"Who sent you after me?"

She just stared at him.

"Your objective couldn't have been assassination, or I'd be dead."

The scene swelled in and out of focus. Rammi blinked, her eyelids heavy. Overwhelmed by the web's power of sedation,

she slumped into the grass. The ringing in her ears became a roar, and darkness claimed her.

Tavon released the Light web with a negligent wave of his hand. Why was she being so stubborn? Death Keepers could strike from the Shadow realm without revealing themselves. She must have been ordered to apprehend him. But who would give such an order?

*Of what am I accused?*

Dread knotted his stomach as he knelt in the grass beside her and gently touched her face. He felt as if he knew her, yet this was closer than he'd ever been before. For fifteen years he'd watched her, ached for her broken spirit and wounded heart.

Tavon's first assignment as a Life Keeper had been to heal Gaverel. When he entered the unconscious man's mind to ascertain the damage, Tavon had inadvertently witnessed what happened in the meadow. Rammi had been ravaged, her dreams shattered—because of Gaverel's obsession with him.

Guilt inspired his interest in the defiant girl. Her grief and fury cried out to the healer in him. He wanted to soothe her, protect and care for her, but she would never accept affection from the enemy.

Tavon watched as his father challenged Rammi, helped her channel her anger into strength. She became confident and proficient, one of the best Death Keepers ever, according to his father. Tavon expected his fascination to wane, but the more dangerous she became, the more he thought about her, dreamed and fantasized about claiming her for his own. Light

was attracted to darkness. Keepers longed for their equal and opposite.

He'd started to approach her countless times, only to realize the futility of his desire. She hated him, with good reason. How could he combat what she had suffered because of him? Fate had finally brought them together. Only he was her mission, not her mate. With a soft chuckle, he eased her to her back, arranging her limbs more comfortably.

The irregular spikes of blue/black hair only drew attention to the delicate purity of her features. Her supple uniform clearly outlined full breasts and rounded hips. He was tempted to kiss her awake, to capture her shocked gasp in his mouth and open the front seam of her uniform, baring those tempting breasts. She'd be groggy and disorientated...

Wait a minute! He couldn't seduce her. Those few moments of confusion might be his only opportunity to figure out what in blazes was going on. She'd never confess the details of her mission to him, but she'd report without hesitation to her superior. Manifesting Light *iede*, he encased himself in the illusion of his father.

Leaning over her, he cupped her shoulders and shook her firmly, mimicking his father's stern tone. "Rammi, wake up. What happened? Report, Severn!"

She blinked rapidly, tossing her head as if to clear the cobwebs. "Where am I, sir?"

"Dimension 939-3. The Veil Keeper returned with Tavon's trainees. Where is he? Explain what happened."

Reaching for his shoulders, she pulled herself out of the grass. Was she always so comfortable touching his father?



Most people were too intimidated to look the Death Master in the eyes much less touch him. Tavon frowned, thinking of the endless hours Rammi had spent alone with her mentor.

How absurd. Was he jealous of his father? She struggled to her feet. He stood as well, placing his hands on her waist to steady her. Her gaze stared past him wide and unfocused.

"I feel so strange."

"Gather your thoughts, then report."

Her legs trembled and her hands moved to his chest. Tavon's pulse leapt and his breath hitched. This was ridiculous.

"I tracked him, sir." She glanced at him and her eyebrows drew together. Tavon stiffened. Had she sensed the illusion?

"I needed to get him alone. I..." She looked around the clearing. "He must have..."

Her silver gaze returned to his clearer now, bright—beautiful.

She swayed against him, and her arms encircled his neck. "Oh, Tilden." Sighing the name, she rose to the balls of her feet and pressed her mouth to Tavon's.

Not Master Tilden, not sir, just Tilden and then the soft kiss. Tavon's head reeled. Was she his father's mistress? Shit! She rubbed her breasts against his chest and pushed her fingers into his hair—his father's hair!

Warm and soft, her lips teased his, stroked, touched, slid. "What's the matter?"

Her moist breath caressed him. He wanted to shake her. *What's the matter? You're fucking my father!* Careful to hide

his shock and anger, Tavon moved his hands to her ass and pressed his burgeoning erection against her belly.

He'd begun this game; he'd see it through to the end, but damn this just got twisted. Wrapping his arms around her, he kissed her boldly, stroking the roof of her mouth with his tongue. "Where did he go?" he asked against her sweetly parted lips. "Tavon could still be about."

"He left me here unconscious. I'll pick up his trail as soon as we're done."

Easing away from him, she casually opened her uniform to the waist. The black material gaped, framing her spectacular cleavage. Tavon gazed at her creamy flesh, stunned. She was really going to do it. She was going to undress and fuck his father!

Rammi sprang. Knocking his legs out from under him with a sweeping kick, she came down on top of him hard, her knees pinning his shoulders to the ground, her hand clutching his throat, limiting his air without strangling him. In the next instant, her hand blaster pressed against his temple.

"Slowly—and I mean slowly—move your arms above your head."

He didn't argue. Not that he could with her fingers compressing his throat. He released the illusion and slid his arms along the grass until his hands touched above his head.

She'd known all along. He hadn't fooled her for an instant. Reluctant admiration swept away his anger. His father always bragged about her skill, cunning, and calm.

Keeping the weapon pressed to his head, she snatched something out of her pocket and slipped it over his hand.

Securing the pouch around his wrist, she repeated the process with his other hand, then cuffed his wrists together. He didn't need to see his hands to understand what she'd done. If he couldn't manifest *iede*, he was virtually powerless.

"Why are you here, Rammi? Who wants me dead?"

Rammi looked into Tavon's perfect face and felt tears burn behind her eyes. *Tears!* She never cried. Why couldn't he be more like his father? Terse, hard, mean?

The first brush of Tavon's fingers had brought her senses back to life. Places long numb began to ache, banked embers ignited to flame. She wanted him, wanted to bask in his Light, revel in his Life. Damn him! It had taken years to vanquish the pain, to erect her emotional barricade. And this Life Keeper shook the foundation of her defenses with one passionate kiss.

Clearing her throat, she climbed off him, keeping her blaster trained on the center of his chest. "Men are so easy." She ignored her thundering pulse as well as his question. "Show a little skin and you all go soft in the head."

"That's because all the blood rushes to other parts of our bodies." He chuckled.

How could he laugh at a time like this? She righted her uniform while he struggled to his feet, watching him warily. He was a Life Keeper. She'd never been assigned to one before. Covering his hands should limit his abilities, but she wasn't foolish enough to think him helpless.

*A Life Keeper.*

All her life she'd dreamed of bonding with a Life Keeper. She shook away the confusing thought. "Let's go."

"Don't we need a Veil Keeper?"

"Not where we're going." She grabbed his bound wrists and pulled him into the Shadow realm. "I intend to move fast. If you jerk your hands away, you'll emerge into some random dimension."

"I've traveled through the Shadow realm before."

Of course he had. He was Master Tilden's son. How could she keep forgetting who he was? Light receded to gloom, color faded to gray. She rushed through the swirling mist, allowing her Shadow senses to guide her. She navigated the Shadow realm naturally, at home in the dense fog.

"Who hired you? Does my father know you're involved?"

She didn't respond, anxious to reach the nexus chamber. They'd talk once she had him secured and she could relax her guard. The nexus chamber served as a gateway between three dimensions: their home world; Dimension 290-3, better known as the Kingdom of Zylott; and the Shadow realm. Few knew of the chamber's existence and, to her knowledge, she was the only one Master Tilden had entrusted with the mystic key.

Her Shadow senses spiked as they reached their destination. She summoned a doorway with a quick incantation and hurried Tavon inside.

"Sit there." She motioned toward the stark metal chair situated in one corner of the triangular room.

"You have got to be kidding." He tugged against her hold. "You're not binding me to an interrogation chair."

Raising the blaster she stared him down. "This isn't a negotiation."

"What the hell am I accused of? Who hired you?"

"Sit and we'll talk."

Defiance burning in his gaze, Tavon sat. Rammi unfastened his wrists and moved his covered hands to the chair's arms. "*Insa enk ta.*" Shadow fibers coiled around his forearms and calves, binding him to the chair.

"Do you feel better now?" he sneered.

She snapped the blaster back into its holder on her thigh and rolled her shoulders. "Actually, I do."

"Why am I here? Who hired you?"

"We'll get to that, but I have a few questions first." She faced him, hands clasped behind her back. "Don't you know your father at all?"

His bright blue eyes narrowed, but he didn't respond.

"Master Tilden would never fuck one of his Death Keepers."

"Not even if she wanted him to?"

She gasped. "You're deluded. I have never treated your father with anything but respect."

"It's disrespectful to desire someone?"

"It would be dishonorable for the Death Master to take advantage of his authority and ... Forget I brought it up. I'm not your father's lover."

"Glad to hear it." His tone caressed her and a smile tugged at the corners of his mouth. "Did you bring me here to play or are you under orders?"

"I brought you here to save your life, *if you're innocent.*"

"Innocent of what?"

"Murdering Kayrin and Larot."

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## Chapter Four

Tavon stared at Rammi unable to believe what she'd just said. "I'm accused of murdering the Flame Princess? I'm a Life Keeper, a healer, a—"

"Three people witnessed the crime."

"Who are my accusers?"

"The Time twins and their bonded mate, Lorrان."

"This doesn't make sense." His mouth went dry and he stilled within the Shadow restraints. They only stung where they touched his bare skin, but he couldn't budge them. He knew the Time twins; they had collaborated on numerous missions. "Why would they lie?"

"I don't believe they did."

"You believe I killed two people?" The question burst from him propelled by hurt and disbelief. How could she think him capable of murder? His stomach lurched. Was he upset by the thought of being accused of murder or by Rammi making the accusation? *She doesn't know you like you know her.* He may have been a silent observer, absorbing every detail of her life, but she was unaware of his interest, his longing.

"I didn't say that," she corrected him. "I believe they reported what they saw, or what they honestly think they saw."

He let out his breath in a ragged sigh. "Do you think I killed them?"

"It doesn't matter what I think."

"It does to me."

Confusion creased her brow and she turned her face away. "It was eighteen years ago. If you were capable of such violence, it would have happened again." She would have to do better than that. He needed her to believe in him, to *know* him.

"In my entire life there has only been one person I wanted to intentionally hurt and even then, I could not have ended his life." He hadn't intended to tell her, but he didn't regret the words.

"What happened that made you so angry?" Her tone was light, inquisitive. She clearly had no idea what he was about to say.

"Gaverel hurt you."

She staggered back a step, her silvery eyes wide and suspicious. "How did you know about..."

"I was there when they brought him to the Life Master. Healing Gaverel was my first assignment as a Life Keeper."

"He told you—"

"I saw it in his mind. I know why he did it."

Their gazes collided. She crossed her arms over her breasts, her expression tense, yet inscrutable. "I blamed you. For many years I blamed you. But you weren't there that day in the meadow. Gaverel was. Gaverel hurt me, because he was weak and cruel, and he was punished accordingly."

Gaverel had been stripped of his mystic abilities and banished to Dimension 542, a dismal, barbaric wasteland with few inhabitants.

"I got over it." She shrugged, but he saw grief in her eyes. "I don't blame you anymore."



She might no longer blame him, but she wasn't "over it." Her wounds had never healed. She just ignored the pain.

"This is all irrelevant." Her hand trembled as she waved away the issue. "Do you happen to remember where you were the day the murder took place?"

He laughed, resting his head against the tall chair back. "I only know about the murder because the entire dimension has spoken of little else since Cayenne and Lorrان returned. I have no idea where I was eighteen years ago."

"A Past Keeper could regress you, but I have strong suspicions Master Alrick is involved. It's better if we don't contact anyone with ties to the Steering Committee."

"Every member of the elite has some sort of tie to the Steering Committee."

"I know." She flashed a secretive smile and formed a dark comm crystal in the palm of her hand. Breathing *iede*-laced breath over the crystal, she activated the link. She pivoted, shielding the crystal with her body as an image formed within the sphere. "I'm sorry to disturb you, my lord. Would you have time to meet me in the nexus chamber? I need your assistance."

"I'll be there directly," Tavon barely heard "my lord" reply.

"Nexus chamber?" he repeated as she dissolved the comm crystal. "Where exactly are we? We can't be in the Shadow realm. You aren't touching me."

"We are nowhere and everywhere." She flashed an unexpected grin. Tavon's heart leapt in approval. Gods, she was beautiful when she smiled. The simmering outline of an archway appeared in one wall of the triangular room. Tavon

was nearly certain they'd emerged from one of the other walls. Was "my lord" from another dimension?

Light penetrated the wall as a doorway materialized. Silhouetted against the light, a tall, broad-shouldered form moved into the nexus chamber and the doorway blinked shut. Emerald green symbols sparkled against the man's long black robe. Sharp-featured and oddly familiar, the visitor assessed Tavon with eyes the same bright green as the symbols on his robe.

"Do I know you?" Tavon heard himself ask, though he hadn't meant to speak the question out loud.

"Is this Tilden's son?"

Rammi nodded. "Lord Nyx of Zylott, this is Tavon Delmont, the Death Master's son."

Lord Nyx of Zylott? Tavon's mind whirled with information. This man was rumored to be part deity and part devil. A crusader by some accounts, a bloodthirsty villain by others. All agreed on one point: he had no use for Mystic Keepers.

"Why is he here, Rammi? What business have you with..." He looked directly at Lord Nyx. "You called my father by name. How do you know my father?"

"Our fathers are cousins. What does that make us?"

"Confused as hell."

Lord Nyx's gaze drifted back to Rammi. "What do you need from me?"

"I need to know where Tavon was mid-morning, May twenty-fourth, eighteen years ago."

"Why?" He crossed his arms over his chest and stared at Tavon.

"I'll tell you after."

It was obvious these two knew each other. What in blazes was going on? "You'll tell him after what?"

Lord Nyx was silent for a moment. His gaze bore into Tavon's. "He was alone in a room lined with books, sketching the face of a girl when he should have been studying. Why is this memory important?"

An image flared within Tavon's mind. He'd been in his father's library and he'd been sketching Rammi's face. He looked at the sorcerer—there was no doubt that's what this man was. Mystic energy unlike anything Tavon had ever encountered pulsed from Lord Nyx.

"He is accused of murder. Could you sense where the room was, which dimension?"

"A Life Keeper accused of murder, how very interesting." The faintest hint of a smile curved one corner of his mouth. "He was definitely in your dimension. In fact I think he was in his own home."

An occasional Keeper had attempted to scan Tavon's mind. Those he couldn't keep out entirely, he'd sensed as they intruded. He'd felt nothing as Lord Nyx pinpointed an exact moment in his past. Extraordinary.

"Then the murderer had to have been a Light Keeper using Tavon's image." Rammi scrubbed her hair with her fingers, renewing the spiky non-style. "*Prazot*, how do we even begin?"

"You're closer than you realize." Lord Nyx waved his hand and the doorway to his dimension rematerialized. He paused, looking directly at Tavon. "Does she know?"

His heart leapt within his chest. How the hell did the sorcerer know? Had Lord Nyx recognized whose face Tavon was sketching, or was it something more ... mystical? "Not yet."

The sorcerer's gaze shifted to Rammi. "This all leads to the same place. You already know the answers. Tilden has known for years. Get the Time Master to confess. It's your only hope." Lord Nyx turned back to Tavon. "Claim her tonight. If you're not bonded when you face Alrick, neither of you will survive." He hesitated a moment longer, his lips compressed in a grim line. "Tilden never should have kept the truth from you. Brodi is alive."

With a wave of his hand, Lord Nyx freed Tavon and disappeared.

Tavon flew out of the chair and pinned Rammi against the wall with the weight of his body. She cried out, shrinking back from his aggression.

"What is your connection to Lord Nyx?" His vivid blue eyes demanded answers. Flutters erupted deep in her belly and her nipples tingled. He was innocent of murder, but how far could she trust him? Master Tilden was obviously keeping secrets from his son.

The pouches were gone; Tavon's hands were free. Why would Lord Nyx do this to her?

"Why is my father interacting with Lord Nyx?"

"They're distant cousins, isn't that what he said?"

He cupped the side of her face, his thumb raising her chin. "We're in this together whether you like it or not. You trust my father, don't you?"

"I trust Master Tilden, not his son."

"He sent you to me."

"He sent me *after* you," she clarified stubbornly.

"He knew I was innocent. He sent you to me."

She took a deep breath. He was right. Master Tilden had wanted her with Tavon. But why? Was it more complicated than the murder allegations? What were they supposed to do now? "It doesn't matter what I believe. It matters what we can prove. Even if Lord Nyx testified before the Committee, they would never believe him."

"But you believe him."

What was Tavon getting at? Lord Nyx had said so many things right before he left, so many confusing, disturbing things. "His information has proved accurate in the past."

"He told me to claim you. Why would he say that?" Soft and deep, barely more than a whisper, Tavon's voice caressed her.

*Because I've always known I'd bond with a Life Keeper. A demanding pulse erupted in her core, shocking her, thrilling her. My equal and opposite.*

"Who is Brodi?" she countered, desperate to escape her own desire.

"When was the last time a man touched you?" He eased his fingers under the neckline of her uniform. The seam separated, revealing the upper swell of her breasts and her frantic heartbeat.

"This morning. Your father groped me."

"You knew I wasn't my father, so why did you kiss me?"

Heat curled through her. She'd used the ploy to regain control of the situation, but she hadn't expected to enjoy it so much. "It got you here, didn't it?"

His fingers played against her skin, teasing her with feather-light touches. "You weren't kissing my father. You were kissing me." His lips brushed hers, stroked, caressed. "Admit it. There's something between us."

"It's called an erection and a cold shower will help." She turned her face away.

"Claiming you will help more."

"I'm not your bonded mate! I will never ... go through that again."

Covering her mouth with his, he surrounded her with his scent, his heat. Her skin tingled. He slipped his hand inside her uniform, cupping her breast. Her nipple gathered against his warm palm. No! She would bond with no man! Never again would she make herself so vulnerable.

"I've dreamed of you since I was a child." His lips moved against hers, and his thumb rubbed her nipple. "Gaverel was courting you. You seemed happy, so I pushed the longings aside."

She shook her head. The ache within her soul gaped, throbbed. She'd dreamed once too. Dreamed of love and laughter, of sunshine and light. Tears blurred her vision and she tried to shove him away.

"You were never meant for Gaverel. You were meant for me."

A sob shattered her composure and she covered her face with her hands. She'd dreamed of being a Life Keeper's mate. Tavon was a Life Keeper.

"You are my bonded mate. I've known it for years." He eased her hands away from her face and waited for her to look up. "But I know what you suffered because of me. How do we reconcile the two?"

"We don't," she sobbed. "I can't go through that again."

His eyebrows drew together. "Is Gaverel ... Has no other man touched you intimately?"

"I nearly killed the only man who ever made love to me. I don't dare."

"Oh, Rammi." He spoke her name with such sorrow, a fresh flood of tears coursed down her face. He brushed them away, then kissed her gently, tenderly. His lips caressed hers, his tongue stroked, soothed. "What that bastard did to you had nothing to do with love. Let me show you the difference. Let me make love to you."

"I can't think. You're confusing me."

He chuckled. Wrapping his arms around her, he guided her head to his shoulder. "I'm confused, too. Let's go somewhere and sort this out. Who knows where you are? Am I safe anywhere in our dimension?"

"Manric Cendar was the only member of the Steering Committee not present at the meeting."

"You were dispatched by the Steering Committee?"

She looked up at his shocked tone. "I'll show you the data crystal when we get settled for the night."

"Do you have somewhere in mind?"

"My family has a summer cottage high in the mountains. It's only accessible through the Shadow realm. My brothers will sense my return. Can you shield your presence from them?"

"I can shield myself from everyone but my parents."

"Then we should be safe for a while."

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## Chapter Five

A film of dust coated every surface, making it obvious the Severn family seldom utilized their mountain retreat. Rammi sent a cleansing pulse through the cottage and laughed nervously. "Maybe we should have gone to a hotel. It's been a while since anyone had time for a holiday."

"Hotels require registration. You're harboring a fugitive."

A fugitive who claimed to be her bonded mate. Every touch, every heated glance built the tension inside her. Only the elders could activate *Pim Noctar*, so why did she feel so odd?

They stood in the main room of the cottage, moonlight casting a silvery glow. Three bedrooms lay off to the right, a dining area to their left. Floor to ceiling windows dominated the wall directly in front of them, showcasing the spectacular view. Tree-covered hills created a jagged horizon against the blue/black sky. Moonlight glistened off a light dusting of snow.

"How did you meet Lord Nyx?"

Tavon didn't seem affected by whatever was stimulating her senses. He smiled, his gaze warm and caressing. And he kept touching her. He pressed his hand to the small of her back. His fingers brushed her hip, her arm, her hair. Each casual contact heightened her discomfort, her restlessness.

She crossed to the massive windows, needing something to occupy her mind. "Your father has been helping him

investigate the Steering Committee. Lord Nyx suspects one or more of the members are practicing the forbidden arts."

"*Setti-iede*? Black magic?" He sounded incredulous. She met his gaze and nodded. "How is that possible? If someone were moving in the *Setti* arts it would disrupt the balance of our entire dimension."

"The source of Death *iede* resides closer to the *Setti* realm than any other. Master Tilden is aware of things no one else can sense. He's felt the distortion growing, but so far he has been unable to determine who's to blame."

"Why has he told no one, and how did Lord Nyx become involved?"

"I don't know the details. I'm basically a courier. Master Tilden is investigating the most powerful people in our dimension. It isn't surprising he sought assistance from an outsider."

"This is why he's stopped using Veil Keepers." He stroked his chin, his expression distracted and thoughtful. "He trusts no one."

"We've found few places we can't get to utilizing the Shadow realm and the nexus chambers."

"There is more than one?"

She just smiled.

Tavon faced her, his gaze intent upon her face. "This is huge. If Father is right—"

"He has to have proof before he can act. You don't accuse a member of the Steering Committee without tangible evidence."

Accepting this with a nod, he stared out into the night. She studied his profile, fascinated by the masculine beauty of his features. He was everything she'd wanted in a man, before she abandoned her dreams. Was it possible? Could he be her true mate? The other half of her soul?

Her body pulsed to life, hungry to explore the possibility. She leashed her desire, focusing on the other things Lord Nyx had said. "Who is Brodi?"

He turned toward her, his gaze suddenly guarded. "Brodi can't be alive. Lord Nyx is mistaken."

"All right. Who *was* Brodi?"

Fidgeting, he glanced out the window, then met her gaze. "Before my father bonded with my mother, his mistress bore him a son."

"How is that possible? Keepers can only conceive with a bonded mate."

"My father was not yet a Keeper. His lover wasn't even elite. She never expected a permanent relationship, but Brodi wasn't as understanding as his mother. He claimed my father treated her like a whore and condemned him to the existence of a bastard."

"From which order did his mother come?" Rammi didn't want to consider the possibility but, to her knowledge, Lord Nyx had never provided false information.

"She was of the Order of Light." He moved away from the windows, his stride stiff and mechanical. "I know what you're thinking, but there has to be another explanation. Brodi was my half-brother. I would sense it if he were still alive."

She didn't push him. His resentment obviously ran deep. If Brodi had been the result of a youthful indiscretion, it wasn't surprising that Master Tilden had never mentioned him. Tavon sat on the large sofa situated against one wall. Rammi joined him there, at a loss for words. A tense silence descended on the room.

"You think Master Alrick is responsible for the Flame Princess' death?"

She nodded. "He was the only one with a real motive. Kayrin spurned him, made him look the fool. I don't think Alrick committed the murder, but I think he sanctioned it."

He sighed, extending his arm along the back of the sofa, lightly brushing her shoulders. "How in the world will we get him to confess? He's had eighteen years to practice his story."

"I don't know." The simple pressure of his arm against her shoulders sent a hot wave of longing through her body. His gaze suddenly brightened, his pupils dilated. He felt it, too! She wasn't imagining the heightened awareness. He was just better at concealing his reactions.

"Lord Nyx said our only hope is to face him as bonded mates."

She smiled. "That may be the oddest come on I have ever heard."

He framed her face with his warm palms. "You are so beautiful when you smile it makes my whole body ache."

"That was better."

"I think your sorcerer friend activated *Pim Noctar*," Tavon whispered. "If I don't claim you, I'll go mad."

Covering her mouth with his, he ended their conversation. Warm and gentle, his lips moved against hers. His fingers caressed her face while he coaxed his way into her mouth. She opened wider. He delved deeper, her tongue curled around his.

Her pulse raced and each ragged breath filled her head with his scent. He tasted of Light and passion. She couldn't get enough. He pulled her into his arms, cradling her against his chest. On and on he kissed her, mingling their breath. She traced his jaw with her fingertips, relaxing in his embrace. Patient, gentle, he let her set the pace.

She'd dreamed of a Life Keeper mate, known him instinctively. Gaverel had blinded her with lies, dazzled her with his handsome face. He'd convinced her with whispered promises that he was the man of her dreams. Her dreams hadn't been wrong; she had been deceived.

Her world narrowed to Tavon, to this one moment in time. Her mate. Her true mate. All these years she'd forsaken her heart's desire, thought she'd been betrayed by her dreams.

Liberated by the truth, need surged through Rammi. Hunger and longing combined in a heated rush. She splayed her fingers against the back of his head and reversed the kiss. She filled his mouth with her tongue, boldly tasting him.

Tavon groaned. His hands slid up and down her back, molding her to his chest. She sent a cleansing pulse down her body, dissolving her uniform in a puff of gray dust. He followed suit and they came together skin to skin. Rammi sighed. It felt wonderful. She rubbed her breasts against his naked chest.

Easing her away, he gazed at her naked body, hunger burning in his eyes. "So beautiful."

He cupped her breast. His thumb lightly abraded her nipple. She tried not to think about Gaverel, but memories hovered, threatening to destroy the fragile bond beginning to form.

"Rammi, look at me." She met Tavon's gaze, allowing him to see her uncertainty. "I love you." The words spread over her like a healing balm, warm and soothing. "I think I've always loved you."

She parted her lips as his mouth covered hers, needing to taste him, to abandon herself in his tenderness. His palm covered her breast and she arched into his touch. Heat pooled low in her belly. Her core throbbed, empty, hollow, incomplete. Laying her back against the arm of the sofa he nibbled and licked at her mouth. This was safe, comfortable.

Distracted by his tender kisses, Rammi jerked when his hand covered her mound. He continued to kiss her as his fingers insinuated themselves between her thighs. She'd been touched before. This part was nice.

She parted her thighs, making room for his hand. His fingers rubbed, sliding easily through her creamy folds. He groaned into her mouth. Encouraged by the needy sound, Rammi opened herself wider.

He pushed two fingers into her slick core. Rammi tore her mouth from his, panting harshly. "Stars, that feels good."

"You'll get no argument from me."

His mouth fastened onto her nipple as his fingers began a rhythmic slide. Each time he dragged his fingers out, he

sucked hard. Rammi tossed her head against the sofa's arm, lost in the sensual storm. Tension coiled inside her, making her internal muscles pulse.

He pulled his fingers out and she grabbed his wrist. "I was almost there."

Smiling into her eyes, he circled her nipple with his tongue. "I know, but you're not coming until I'm inside you."

"Then ... come inside me now."

Chuckling, he shook his head. "You're not ready yet."

She laughed. "I beg to differ."

"The begging will come later too."

He lifted her and swung his legs onto the sofa, arranging her astride his hips before he lay back. "Come here."

His hands grasped her hips, dragging her forward. What was he ... oh! He positioned her directly above his face and gently parted her folds. Heat spiraled through her pussy with the first brush of his tongue. Rammi arched, her head thrown back. Stars, it felt wonderful!

He circled her clit, licking and suckling until she trembled. His tongue traced her slit over and over, lapping up her cream like a hungry cat. An orgasm gathered within her. She gritted her teeth, her thighs flexing. If he realized what was happening, he'd stop again. He'd said he wasn't going to let her come. But she needed this. Gods, how she needed it.

His fingers dug into her hips, anchoring her over his face as he drove his tongue into her cunt. Rammi cried out, powerless to stop the burst of sensation. Hard spasms of pleasure gripped her inner muscles. Her nipples pulsed in time to the throbbing of her core.

"I'm sorry," she murmured, collapsing against the arm of the sofa.

He scooted out from under her, licking her essence off his lips. "For what?"

"You didn't want me to come until you were inside me."

"I *was* inside you. My tongue was inside you."

"So were your fingers," she protested.

"All right, so I got carried away. You just taste so damn good." He stood and took her by the hand, leading her toward the dining room table.

"There are three bedrooms." She pointed in the opposite direction.

"And we'll try out each one, but this first time has got to be special. I want nothing to remind you of before." He lifted her to the table and parted her thighs. "I want to be able to see you and touch you without any hesitation in your eyes."

Gaverel had been on top of her, pressing her down, making her feel weak and helpless—used. Tavon's concern warmed her, eased her uncertainty. She raised her legs, hooking her ankles behind him, opening herself wide.

"Take me," he whispered. "Touch me. Show me where you want me to go."

Her hand trembled as she closed her fingers around his cock. Hot, hard, throbbing, he bucked within the loose circle of her hand. She sighed, her pussy melting, wet, wanting. Guiding him to her entrance, she raised her gaze to his.

He penetrated her slowly, filling her, stretching her. His balls pressed against her bottom and he released a hissing breath. "You okay?"



"I'll be better when you start moving."

Needing no further encouragement, he hooked her knees over his elbows and lifted her hips to a better angle. She clutched his shoulders. He pulled out completely before plunging back in. Unlocking her ankles, she gave him room to move. He claimed her with slow, deep thrusts, filling her completely with each new drive.

She arched, tightened her inner muscles, and watched his eyes. Bright, glowing with love and tenderness, his gaze surrounded her.

Her heart swelled with unfamiliar emotions. Tears welled in her eyes. What was wrong with her? This felt like paradise. Why was she crying?

He thrust harder. The pleasure built.

Her lungs burned, her chest tight and aching. He filled her again and again. She needed more. She needed all of him! Tangling her fingers in his hair, she dragged his mouth down to hers, kissing him with passion and demand. He filled her mouth as he filled her core, his hands firm upon her hips. She sucked his tongue deeper, squeezed his cock tighter, and still it wasn't enough.

She was ravenous, desperate, incomplete. Pressing her back across the table, he lifted her legs to his shoulders and pounded into her cunt. Her breasts rocked with each forceful thrust. She covered them with her hands.

"Now, my love. Come for me now!"

He thrust to the hilt and her body obeyed, exploding with spasms of pleasure. Tight as a bowstring, she arched off the

table as her inner muscles caressed his cock. His hot seed burst into her, detonating another series of contractions.

Panting, stunned, utterly replete, she gazed up at him with tear bright eyes.

"Why are you crying?" He kissed her gently then waited for her answer.

"I didn't realize how empty I was until you filled me with your Life."

\* \* \* \*

True to his word, Tavon made love to Rammi in every room in the cottage. Each time they tried a new position, experimented with different stimulation, their bond grew steadily stronger. They could soon hear each other's thoughts.

*Will you hear everything I think or can I block you out?*  
She tested their telepathic link as they showered for the third time. They could cleanse their bodies with a mystic pulse, but the warm water helped them relax.

*Why would you want to block me out?*  
She snuggled against him, cupping his butt with both hands. *I don't know that I want you to hear everything that goes on inside my head.*

*Can you speak to your brothers mind-to-mind?*  
Yes.

And do they hear every thought in your head or only the ones you send them?

Only the ones I send them.

*Our link is a bit stronger, but I still have to intentionally touch your mind or you have to send your thoughts.*

They kissed as he pressed her against the slick shower stall. *That's cold!* She shivered violently. He lifted her. She wrapped her legs around his waist and he surged inside with one deep thrust. *And that's hot.* She gasped, resting her head against the stall. He just held her there, pinned against the stall, impaled on his throbbing cock. She squeezed him tightly and he groaned.

*I've been thinking about something your friend said.*

She laughed. "Do you often think of my friends while you're inside me?" she asked out loud.

He grinned, pushing deeper. "Lord Nyx said we must face Alrick together or we wouldn't survive."

"True and now we're bonded." She smiled into his eyes. "Does this give you an idea?"

"Bonded mates can access each other's power."

"So how will that help us get Alrick to confess?"

Squeezing her bottom, he flexed inside her, then offered a mischievous grin. "I think the skeletons in Alrick's closet should go pay him a visit."

"Not until they finish playing in the shower!"

He laughed and thrust hard, covering her mouth with his. She clung to him with her arms and legs. Her core pulsed rhythmically. He slid his tongue in and out of her mouth, mirroring his deeper penetration. She reached for him with her mind, drawn by the Light of his mystic power. Sizzling sensations raced across her nerve endings. Her whole body tingled.

*I love you, Rammi.* Tenderness saturated the thought. She tightened her body possessively.

*I love you, too.*

He paused, throbbing deep inside her. His eyes opened and their gazes locked. "I don't want you to say those words until you're certain you mean them."

She nodded, fighting back her beaming smile. "All right. I'll say them when I'm certain."

His kiss gentled, but his thrusting went wild. He kept her pressed to the stall and pounded into her. She surrendered to the power of his passion, gloried in the strength of his desire. Tension built to a fever pitch and Rammi dragged her mouth away.

"I love you," she cried. He shook, flexed, and filled her with his hot seed. Thrilled by his loss of control, she grinned and said the words again. "I love you."

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## Chapter Six

"Have you ever done this before?" Rammi led Tavon through the Shadow realm.

"I don't know if what we're about to attempt has ever been done before."

She paused and looked into his eyes. "You made it sound like..."

"Theoretically it should be simple. You now have access to my abilities and I have access to yours. All we're doing is combining the two."

Heart hammering within her breast, Rammi tried to find comfort in his nonchalance. "Let's have a trial run, shall we? I'm going to let go of your hand. See if you can stabilize yourself by accessing my abilities. If you start to fade out, I'll grab you."

He nodded and she slowly released his hand. As soon as their fingers separated he wavered, rippling like an image on a swelling wave. She felt him sink into her mind and tingled with memories of his body moving inside her. The undulation ceased, his form solidified, and he smiled.

"A Life Keeper unescorted in the Shadow realm. This has got to be a first."

"Don't get too cocky. You're all of three feet away. When you start navigating the Shadow realm alone, I'll be impressed."

"Oh, you seemed pretty impressed a little while ago." She slapped at him as heat crawled up her neck. "You were definitely impressed in the shower."

"And you were definitely cocky." She laughed. He pulled her into his arms and kissed her deeply, thoroughly. "We don't have time for this." His hand cupped her breast and she moaned. "The entire dimension is hunting you. I want this settled tonight."

Sexual awareness sizzled between them as he eased her away. All he had to do was brush her skin with his hand and a new cycle of arousal built. *Pim Noctar* had officially elapsed, but her body craved his.

"Soon," he whispered, giving her hand a gentle squeeze.

Focusing on their destination, Rammi entwined their fingers and flowed through the Shadow realm. A surge of awareness told her they'd arrived. She coated her hands with *iede* and parted the mist, allowing them to see into Alrick's chamber without revealing their presence.

The chamber's outer wall glistened like iridescent crystal. Rammi gasped. "This isn't his palace. He's in the Temple of the Veil."

Tavon leaned closer peering through the small opening in the mist. Alrick, or at least she presumed it was Alrick, knelt beside the bed. He was naked and a dark-haired woman's legs draped over his broad shoulders. His face was buried between her thighs and his hands cupped her breasts.

"Are you sure that's him?"

She heard the laughter in Tavon's tone and smacked his arm. "This isn't funny."

"I thought sex was forbidden to Veil Keepers."

"Only for the first two years of their training."

"Should we come back?"

"No." She glanced into the chamber. "Cast your illusion, let's go."

"With the woman still here?"

"It may work to our advantage. Hurry."

Tavon struggled to manifest Light *iede* in the Shadow realm. Rammi opened her being to him, offering mystic energy in its purest form. His palms filled with the glistening manifestation of power.

"Thanks." He brushed a quick kiss to her brow. "Ready?"

She nodded and he showered them with *iede*. Waiting for a physical sensation, she watched Tavon morph into the likeness of Larot. "Do I look like Kayrin? I don't feel any different."

"You look just like the image in the crystal."

"How long can you maintain the illusion?"

"As long as it takes. Form the data crystal now. I don't want anything to distract from our performance."

They didn't want Alrick to realize their performance was being recorded either. Rammi created a data crystal and activated it with her breath. She placed it carefully between their clasped hands. "Don't press too hard, it will muffle the sound." Tavon nodded, glancing down at the small gray crystal. "Let the games begin."

Stepping closer to the opening she'd created in the mist, Rammi called out to the Time Master. "Alrick."

"What was that?" The woman pushed him away, scooting to the middle of the bed.

Alrick grabbed her ankle and pulled her back toward the edge. "I wasn't finished."

"Alrick." Rammi used a sharper tone.

The brunette jerked her foot out of his grasp. "You had to have heard that, Master Alrick. Someone is calling you."

"You've gone daft. I didn't hear a thing."

Rammi slipped from the Shadow realm and into the crystal chamber, Tavon a step behind. The Veil Keeper shrieked, diving beneath the covers until only her eyes peeked out.

"You vile coward." Rammi lowered her voice, making it raspy and tremulous.

He scuttled back across the bed, nearly trampling the woman. "What sort of trick is this? How are you..."

"You know who I am, who we were! How can you live with our blood on your hands?"

"Light Keeper tricks! I'm not frightened by—"

"They came through the wall," the woman cried and Rammi wanted to hug her. "How did they get beyond the crystal shield?"

Alrick's eyes widened and color drained from his face. "I don't believe in ghosts."

"Believe what you like," Tavon snarled. "We've come for justice."

"I did not kill you. Tavon Delmont is the one—"

"*Insa enk ta.*" Shadow fibers coiled around his throat. It was a Death Keeper chant, but Alrick wouldn't know that. Few who heard the syllables lived to repeat them.



"No, my love, not like that." Tavon was a fabulous actor. How often did he assume fictitious roles? "We cannot pass beyond until we understand his motivation. Let him speak."

Rammi commanded the fibers to expand, but didn't dissolve the coil. "Speak while you still can, Time slug."

"You spread your thighs for that commoner when you were meant for me!" He gasped out the words, his fingers clawing at the Shadow coil. "I would have cherished you. I would have—"

"You coveted my neutral *iede*, the power that would have passed to your children. You didn't even know me!"

His nostrils flared and color flooded his face. "You subjected me to public ridicule. No one slanders my name and—"

"And lives to tell the tale?" Tavon finished for him. "You spoke of Light Keeper tricks. Is that how your assassin struck? Why use Tavon Delmont's shape? What had he done?"

"It amused me. It amused us." Rammi tightened the coil for a moment. Alrick gagged and choked. "No one slanders my name. *No one!*" His voice strained and broke. Why was he so determined to make this point?

Why not? He thought he was arguing with the vanquished spirits of his victims.

"Who is your henchman?" Tavon demanded. "Speak his name."

Rammi shot him a cautioning glance. There was too much authority in his tone.

"Tavon Delmont." Alrick grinned. "Have your revenge or step back through the Veil and tell your high priestess this wasn't amusing."

*He thinks we're Veil Keepers.* She sent the thought directly to Tavon's mind. *Let's leave it that way. He will say nothing more.*

Mimicking the hand gestures Veil Keepers used to access the Veil, Rammi opened a portal into the Shadow realm. She paused for one heated glare before following Tavon through the opening.

"Is this damning enough to present to the Steering Committee?" Tavon asked as Rammi deactivated the data crystal. They'd returned to the mountain cottage to review the recording. "He basically admits the murders were in response to Kayrin's rejection."

"'No one slanders my name.' He said that over and over. Who else has crossed Alrick?"

Tavon shook his head. Dawn was still several hours away. "How were you able to penetrate the crystal shield?"

"I wouldn't have been able to if Alrick hadn't been in the Temple. I used basic Death Keeper skills to guide me to my target. My target just happened to be inside the crystal shield."

"Well, his misconception will buy us some time." He chuckled. "High Priestess Sacha is going to have hell to pay."

"Why was he there? What business has the Time Master in the Temple of the Veil?"

"You saw them. He was *aveiling* himself of the temple amenities." She shook her head and turned her face away,

hiding her smile. One day he would see her smile freely, her eyes shining with laughter—and love.

"There's more to it than that. Lord Nyx said your father has known what really happened for years. I say we confront him with the recording and put an end to all of this."

"If Brodi is alive, then it all makes perfect sense," Tavon grumbled. "Brodi would like nothing better than to cast doubt upon me."

"You said his mother was from the Order of Light. Was he able to create illusions?"

"Yes. But why would my father lie about his death?"

"We'll find out in the morning."

"So, how shall we spend the next few hours?" He sauntered toward her. "It would be rude to wake him in the middle of the night."

"I agree." She grinned, sidestepping him. "But we started on the couch, we've tried out all the beds, the table, and the shower stall. There is nothing left for us to do."

"Oh, I disagree." He caught her wrist and led her toward a large heavily padded chair. "This fabulous piece of furniture has been completely neglected."

"How could we have been so cruel?" He sent out a cleansing pulse strong enough to dissolve both their clothes and Rammi giggled. "That's not fair."

"The injustices have just begun!"

He scooped her up and placed her in the chair, hooking her legs over the arms and pulling her bottom to the very edge of the seat.

"Why, this is positively indecent," she cried, the laughter in her tone completely ruining the effect.

"I like indecent, but I like obscene even more. Tell me when I'm being obscene."

He knelt in front of her and cupped her breasts. "That's nice."

"Oh, nice will never do." He slipped his hands beneath her bottom and raised her pussy to his mouth, tracing her slit with his tongue. She murmured, arching into the torrid kiss. "How's this?"

His heated breath wafted over her creamy folds. "Fabulous."

Chuckling, he pushed two fingers into her core and focused his tongue against her clit. Hot, twisting sensations assailed her. Rammi cupped her breasts and cried out, shaking.

With his fingers deep inside her, he stroked her clit with his thumb, drawing out her orgasm until she sagged against the chair. His gaze caressed her flushed face. "Not obscene yet?"

"Sorry. That was nothing you haven't done before."

Her soft chuckle ignited a dangerous fire in his eyes. "You want new and inventive?"

"I thought we were going for obscene."

"Obscene it is." In a flash he scooped her up and sat in the chair himself. "Up you go." He lifted her hips, guiding her knees to the chair's tall back. She braced her hands against the seat while he turned her upside down. She shrieked, then moaned as his hot breath caressed her inner thighs. Bending

her elbows, she settled her forearms against the seat on either side of his hips.

"This is definitely obscene."

"So glad you approve."

Her thighs framed his face, positioning her pussy right over his mouth. Her head was in his lap, leaving no doubt what he had in mind. She teased him with her tongue, swirling around the plush head of his cock without taking him in her mouth.

He moved her knees as far apart as the chair would allow, lowering her onto his waiting tongue. He pushed deep and Rammi groaned. She sucked him into her mouth with the same tender care he showed her. He led, she followed, stroke for stroke, lick for lick. A carnal dance of pleasure and desire.

Another orgasm tightened within her. Her legs trembled and her core clenched his tongue. His approving growl vibrated her sensitive folds, prolonging the rippling pleasure. He licked and sucked until the last tingle faded, then moved with undeniable urgency.

Grasping her waist, he guided her to the carpeted floor. She ended up on her hands and knees. He followed her down, kneeling behind her, thrusting home with one forceful lunge. Echoes of her orgasm tingled through her as his thick cock stretched her tight.

Rammi gasped, her head reeled, her body throbbed, her heart overflowed with love. How had she lived so long without him? She hadn't lived, she had merely survived.

Arched and open, she gave herself to him, claspng him tightly each time he drove deep. His hands grasped her hips,

his harsh breathing filled her ears, and his scent surrounded her.

He strained against her, into her, one with her. Passion burst and together they soared.

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## Chapter Seven

The woman paused outside Brodi's chamber, shocked by her own hesitation. Her affection for the assassin caught her by surprise. It had been so long since she felt anything. He'd amused her. He'd been useful, but he posed too great a danger to her now. She had no choice but to end it and clean breaks were always best.

She'd find someone else to amuse her. Concealing herself in illusion, she triggered the chime announcing her presence. The privacy panel raised and Brodi stood before her. Danger emanated from this man. His brutality excited her. What a waste.

"Celeste." He cocked one eyebrow and smiled. "What brings you by?"

She lowered her lashes, not wanting to appear too self-assured. The Veil Keeper slut would be intimidated by him. "I have never known pleasure like I felt with you. I ... If you were to approach Master Alrick and suggest..." She raised her gaze and slowly licked her lips. "I want to do it again."

Brodi chuckled, stroking her cheek with his knuckles. "Go to the chapel. We'll meet you there."

Men were such fools. Dissolving her robe, the woman sighed as cool air wafted across her naked flesh. Candlelight flickered off the smooth walls of the chapel, accenting the purple marbling. Such a lovely setting, it was almost romantic.

She must remember to act like the simpering slut or Alrick would see through the illusion. The men arrived a few minutes later. She offered them a sultry smile.

"Didn't get enough yesterday, sweet Celeste? Well, good. Neither did I."

She ran her hands over her body, grazing her nipples and skimming her mound. "I want to ride you, while Brodi fills my ass. Can we do it that way this time?"

Alrick frowned. "I like being on top. You should know that."

"I do, Master Alrick, but just this once." She strolled toward him, hips rolling, breasts swaying. "Please."

"Maybe you can convince me—on your knees."

Without hesitation, she knelt and loosened the laces of Alrick's pants. Brodi knelt behind her, trailing kisses across her shoulder and cupping her breasts. She sucked Alrick's cock into her mouth, thrilled by his ragged gasp. Brodi pinched her nipples hard. Ah, yes, he knew just how to drive a woman crazy with his mixture of pleasure and pain. Taking Alrick deep into her throat, she worked him mercilessly. His hands tangled in her hair and he thrust into her mouth.

Brodi pulled her away with a soft chuckle. "Aren't you convinced yet?"

"She's getting better at that. She's never taken me that deep before."

The woman stood and moved toward the altar, hoping Alrick would follow suit. He pushed her hips against the cold stone and played with her breasts, squeezing each mound and pinching her nipples. The woman did her best to moan at



the appropriate times, but she was restless, eager for the real fun to begin.

"Brodi, lick her pussy, but don't let her come."

Still on his knees, Brodi moved closer and lifted her leg to his broad shoulder. He feathered kisses along her inner thigh, then covered her mound with his mouth. Sweet, passionate Brodi. His tongue moved with skill and daring, but she was too distracted to respond.

"Enough. Lift her up here. I want that tight cunt gripping my cock."

Turning to the altar, the woman smiled. Alrick lay on his back, his erect cock exposed, waiting to be mounted. She was tempted. The image formed within her mind. She watched herself moving, impaled on his powerful cock, while Brodi buried himself in her ass.

No. Alrick wasn't worthy of the ride.

"Do you always get what you want, Master Time?" she asked sweetly.

Before he could answer, she placed her hand over his nose and mouth. Manifesting *Setti-iede*, she sealed his airway. Spinning on the ball of her foot, she grabbed Brodi's face as well.

*I'm sorry, my love. I shall miss you.*

She didn't linger to watch him die. Retrieving her bundle from its hiding place beneath the altar, she took the shredded Veil Keeper robe and set it in plain sight. Alrick had stopped struggling by the time she turned to him with the long, sharp dagger. Disintegrating the *Setti-iede*, she brushed the sparkling flecks off his lifeless face and thrust the dagger hilt

deep into his chest. Blood gushed as she withdrew the blade. She watched it saturate his tunic with dispassionate interest.

Unwilling to look at Brodi's face, she moved behind him and slit his throat. Her heart lurched and her stomach knotted. She thought herself beyond these tender feelings. Why did she have to care for him? After she dissolved the *Setti-iede*, she noticed the sparkling residue on her hands. Damn! This wouldn't do. She sent a cleansing pulse through the chapel, destroying every trace of *Setti-iede*.

She stood and assessed the scene. Not her best work, but it would suffice.

Manifesting a robe, she left the chapel, bloody footprints trailing in her wake. Now to plant the knife and scramble a mind, concluding this sacrifice.

\* \* \* \*

"This is going to be a hard sell," Master Tilden said. "He alludes to a lot, but doesn't actually confess anything."

Rammi nodded. "That's why we brought it to you instead of the Steering Committee." She sat beside Tavon in his father's spacious office. "He stresses that no one slanders him without repercussions and I don't think he meant Kayrin and Larot. Who else was hurt by their murder? Did he have other reasons to hate Matriarch Flame?"

"You're slightly off target with that line of reasoning. The question should be who was hurt by Tavon's implication?"

She glanced at her bonded mate. They had agreed not to bring up Brodi initially. Tavon wanted to see how long it took for his father to confess. "You've lost me, sir."

Master Tilden relaxed in his massive chair, his dark gaze moving from Rammi to his son and back again. "After Kayrin ran off with her lover, Alrick went on a ruthless campaign to replace her with the most powerful female he could find. His first choice was the Light Master's sister."

"Alrick courted Mother?" Tavon sounded aghast.

"Courtied indicates participation. Alrick pursued your mother. She finally had to make a public scene before he was humiliated enough to choose another victim."

"'It amused me, no, it amused us'." Rammi paused a moment to emphasize the quote. "Who else would be amused by Tavon's implication?"

Never before had she seen Master Tilden fidget, but he fidgeted now. "Has Tavon told you about Brodi?"

Tavon's features tensed, his gaze clouded. "Brodi is dead."

"The fire left his body unrecognizable. He claimed he could access the Veil right before a fire mysteriously took his life."

Tavon scooted to the edge of his chair, his hands clenched into fists upon his knees. "Is Brodi alive, yes or no? I can no longer sense his existence. Can you?"

"There are times when I sense—something. It's as if his nature has been changed. It is Brodi and yet it is not."

A vivid purple comm crystal materialized in front of Master Tilden. "It's from High Priestess Sacha and it looks urgent. Don't speak. She doesn't need to know you're here." He scooped up the crystal and breath-activated the link.

"What can I do for you, high priestess?"

"I never thought to request your assistance, but I appear to need your expertise." Her tone sounded brittle and thin, filled with anxiety.

"What is the nature of your situation?"

"My temple has been defiled." Her voice was shrill, edged with hysteria. "One of my Veil Keepers has committed murder."

Rammi's startled gaze flew to Tavon. Master Tilden kept his attention carefully focused on the comm crystal.

"Are you in danger?" the Death Master asked. "Has this Veil Keeper been apprehended?"

"I will send an escort to you. Tilden, please come now."

The crystal disintegrated into dust.

"Did she just say one of her Veil Keepers *committed murder*?" Rammi couldn't believe her own ears. Veil Keepers were notoriously pacifistic.

"You will come as my assistant. Tavon, disappear."

"I'm not sure I can maintain the illusion in the Veil. I've never tried before."

"We'll keep you behind us until we emerge. I suspect this will interest all of us. I should have told her I'd take a shuttle. She knows I avoid the Veil."

The escort arrived before Master Tilden could reconsider. Tavon blinked out of sight in a flash of Light *iede* as a Veil Keeper parted the Veil. Careful to keep Tavon behind them, they followed their guide. The Veil Keeper faced them, placing one hand on Tilden's shoulder and one hand on Rammi's. Tavon held tightly to their wrists.

The Veil swallowed color, light, and sound until utter darkness remained. Rammi closed her eyes. The absolute nothingness was disconcerting, but not knowing whether or not they could trust their guide compounded her anxiety. She hung suspended in the void for a heartbeat, then momentum assailed her, rocking her head back on her shoulders and whipping at her clothes.

They emerged in the massive vestibule of the Temple of the Veil. The pressure of Tavon's fingers eased. Rammi tried not to react. The Veil Keeper inclined his head and left without a word. Light passed through the faceted crystal shield, creating beautiful prisms of color. Rammi glanced behind her, but saw nothing.

*I'm here, my love.*

High Priestess Sacha rounded a corner in a flurry of diaphanous purple robes. The material floated around her body hinting at her shape without revealing the details. Her red-streaked dark hair circled her head in a braided coronet and her reddish brown eyes brimmed with tears.

"These happenings are ... beyond my comprehension." She rubbed her bare arms, her hands trembled visibly.

"Show me."

She nodded at Master Tilden, then turned her attention to Rammi. "Were you successful in your mission, Death Keeper? I'm surprised to see you."

"I'm in the process of preparing a full report for the Steering Committee." Rammi said nothing more.

The high priestess led them down one gleaming corridor after another. The walls and smooth floor were marbled in

purple and blue. Excluding their clandestine visitation, Rammi had never been in the temple before. It was really quite beautiful.

"They were found when three trainees went to meditate." She motioned to the ornately carved archway leading to a chapel.

Rammi sensed death long before she saw the bodies. She could smell its acrid breath and feel its icy fingers against her skin. A man lay on the altar fully clothed but for his exposed penis. His face turned away and blood darkened his tunic. His sable brown hair and muscular build struck a familiar chord within her mind.

Alrick.

She moved closer, but Master Tilden turned to her right.

Circling the altar Rammi confirmed that the Time Master was the first victim before joining her mentor beside the second. This second man was younger, his coloring darker.

"Do you know him?" High Priestess Sacha asked.

Rammi looked at Master Tilden, shocked to find grief contorting his harsh features. She touched his arm. He twisted away.

"His name is Brodi. He was my son."

"My condolences. I had no idea." She sounded sincere, but Rammi couldn't shake the feeling that something wasn't right about the situation. *Two men are dead, Severn. Of course it feels wrong.*

*It's more than that.* She nearly gasped when Tavon responded to her mental grumbling. *Trust your instincts, Rammi. This was staged.*

"Who do you believe did this?" Rammi asked the high priestess.

"We found Celeste in her chamber, curled up in a ball, the knife still clutched in her hand. She hasn't spoken since. All she'll do is sob. I believe that's her garment. She was naked when we found her."

Rammi glanced at the torn robe, but made no move to examine it.

"Master Tilden, I was told you can look into the eyes of the dead and see their murderer." Her lips trembled and tears escaped the corners of her eyes. "I would never have asked this of you had I known he was your son."

The Death Master said nothing. He knelt next to Brodi's body and looked into his lifeless eyes. Moving to the altar, he did the same with Alrick. "I see a comely woman, with long blonde hair. Her eyes are a pale shade of blue and there is a small mole to the left of her mouth."

"You have perfectly described Celeste. Shall I take you to her now?"

"No. Contact Master Jarek. I must excuse myself from this case and leave it to the Shadow Master."

"I understand."

She led them back to the vestibule and summoned an escort to return them to Master Tilden's office.

"Why did you let me believe Brodi was dead all these years?" Tavon asked as he dissolved the Light illusion.

"It gave you peace to believe him dead. I saw no reason to enlighten you."

"What really happened in that chapel?" Rammi crossed her arms over her chest, feeling contaminated, dirty. "No mere Veil Keeper could have killed those two men."

"I agree, but someone went to a great deal of trouble to make us believe it was so." Master Tilden took several deep breaths. "There is a more significant connection between Alrick and Brodi than a tryst with some random Veil Keeper. The Time twins have reluctantly cooperated with my investigation. They admitted Alrick had a private Veil Keeper who was able to cloak them in Light illusion. I believe that person was Brodi."

"Is it possible they killed each other?" Tavon asked.

They stood in the center of the room, too stunned even to sit. Master Tilden raked his fingers through his hair. "It's possible. The mind imprints the last image it sees. That image isn't always the murderer."

"What should we do now?"

"We let the Steering Committee draw all the expected conclusions." Master Tilden moved behind his desk and sat. "Alrick ordered the Flame Princess murdered because she had spurned him. Brodi was Alrick's henchman. Brodi masqueraded as Tavon to punish us for treating him so ignobly. And both died at the hands of this crazed Veil Keeper."

"Then an innocent woman will be punished for the crime," Rammi pointed out.

"I will intervene before that happens. Whoever set this up needs to believe they succeeded. We must do nothing to indicate otherwise."



"How will we continue our investigation if the Steering Committee closes the case?"

"We won't." He tapped his thumbs against his desktop. "Lord Nyx approached me with his allegations and I agreed to cooperate. Some of what he said corresponded with what I already knew, so I suspected we could assist each other."

"Toward what end?" Tavon asked. "What does Lord Nyx suspect?"

"He believes the *Setti* arts are being practiced within the Temple of the Veil."

"Evil permeated that chapel. It felt worse than death," Rammi said.

"You can't turn Lord Nyx free in our dimension, regardless of what happened today," Tavon objected. "Lord Nyx despises Mystic Keepers. He will declare war on the Order of the Veil."

"If the Veil Keepers have gained access to the *Setti* realm, a war with the Kingdom of Zylott will be the least of our concerns."

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## Epilogue

"Why did Tilden send you, golden boy?" Lord Nyx asked as he stepped into the nexus chamber. "It's a good thing I'm not easily offended."

Tavon's eyes narrowed, but he manufactured a smile. "My father wanted you to have this information as soon as possible and he had other obligations today."

The sorcerer's emerald gaze shifted to Rammi. "You needn't have bothered. Rammi knows the way."

"My bonded mate will no longer interact with you alone."

"You don't trust her?"

"I don't trust you."

"Enough!" Rammi stepped between the two men. Snatching the data crystal from Tavon, she handed it to Lord Nyx. "Alrick is dead, as is Brodi."

"You've been busy, Death Keeper."

"She didn't kill them."

Tavon's voice snapped with indignation, but Rammi recognized the twinkle in Lord Nyx's eyes. She had connected with the sorcerer the first time they met, sensing a kindred spirit. Even Master Tilden didn't always understand the subtle humor in Lord Nyx's banter.

"Foul things are afoot in the Temple of the Veil."

The sorcerer snorted. "Tell me something I don't know."

"Master Tilden is offering to assist you in any way he can. He is demonstrating his willingness with the information contained in the crystal."

"And what does he want in exchange?"

Rammi squared her shoulders and swallowed past the sudden tightening in her throat. "You must release your hostage."

"Which hostage would that be?" He cocked one dark eyebrow, his gaze mocking her. "I have hundreds."

"We are only concerned with one."

"I'd rather have the Veil Keeper." He tossed the crystal back to her. "Minuette is mine."

"Shit," Rammi muttered as he disappeared. "Master Tilden is going to be pissed. He promised the Frost Master he would get her back." Glancing down at the data crystal she repeated the obscenity.

"What's the matter?" Tavon stepped up beside her.

"It's empty." She laughed. "Damn his clever hide. How did he absorb the information so quickly? He had the crystal all of two seconds."

Tavon took the crystal from her and held it up to the light. "Are you sure it's the same crystal?"

"I'm not sure of anything where that man is concerned." She shook her head, unable to hide her smile. "I don't envy Minuette."

"Are you sure?"

Hearing the jealous tinge in Tavon's voice, Rammi faced him. She looped her arms around his neck and kissed his lips. "I like Lord Nyx, I admit it, but you have nothing to worry about. My heart, soul, and body belong to my bonded mate."

He took her in his arms and kissed her hungrily. His hands rubbed her back and he pressed his rapidly hardening cock

into her belly. Rammi guided him backward as they kissed. The back of his knees met the edge of the interrogation chair and she pushed him onto the seat.

"*Insa enk ta.*" Shadow fibers coiled loosely around his forearms. She made sure none of them touched his bare skin. "Now, you will tell me all your secrets, or I will torture you."

He laughed at her melodramatic tone. Kneeling on the floor, she parted his legs and smiled into his eyes. Her agile fingers worked the laces of his pants and freed his cock.

"If this is your idea of torture—"

Her warm mouth interrupted his words. Her hands stroked his legs, his hips, his arms, while her mouth lavished *torture* on him.

"I will tell you nothing," he insisted breathlessly. Her tongue swirled around him and he groaned. "Except how much I love you." She took him deep into her mouth. "And how glad I am the Death Master chose you to capture me."

The End.

For now...

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## **Zylott Wars**

After a Veil Keeper rapes and murders his wife, killing their unborn son as well, Lord Nyx of Zylott feels nothing but anger and emptiness. When Veil Keeper Minuette literally falls into his life, Nyx vows to seduce her and replace what the Order of the Veil took from him—his unborn child.

Minuette is fascinated by her captor. She senses his desolation and loss. He touches her with passion and longing, overwhelming her mistrust and fear. A mystic shield guards her virtue, but what will protect her heart?

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## **Aubrey Ross**

Multi-award winning author Aubrey Ross writes an eclectic assortment of erotic fiction. From power struggles between futuristic clans, to adventurous Mystic Keepers, her stories are filled with passion and imagination. Some of her recent awards include an EPPIE finalist, two Passionate Plume finalists, and a CAPA Nomination from The Romance Studio.

With a pampered cat curled on the corner of her desk, Aubrey dreams of fascinating words and larger than life adventures—and wouldn't have it any other way! Visit her website at [www.aubreyross.com](http://www.aubreyross.com). Join Aubrey's News group at: [groups.yahoo.com/group/Anything-but-Ordinary/](http://groups.yahoo.com/group/Anything-but-Ordinary/).

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