

MYSTIC KEEPERS ZYLOTT WARS



AUBREY ROSS
CHANGELING DRESS

Changeling Press LLC

www.changelingpress.com

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First published in 2008, 2008

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Mystic Keepers: Zylott Wars

Aubrey Ross

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ISBN: 978-1-59596-790-9

Formats Available:

HTML, Adobe PDF,

MobiPocket, Microsoft Reader

Publisher:

Changeling Press LLC

PO Box 1046

Martinsburg, WV 25402-1046

www.ChangelingPress.com

Editor: Maryam Salim

Cover Artist: Angela Knight

Mystic Keepers 2: Zylott Wars (Collection)
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Mystic Keepers: Zylott Wars

Aubrey Ross

The future hangs in the balance as Setti hybrids invade the kingdom of Zylott. Never before have the Setti been this bold or this successful. Past resentments must be set aside and uneasy alliances forged when the sorcerers of Zylott turn to the Mystic Keepers for help.

Consuming desire and conflicting loyalties will test their inner strength. They must learn to see beyond their prejudice before they face their common enemy. If the Setti cannot be stopped in the kingdom of Zylott, their ultimate destination is Earth.

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Chapter One

Drahbin Fortress

Kingdom of Zylott

Lifting a lock of the Veil Keeper's long blonde hair, Lord Nyx wrapped the strands around his fingers, savored the silky texture, fascinated by the sheen. Moonlight bathed the tower chamber, outlining his captive's delicate features and the appealing shape of her scantily clad body.

The crisis had passed. Her fever was broken. It was time to begin. He'd prepared her this morning, bathed her body and washed her hair.

Minuette. His mind whispered her name. Still, he wouldn't allow the word to pass his lips. She was a Veil Keeper first and last. Her name was irrelevant. Any affection he felt for her only complicated his quest. He must remain distanced, focused entirely on his goal.

The Sacred Order of the Veil had forced his hand, shaped the path on which he trod. He'd exhausted all other options and nearly surrendered to despair, then this woman had literally fallen from the sky.

His gaze drifted along the graceful column of her neck. Despite the full, round breasts partially revealed by the bed sheet, her shoulders were narrow, her torso slim.

Should he bind her before he awakened her?

No. There was a better way.

"Why are you sitting in the dark?"

Nyx didn't turn at his brother's familiar voice, but he lit the wall torches with a negligent wave of his hand. "The darkness speaks to me."

"Oh, you're in one of *those* moods."

He ignored Sef's teasing tone. His brother knew the source of his foul moods. Why did he persist in his attempts to penetrate them? Nyx eased his hold on the Veil Keeper's hair, allowing it to slide across his skin as it descended.

"How is she?"

"Recovered. I was preparing to release her from sleep thrall." He pivoted on the low stool and faced his brother. "Did you travel from the palace to verify the health of my hostage?"

A smile tugged at the corners of Sef's mouth. He clasped his hands behind his back and rocked onto the balls of his feet, his eyes sparkling. "I've come to invite you to a wedding."

"Congratulations on the wedding—and the impending birth of your son."

Sef's eyes widened and his jaw dropped. "How long have you known Dori was pregnant? Are you certain she'll bear me a son?"

"I dreamt of your son months ago. Why have you waited so long to tell me?" Compassion extinguished the excitement in Sef's gaze and Nyx's gut clenched. Pushing to his feet, he approached his brother. "My loss will not taint the birth of your first child. I won't allow it. You will revel in this event or deal with my wrath. Choose now."

Releasing an excited laugh, Sef hugged Nyx enthusiastically. "I'm so happy, I could fly."

"Not without years of training." Nyx disentangled himself and stepped back. He hated people touching him, but Sef's exuberance was understandable.

After eight years of dedicated attempts, Sef and Dori had mistakenly resigned themselves to the fact that they would never have children. It was her apparent barrenness that had kept Dori from agreeing to marry King Sef long ago.

"Then you'll attend?" Sef cast a furtive glance toward the Veil Keeper. Nyx saw pity flicker in his brother's gaze, but Sef wisely remained silent on the subject. "It's to be a small private ceremony. I won't subject you to the royal feast."

"I will attend the wedding and the royal feast."

"Truly?" Meeting his gaze directly, Sef grinned from ear to ear. "Dori will be so pleased."

Nyx returned to the stool and his troubled thoughts. Sef was silent so long it startled Nyx when he spoke again.

"I know the Keepers have demanded her release." His tone was hushed, wary. "How long do you intend to hold her?"

"As long as it takes." With another wave of his hand he extinguished the torches, casually dismissing Zylott's reigning king.

Even after his brother left, Nyx sat and stared at his captive. Emotions rolled through him, each more powerful than the last. How did he accomplish his goal without becoming what he despised?

Rape and brutality had decimated his life. Forcing himself on this woman was not an option. However, seduction, with a healthy dose of deception, held endless possibilities.

* * * *

Floating in velvet isolation, Minuette savored the silence. Something warm brushed her arm, summoning her from the void, awakening her senses. Another stroke, more tingles, she fought against the stimulation, craving the peaceful solitude.

Danger loomed, urgent and intense. She'd failed, lost control ... The details slipped away. Why was she so sleepy?

"Oh, my love, I thought I'd never find you." A deep male voice whispered and a warm hand cupped her breast.

Her nipple gathered against his palm, but alarm skittered down her spine. Where was she? Who was this man? Why did she feel so strange?

"Touch me, my love. We have waited so long. Why do you hesitate?"

Strong fingers closed around her wrist drawing her hand to his broad chest. Lost in the sensual haze, she didn't think to resist. So often she'd tossed in her lonely bed dreaming of a lover's kiss, aching for the forbidden stroke of his hands, the intimate penetration of his body.

She explored his chest, his shoulders, his thick upper arms. He shifted, bringing his long, lean body close against hers. Skin to skin, of course they were naked. How else would he make love to her?

His mouth found hers in the darkness. She parted her lips, waiting for the bold thrust of his tongue. He licked and nibbled, coaxed and teased. Frustrated, she reached for his head and her fingers sank into his hair. Long and loose, so different from a Mystic Keeper male's short spiky hair, the strands slid between her fingers, caressed her hands.

"Kiss me," she whispered against his mouth.

"As milady commands." He angled his head and claimed her mouth with a slow sweep of his tongue. His taste was exotic and spicy as she sucked gently on his tongue, thrilled by his startled moan.

Her skin tingled and heat gathered low in her belly. Why had he waited so long? She'd battled these yearnings for nearly two years, desperate and alone.

Deep in her sleep-muddled brain a warning chimed. This wasn't right, it couldn't be real. Her mystic shield had yet to be dispersed. Sex was forbidden to her.

But her lover's hands felt real. Warm and solid, his body pressed over and against hers. He rolled her to her side, raised her leg to his hip, and rubbed his cock against her mound. Would he take her now, fill the empty place between her thighs?

Abstinence was a necessary sacrifice and only temporary. She would be free to find her bonded mate once her training was complete.

His tongue moved in her mouth, his warm breath filled her lungs. If this was a dream, she could...

He stroked her breasts, her hips, her thighs. She trembled and arched, grinding herself against the distinct ridge of his

cock. She wanted more. She wanted to feel his flesh moving deep inside her.

"Are you real or a dream?" She panted softly, restless and confused by the sensations assailing her. "You must tell me honestly."

"Which would please you more?"

"I want you inside me and that can only happen if you are a dream."

"Then I am a dream. Open your mind and I will bring you pleasure."

His mouth returned to hers, his hands framed her face. He nudged her mental shields, his presence strong, yet patient. Arduous training had conditioned her to resist mental probing. Her mind contained the secrets of the Veil; she was honor bound to resist.

"Let me in, my love," he whispered. "I want only to please you."

He slipped his arm under her neck and took the kiss deeper. Sensations stirred within her mind and spread throughout her body. His hand remained on her cheek, but she felt fingers moving over her body.

She groaned. How was he doing this? Fear nipped on the heels of her pleasure, threatening to shatter the illusion.

"I won't hurt you. This is what you want, what we both need. My only purpose is to bring you pleasure. Allow me just a little deeper."

His softly accented words lulled her, soothed her. Hot prickles erupted in her brain and she shuddered. Images

flared to life, vivid and detailed. She saw herself naked in her lover's arms as he caressed her body.

"Oh!" she gasped. "It feels so real."

Amazed by the erotic combination of reality and fantasy, Minuette surrendered to the experience. He was right, she needed this, had wanted this for years!

He shifted her to her back and stretched out along her side, extending one leg across her thighs. Long and lean, sleekly muscled, his body had a faint golden cast. She couldn't see his face as he bent over her, but his hair was beautiful. Dark, with just a hint of red, the color fascinated her.

His physical body didn't move, but he animated the dream. Corresponding sensations detonated all over her body. His dream image cupped her breast, and her physical nipple tightened.

Panting harshly now, she buried her fingers in his hair and kissed him hungrily. He intensified the mystic transmission. Reality blurred. Physical sensation synchronized so perfectly with the vision that she could no longer tell one from the other.

His hands moved over her boldly. He rolled her nipples and stroked her quivering abdomen. She parted her thighs, secure in the knowledge that this was only a dream.

He moved his mouth to her breasts, dusting them with kisses while his fingers played between her thighs. He cupped her mound, squeezed, and rubbed her with the heel of his hand. A hot, melting sensation swept through her core.

Minuette groaned. Only once had she been this desperate for release, and that had ended badly.

Closing his lips around her nipple, he licked and suckled, scraping his teeth against the very tip. He moved between her thighs, guiding her legs up and back until she was spread wide.

She dragged his face away from her breast. Tension gripped her, making her pussy flutter and her legs tremble. His features were still lost in shadow, compounding her anxiety. When she'd tried to relieve this aching pressure, her mystic shield had scorched her fingers.

"If you are not a dream, I will—"

"I *am* a dream. You won't hurt me."

How had he known what she was about to say?

He's in your mind, you fool. You let him beyond your mental barrier.

His mouth returned to her nipple. He suckled firmly and pushed two fingers into her core. She cried out. Her inner muscles clenched as he stretched her, stroked her, and slid his fingers in and out.

"See, nothing to fear." He pushed deeper, faster, his thumb brushing her clit at the apex of each thrust.

Tighter and tighter the coil wound. She tossed her head from side to side, lifted her hips, and took his fingers deeper. A keening cry escaped her throat as the coil released. Pleasure surged, making her body shake. He stroked her tenderly until every last spasm ran its course.

"I don't want to wake up." She sighed. "Do that again."

"As milady commands." Playfulness danced through his tone and he slowly moved his hand. "Shall I fill you now, or would you like me to lick your pussy. I love the taste of passion's cream. Shall I taste you?"

His words made her shiver. Did men do *that* in reality?

With a deep, throaty chuckle, he lowered himself between her thighs. "I think I shall savor this dream, make it last all night." He parted her folds and breathed over her damp flesh. "What a pretty pussy. Do you taste as good as you look?"

He licked her from back to front, paused to circle her clit, then reversed direction. Minuette moaned, a long, drugged sound that perfectly matched the sensations unfurling in her body.

"You like that."

It wasn't a question and she didn't bother to reply. He licked her again and again, slipping his hands beneath her bottom to align her better with his mouth. Each stroke took her higher, made the fire burn hotter, until she shook with the intensity.

He surged up along her body and drove to the hilt in one powerful thrust. She screamed. Her back bowed clear off the bed as orgasm pounded through her. The hard, rhythmic spasms accentuated the pressure of his thick cock buried inside her. Stretched, filled, she could barely breathe, could only revel in the unbelievable pleasure.

Before the last ripple faded he moved. Thrust and withdrawal, thrust and withdrawal, each deliberate penetration staked his claim upon her body. He grasped the backs of her knees, rocking her hips up, going deeper.

Minuette bit her bottom lip to keep from screaming again, overwhelmed by the sheer carnality. Deep in her body another climax built. She resisted the tingling pulse. She didn't want this to end, she wanted to go on dreaming, she wanted...

Blinding pleasure burst within her, driving the breath from her lungs. Her pussy clenched him rhythmically. Her lover thrust home one last time, shuddered violently and joined her in release.

Trembling and muddled, Minuette blinked repeatedly. She couldn't bring the room into focus. What an amazing dream!

Echoes of the staggering orgasm still rippled through her body. If only someone could touch her like that in reality. She ached for the tenderness, the completion her dream lover had triggered in her. It was everything she'd ever wanted and more.

She raised her hand, brushing the hair out of her eyes, and groaned. She was so weak she could hardly move. What was wrong with her?

Where am I?

Her last clear memory was navigating the Veil with the Flame Princess. Lorrان! What had happened to Lorrان?

Door hinges creaked and wood groaned, but she discerned no movement, saw no flicker of light.

"I brought you some water." A deep male voice penetrated the darkness.

His hand touched her shoulder. She twisted away, scooting back until she leaned against the wall. "I welcome the water, but keep your hands to yourself."

"Take small sips. You've been ill a long time."

Minuette noticed an unusual inflection in his voice. Familiar; this was the man from her dream. But how was that possible? Characters from dreams didn't appear in reality.

Oh stars, had it been a dream? The things he'd done ... No! It had to have been a dream. Those things were forbidden to her.

After taking several sips of water, she turned her face toward the man. He was barely discernible in the gloom. Her vision hadn't failed, it was night. The paltry sliver of moonlight admitted by the window did little to illuminate the room.

"Please activate a light source." She tried not to sound too demanding until she understood what was happening to her. "This is unnerving."

"There is no light source to activate. I'm sorry. You'll have to wait until morning."

She knew bullshit when she heard it. Still, she chose her words carefully. "Where did you get the water? Can't you fetch a lamp or a candle at least?"

"Why is it so important that you see me? Is there nothing more pressing on your mind?"

It was a challenge and a distraction. He obviously wanted her in the dark. She'd play his game for the time being. She needed information more than light. "Where am I? What happened to—my friend?" No need to volunteer her name.

"I'm allowed to tell you that you're in the Kingdom of Zylott and your companion was rescued shortly after your capture."

The fog cleared by degrees, the weighted lethargy lifted. Had they drugged her? No, she'd had Veil fever. That's why she'd lost control of the navigation.

"Who rescued my friend?" She struggled through the facts he'd listed. Captured by whom? The Kingdom of Zylott bordered the Keeper dimension. She'd gotten the Flame Princess *almost* home.

"I only know what my master tells me. He thought it would ease your mind to know about your friend."

In many dimensions a master was a mentor or a leader, but this man's tone hinted at subjugation. "Your master?" When he said nothing, she went on, "Are you Fahroni? Is this your home dimension, or are you one of the Keeper renegades?"

He refilled her cup, making no response to any of her questions. She'd heard Kin Zylott and his followers had enslaved the native Fahroni after they were exiled from the Keeper realm. Apparently, the stories were true.

"Your illness was unfamiliar to me." The man finally spoke in a deep, caressing tone. "Do you know what afflicted you? None of my herbs had any effect. I very nearly lost you."

Warmth pervaded her chest, tingling echoes of the dream. His voice was gentle, filled with compassion and worry. "You're a healer?"

"Yes."

She cleared her throat and drank more water, forcing herself to think. "Who is your master? Why did he capture me?"

"Rest. You're still weak. There is plenty of time for explanations."

Her fingers tightened around the cup. "You better stick to healing. You're a piss-poor counselor."

His warm throaty chuckle reached her from the darkness. "Are you always so—outspoken?"

"Give me a minute. I'm just waking up."

"You prefer brutal honesty to tactful gradualism?"

A shiver skittered down her spine. Why had he suddenly sounded so lofty? "If the water's cold, it's easier to just jump in." Tension built within the silence. His reluctance compounded her worry. "Is there anything you can do to change the situation?"

"No."

"Then tell me everything."

"For two weeks you hovered near death. The master cast you into sleep thrall when he was certain you would recover. The body heals more quickly in such a state."

"Your master is a sorcerer?"

"My master is many things."

"Who is he?"

"I'm not allowed to say."

Minuette shoved the cup at him. After he took it from her hand, she crossed her legs in front of her, keeping the sheet wrapped around her as best she could. She flexed her hands and narrowed her focus, determined to manifest *iede*. The powdery substance was the physical essence of her mystic energy. Without it she could do nothing. She felt no stirring, no tingle in her palms. She was weaker than she'd thought.

"I am a healer," his hushed voice drew her attention back to him, "but that's not why I'm here."

"I'm naked, with a stranger in the dark. I bet I can guess what you want."

"I've been commanded to seduce you."

A nervous laugh escaped her. "Yeah, that's what I thought. Why would you even consider such a ridiculous command?"

"You make it sound as though I have a choice," he snapped. "I will be brought to you each night and taken away at dawn. I will be punished each time I fail. Each punishment will be more severe until I succeed, or I am dead."

Minuette's heart lurched within her breast. He couldn't be serious. "Sucks to be you," she whispered, insulating herself with sarcasm.

His hands closed around her upper arms. He pulled her to her knees as he stood. "I want to be gentle, milady, but I will not die for you." He sounded utterly resolute.

She shoved against his chest, losing the sheet in the process. "Well, I hate to tell you this, but you're just plain out of luck. Veil Keepers are protected by a mystic shield that makes rape impossible."

"I will not rape you. When I melded with your dream, I showed you the pleasure you will know in my arms."

She stilled. Her heart pounded and her ears rang as her mind absorbed what he'd just said. He'd controlled her dream! He'd sent those images into her subconscious as a graphic preview of what he intended.

Awkwardly clearing her throat, she twisted out of his hold. "Your master has taught you more than healing. How did you

... It doesn't matter. It's impossible. I can't do those things with you."

"He'll punish me." His voice sounded harsh and desperate. "Will this mystic shield cause me more pain than my master?"

"He can't punish you for something beyond your control. You've done what he commanded."

"I've failed! Nothing else matters."

Compassion blossomed in her heart. Life must be unbearable with such a cruel master. Still, she couldn't help him. It was simply impossible. "I'm sorry. I can explain it to him, if you think that will help."

"Veil Keepers are never allowed to mate?" He sounded dubious.

"The shield is deactivated after the initial phase of training, but I assure you mine is fully functional. Why did your master command you to seduce me?"

"I'm only allowed to tell you those things you need to know."

Suspicion surged within her mind. A powerful sorcerer in the Kingdom of Zylott? Was she the prisoner of Lord Nyx? "Was I captured because I'm a woman or because I'm a Veil Keeper?" Dread knotted her belly, made her voice thin and tight.

"Has anyone tested your mystic shield? Do you know for a fact—"

"Answer my question. Is this some sort of revenge?"

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Chapter Two

Nyx wanted to shake the Veil Keeper. She was ruining everything. She'd responded so sweetly during their dream meld, he'd thought the battle all but won. Her intoxicating taste lingered in his mouth and his hands longed for more of her softness. She'd been so close to surrender. Now they were far off course.

"My master has valid reasons to hate Veil Keepers."

She snatched the sheet back up, covering her nudity. "If I'd only been a Frost Keeper what would he have done with me?"

"Are you a Frost Keeper as well as a Veil Keeper? How can you be both?" He probably knew more about her dimension than she did, but he wanted to reinforce his role.

"Zylott was founded by a renegade from my dimension. Even if you are a Fahroni slave, how can you know nothing of Mystic Keeper ways?"

A renegade! Nyx took a step back as fury threatened his masquerade. How dare she malign his father! He gritted his teeth and forced his temper to subside. "Lie down."

"No."

He clenched and unclenched his hands. Why did she persist in provoking him? Didn't she realize ... She thought him a lowly slave, which was exactly what he needed her to believe.

"My master offered to have you bound, naked and waiting for me. I asked that he not subject you to such humiliation."

"You think being mind-fucked was less humiliating?"

He took a menacing step forward. "You found pleasure in the dream meld, you can't deny it. You participated willingly."

"I thought it was an ordinary dream!"

"Do you often have such erotic dreams?"

After a long pause she asked, "Why do you want me to lie down?"

"To test the validity of your claim. If I don't, my master will. Would you rather I summon him?"

"Yes! I'm not making this up. Let him burn his hand. Or better yet don't tell him anything and the shield will blister his cock! I've heard stories of the damage and—"

"You've heard stories. But has anyone ever touched you? Do you know your shield is intact?"

His arm banded her waist, dragging her to the edge of the bed. She shoved against his shoulders, arched her back, and turned her face away. She'd responded so sweetly in the dream meld. Why did she shrink from his touch now?

"Did you have a lover before this shield was activated or have you only known pleasure in your dreams?"

The sheet twisted around her hips, leaving her breasts bare. High and full, the tempting mounds quivered with each ragged breath. "I'll tell you only what you need to know."

He smiled, then scowled as he realized what he'd just done. He shouldn't find her amusing. She was a Veil Keeper!

"I'll know soon enough." He cupped her breast, his thumb lightly rubbing the nipple.

She grabbed his wrist. "My breasts aren't involved."

"I disagree. Your nipple is pebble hard and I've just begun to touch you."

"Why torment me when you can't complete the act?" She dug her nails into his flesh, her tone tremulous.

"Does my touch torment you?" His cock bucked at the subtle inference.

He'd braced himself emotionally to endure fucking her. It was necessary to his plan, but he hadn't expected to enjoy it, hadn't *wanted* to enjoy it. Enjoying sex with anyone betrayed Cherrine's memory.

"I don't want you touching me." Minuette ground out the words between clenched teeth, pushing his hand away from her breast.

"Little liar," he made it sound like an endearment, "you want nothing more. I felt the ache inside your mind when I joined your dream. You have longed for a lover for years." Her breath hitched and she pushed against him frantically. "If I can breach your shield will you let me take you willingly? I will make it even better than the dream."

"It's a pointless question," she snapped. "My shield cannot be breached."

He leaned in close and whispered, "How do you know?"

"I ... A friend told me about ... Just trust me, I know."

Intrigued, he moved his hand to her other breast, amazed to find her nipple tightly puckered. She was incredibly responsive. "Did you touch yourself?"

"Yes," she whispered so quietly he barely heard the word.

He pulled her arms behind her back and held them there with one large fist. Skimming his fingers along her smooth

skin, he returned his free hand to her breasts. Warm and incredibly soft, her skin tantalized his senses. He would not enjoy touching her. This was necessary, nothing more.

"Tell me about your friend." He needed to keep his mind occupied, his emotions distanced from the temptation in his arms. "What did she say? Talk to me."

She tugged against his hold. "Let go of me. I won't be manhandled like this!"

He laughed and tangled his fist in her long, loose hair. "I've been nothing but kind thus far. Would you like me to manhandle you?" Crushing her mouth beneath his, Nyx demonstrated the difference between persuasion and force. He pulled her head back and thrust his tongue deep, retreating long before she thought to bite him. "Now, tell me about your friend or I'll restrain you to the bed and manhandle you at my leisure."

Her warm breath wafted against his chest and she said nothing for a long time. Nyx feared he would have to restrain her, then she began to speak.

"Elita confessed all the things she and her beloved did to each other."

"Sexual things? Forbidden things? Is Elita a Veil Keeper?" He teased her breasts, waiting for the tension to ease from her torso. She enjoyed being touched, that much was apparent from her breathless sighs and diamond hard nipples.

"She's a Light Keeper, her love was of the Order of Shadow. They petitioned the Steering Committee to activate *Pim Noctar*, but while they waited for approval—"

"What is *Pim Noctar*?" 'The healer' wouldn't know.

"Why are you doing this?" She arched into his touch even as she protested. "You can touch me until we're both crazy and it won't change a thing. You can't—"

"Tell me about your friend." Leaning down, he circled her nipple with the tip of his tongue. He stroked and suckled, drawing her crest deep into his mouth. Each time he brought her to orgasm, she would be less inclined to resist. That was the only reason he caressed her. This was not for his pleasure, even if she had the most spectacular breasts he'd ever seen.

"Keepers bond with their equal and opposite, light with shadow, frost with flame. *Pim Noctar* is the ritual that creates bonded mates."

His hand descended along her abdomen, lingering against her silken belly, easing beneath the bunched sheet. "Are Veil Keepers allowed to participate in this ritual?"

"It's not forbidden but it's discouraged. The Sacred Order of the Veil is different from other orders."

Yes, they're vile and corrupt, and you are one of them! Like icy water the thought doused his burgeoning desire. "Back to your friend. They were waiting for permission to bond. What did they do?"

"They brought each other pleasure in other ways, ways I hadn't realized were possible."

"How?" A wicked smile parted his lips as he imagined some of the ways an inventive couple might pleasure each other without actually fucking. "Shall we try some of them? Would you like to feel the pleasure again?" Despite his resentment, gods knew, he needed release.

She shifted her hips, her breath hitched, and she moaned. Her restlessness made him want to pounce, to thrust to the hilt, and test her claim with the entire length of his aching cock.

"I can't. It's not the same. Elita didn't have a mystic shield."

"But you were curious enough to touch yourself." He eased his hand lower. "Did you use your fingers or something else?"

"Something else?" She sounded shocked. "What would ... No, I used my fingers."

Interesting. If he breached her mystic shield with a wand then his plan would be back on track. "How did you use your fingers? It didn't burn when I rubbed against your mound."

"That part felt good." Her voice dropped to a whisper. "It was only when I ... went inside that the shield engaged. Nothing has ever hurt that badly. I didn't think the blisters would ever heal. You can still see the scar on my middle finger."

He gingerly cupped her mound. His eyes narrowed at the silky softness of her hairless flesh. "How does that feel?"

Her panting accelerated, but she didn't reply.

Parting her folds, he slid one finger along her damp slit. Their dream meld had left her slick and soft, ready for more, ready for reality. He gingerly pushed his middle finger into her snug core. Gods, her pussy was hot. She felt—Fire shot up his arm, scalding pain rocked him backward.

"Damn Veil Keeper tricks!"

She scrambled away, reaching blindly for the sheet. "I warned you, repeatedly." As if her smug tone weren't enough, he detected *laughter* too!

Minuette had to pinch her wrist to keep herself from laughing. Stupid, stubborn man. She'd tried to spare him the pain, but he wouldn't listen. Served him right!

He headed across the chamber, moving deeper into the darkness.

"Where are you going?" Why should she care? He was leaving. She might be able to escape.

"Get some rest," he grumbled. "I'm not sure when I'll be allowed to return."

"Wait. Where are my clothes?"

He tossed something to her. It arched through the air, a denser shadow in the gloom. The garment struck her in the chest and she closed her arms around the softest material she'd ever felt. "What is this?"

"One of my master's robes. It will keep you warm."

She shoved it away. *I'd rather be naked.*

He pounded on the door and called out in a language she didn't understand. A loud creak rent the air as the healer was released into the corridor beyond her cell. She caught a glimpse of golden skin and reddish brown hair before the door slammed shut again.

She wrapped the robe around her shoulders like a cape and drew her legs up to her chest. At least this was less intimate than actually putting it on. Heaving an audible sigh, her hand slid along her calf. Why did her legs feel so smooth? If she'd been unconscious for weeks ... The master must have

had her prepared for the healer. Stars, she hoped he'd ordered it done. She didn't want to think about that monster fondling her naked body while she was unconscious. Her underarms were smooth. Had he removed *all* her body hair? Was that why she felt so sensitive?

She'd been afraid to touch her feminine folds since her encounter with the shield. Feeling rather foolish, she slid her hand along her belly. Her fingers curved over her hairless mound and Minuette groaned. Smooth, warm, and incredibly soft, she wanted to delve deeper, to part her folds and see if she could recreate the pleasure he'd given her in the dream meld.

What is wrong with you! You should be trying to escape and you sit here masturbating! Veil fever had drained her strength. It might be weeks before she could part the Veil, but her lesser powers should still function. She centered her energy and visualized a Light crystal. Though Minuette was a Frost Keeper by birth, her mentor had been a Light Keeper, so she knew how to create illumination and could manage an illusion or two.

Nothing happened.

She wasn't that weak. She'd felt the tingling flow of her mystic energy, but her palms failed to manifest *iede*. Rubbing one palm with the fingers of her other hand, she discovered a thin film. *What the hell?* She checked her other palm. It too was sealed. The healer might not understand Keeper ways, but his master obviously did.

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Chapter Three

Nyx snatched a tunic from his wardrobe and pulled it on over his head. His mind filled with images of the Veil Keeper's supple body sliding against his robe. *Damn it.* Why hadn't he told her to retrieve her garments from under the cot? He'd never be able to touch his robe again without thinking of her.

He looked at his blistered finger and shook his head. Unbelievable! Summoning mystic energy into the wound he healed it from the inside out. His skin was left pink and sensitive, but the sting gradually faded.

A faint ping erupted within his brain. One of his bloodline was requesting admittance. Nyx scanned the presence before he lowered his mental shields and detected his younger brother Tye.

Isn't it past your bedtime? he teased his sibling.

You know where I am. Can you meet me here? I don't have much time.

I'll be there directly.

Nyx's heavy footfalls rang in the stone corridor as he stomped toward the Nexus Chamber. The portals were scattered through countless dimensions, allowing a chosen few to move freely between. The Guardians were a highly evolved race who had transcended the need for corporeal bodies. They created the Nexus Chambers to assist those who still depended on a physical form. They granted access to the chambers in stages as the Chosen proved their worth.

Nyx's battle against the evil *Setti* had been deemed worthy of the chambers' use. He crossed his office in complete darkness. There was no need for light unless others were around. Speaking a brief incantation, he summoned a portal, allowing him to access his Nexus Chamber.

Closing the portal behind him, Nyx greeted his brother, then waited for Tye to speak.

Common brown hair and hazel eyes allowed Tye to pass for a number of species as his assignments required. Their mother had been a Fahroni princess, the race of beings Minuette claimed they enslaved. Tye's short spiky hair made Nyx shudder. Tye made a very believable Mystic Keeper.

"You have to release the Veil Keeper," Tye said without preamble. "The entire dimension is in an uproar over this one slip of a girl."

Nyx crossed his arms over his chest and glared at his brother. "Is *this* why you summoned me here?" None of the Keepers were happy about his refusal to release Minuette. He'd been tempted to tell them she perished from Veil fever. Gods knew it was nearly the truth.

Her family wanted her back. Other powerful Keepers had demanded her return. Only the high priestess of her order had greeted Minuette's capture with complete indifference. It infuriated Nyx every time he thought about it.

"She's elite on so many levels there is no category for her." Tye continued his explanation. "Her father is the Frost Master, her brother married a Flame Princess. She is not only a Veil Keeper, she is—"

"I know who she is."

"Then why are you still holding her captive? You should have released her weeks ago."

Nyx avoided his brother's challenging stare. Part of him knew Tye was right, the sane, rational part. But the mystical, elemental part couldn't let her go. "She's been ill. I wasn't sure she'd recover."

"Is she recovered now? If she is you must release her. The Kingdom of Zylott cannot be torn apart because of your bitterness."

"This is more complicated than you will ever comprehend. Stick to what you know and leave my life to me!"

Silence stretched between them, tense and uncomfortable.

Tye took a step toward the portal, then turned to face Nyx. "What happened to Cherrine was tragic and unforgivable, but this Veil Keeper had nothing to do with it."

"She's a Veil Keeper. That's good enough for me."

Tye shook his head, allowing disappointment to cloud his gaze. "It wouldn't have been enough for Cherrine, so don't claim you're doing this for her."

Before Nyx could respond, Tye stepped through the portal leading back to the Keeper realm. Nyx returned to his office and moved behind his desk, haunted by his brother's words. Would Cherrine have disapproved of his plan? Was he no better than the monsters who had destroyed his life and robbed him of his future?

If it hadn't been for the aching loneliness he'd sensed in Minuette, he'd be tempted to release her as Tye said, and simply walk away. But she was miserable, isolated, lonely, and confused. All feelings he understood too well.

Heaving an exaggerated sigh, he unlocked the top drawer of his desk with a word and retrieved the data crystal the Death Master had given to him. The information was supposed to have secured Minuette's release, but Nyx had conjured an identical crystal and refused to make the exchange. He'd handed the counterfeit crystal to his contact and ducked back through the portal before she realized what he had done. His mouth curved with the hint of a smile as he remembered the incident.

He'd spent endless hours searching the information contained within the data crystal. The Death Master had been meticulous, including everything from personnel records to a detailed history of the Sacred Order of the Veil.

With a pulse of mystic energy Nyx activated the crystal. It rose into the air and rotated in a slow circle. It responded to verbal questions, if you knew which questions to ask.

"Do you contain information on the mystic shield used to protect female Veil Keepers?"

"That phrase is contained within my historical records, but the entries are not gender specific. Would you like to ask another question?"

Was a male trainee's cock sheathed in a mystic shield? Or was the phrase applicable to other barriers? "Is the purpose of the shield mentioned in your records to prevent Veil Keepers from engaging in sexual intercourse?"

"No."

Open ended question, Nyx. You know better than that.

"What is the purpose of the mystic shield mentioned in your records?"

"The mystic shield encourages dedication and focus in a Veil Keeper during the first phase of their training by discouraging sexual relationships. It also prevents them from being taken against their will."

Did the damn thing have to be so literal? That was basically what he'd said. "How is the shield deactivated?"

"It is dispersed by the high priestess or one of her chancellors during the final induction ceremony."

"What are some other ways of deactivating the shield?"

"I do not contain that information."

Nyx glared at the crystal hovering above his desk. "What are the Veil Keepers told about how to deactivate the shield?"

"I do not contain that information."

He was about to shut down the crystal when he thought of another approach. "Do you contain any reference to the shield being prematurely dispersed?"

"Yes."

"What was the result?"

"The Veil Keeper was chastised and the shield reactivated."

"Was the dispersal intentional?" He folded his arms on the desktop and considered the possibilities.

"I contain more than one incident. How should I proceed?"

"Report on the intentional dispersals."

"A female Veil Keeper realized each of her orgasms decreased the effectiveness of the shield until her lover was able to penetrate her body without injury."

Nyx relaxed back in his chair. Could it be that easy? The crystal said the Veil Keeper 'realized' the connection, as if

she'd discovered something she wasn't supposed to know.

"Does sexual release always weaken the shield?"

"No."

Shit. He'd done it again. "What other factors contribute to the premature dispersal of the shield?"

"The shield is interfaced with the Veil Keeper's emotions. If the stimulation is unwanted, the shield will remain impenetrable regardless of how many orgasms are coerced."

"And if the orgasms are not coerced? What if the Veil Keeper craves penetration?"

"Unbeknownst to most trainees, if their need for penetration becomes desperate, the mystic shield will disperse."

Deactivating the crystal, Nyx returned it to the drawer. He had his work cut out for him. Bringing her to orgasm wouldn't be enough, he had to make her 'desperate' for him.

* * * *

Minuette heard a muffled voice just outside her prison. She held the robe against her breasts and waited for the door to open. The chamber's cool air had conquered her obstinacy. Still, the robe kept drooping off her shoulders.

The door swung inward and a tall figure entered the room. Her breath caught in her throat. Had the healer returned? Or was this the master?

"Come. The master has allowed me to take you to a more comfortable chamber."

She didn't want to stay in this dank, stone room, but her stubborn nature wouldn't allow her to meekly obey, even for the healer. "A prison is a prison. I'm not sure I see the point."

"Fine. Stay here."

She heard the shrug in his tone and watched him turn to leave. "Wait. What will it cost me, if I go with you?"

"The inconvenience of my company."

She exhaled and scooted off the cot. He met her in the middle of the room, wrapping his strong hand around her upper arm. How was he able to move so easily through the darkness? Each step she took was awkward and unsure.

She'd spent the past hour puzzling through the fragmented information. One name returned to her again and again. "Is Lord Nyx your master?"

His steps faltered. "What would bring you to such a conclusion?"

"Lord Nyx is the most powerful sorcerer in the Kingdom of Zylott. He is also known to despise Keepers. It wasn't much of a leap."

He said nothing.

Narrow slit windows allowed moonlight into the corridor, so Minuette twisted out of his grasp. "Is there no lighting in the entire building? Or do you enjoy this game?"

As if by his decree, she smacked into a hallstand she had been unable to see. She muttered a curse and adjusted her placement, staying directly behind the healer.

"It would be easier if you'd just let me guide you." He reached for her hand, but she snatched it away.

"It would be easier if you'd turn on the lights!"

He paused at the top of a spiraling staircase. Beyond the first few stairs, the stairwell was pitch-black.

"This isn't funny." There wasn't even a handrail. "I'll break my neck if I go down there."

"Then stop being so stubborn and take my arm."

"And beat you over the head with it?"

Minuette took a deep breath and started down the stairs, using the curved wall as her guide. "Do you have a name?" Why had she asked? This man was not her friend. Despite his kindness, he would do his master's will.

Each step took them deeper into darkness. Her heartbeat thundered and her shallow, panting breaths made her dizzy, unsteady.

Her foot slipped and Minuette screamed. For an instant she plummeted, weightless, helpless, then strong arms closed around her and pulled her against a broad chest.

"My name is Damos." The healer shifted her higher against his chest. "Will you please stop being so foolish?"

"How are you doing this?" Even her hushed voice sounded loud in the inky void. "Can you see in the dark?"

"Yes." His answer was stiff as if he resented the admission. "Wrap your arms around my neck."

She reluctantly obeyed and he continued down the unseen stairway. His long hair brushed her cheek. Instinctively she turned into the softness. An unfamiliar, spicy scent clung to the strands. She inhaled deeply allowing the fragrance to wrap itself around her. His arms felt strong and capable. It would be so easy to...

Don't be such a fool! This is part of the seduction. He wants you dependent on him.

A pale sliver of moonlight identified the bottom of the stairwell. Minuette expected him to set her down. He continued on with long, sure strides.

"How much do you know about Lord Nyx?"

The question surprised her nearly as much as the ease with which he carried her. His build was long and lean, not heavily muscled. "Rumor and speculation. He is rather notorious in my dimension."

"What is said about him?"

"You serve him. Surely you know more than I."

He neither denied nor confirmed her conclusion. "Indulge me."

"It's said he is ruthless in his quest for mystic power. Some whisper that he has ties to the *Setti* realm. I've also heard he's extremely handsome and can create sensual frenzy with the power of his gaze."

He made a sound suspiciously like a snort, but offered no comment.

This corridor was wider than the one above and his footfalls were dampened by a carpet runner. Beyond the faintest outline of doorways and an occasional hallstand, Minuette could see nothing.

She looked up at the healer, surprised to find his silhouette visible. His hair swept straight back from a wide brow, and his nose was faintly aquiline. Well-shaped lips and a firm jaw line completed what little she could see. He looked at her and the fall of his hair cast his face into shadow again.

"How long have you been in training? My master explained a bit about what you are."

She chuckled. His master's perception of Veil Keepers was likely as dependable as her information regarding Lord Nyx. "What did your master say I am?"

"Veil Keepers guide others through the energy field that separates one dimension from another. It requires great skill and brings with it enormous responsibility, so few are accepted into your order. You must be very powerful."

Was he mocking her? "I'm *powerless* and your master knows it. He sealed my palms with some sort of film."

He paused before a door and spoke a lyrical phrase. The door swung open of its own volition. A different phrase closed the door and shut out what little light there had been in the hallway.

Frustration shoved Minuette beyond her fear. She'd put up with this bullshit long enough. "You can see in the dark. There's no reason for this! Activate a light source."

"No." He continued across the room.

"All the darkness does is gives you an unfair advantage." She hated feeling helpless.

"True."

Wiggling wildly, she slid down his body and sat on the floor, too angry to speak and smart enough not to move.

"Food and wine await us at the table. Do you intend to remain in the middle of the floor?"

"Yes. I'm through playing your games. Turn on the lights—oh, to hell with that, go get your master. I'll have this out with him."

Mystic Keepers 2: Zylott Wars (Collection)
by Aubrey Ross

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Chapter Four

Nyx stared at the Veil Keeper's fierce scowl, torn between anger and amusement. He had to earn her trust or she'd never take him willingly into her body. Tension banded his abdomen at the thought. He didn't want to want her, but his body ached just looking at her. This should be a sacrifice, the necessary means by which he would facilitate his revenge. He must feel nothing for her but lust.

So why did you tell her your name? Few knew his given name. Even his family called him by his title.

I've also heard he's extremely handsome and can create sensual frenzy with the power of his gaze. If she'd only heard his appearance described, it was doubtful she would recognize him. Nyx hesitated a moment longer, then lit a candelabra near the table.

She blinked, staring up at him with wide, crystal blue eyes. Her body was lost in his robe. The black fabric made her face appear pale, fragile, and accented the silver/gold splendor of her hair.

"I thought you were a healer." She glanced at the flickering candles suspiciously.

"Healing is my strongest ability. You already know I possess others." A bright blush spread across her cheeks and she averted her gaze. "Shall we have something to eat?" Her gaze snapped back to his face. He smiled and proffered his hand.

Ignoring the offer, she struggled to her feet. The wide neckline of his robe drooped temptingly across her breasts. She adjusted the garment, and one side slipped off her shoulder. Candlelight danced across her smooth skin, beckoning his touch, his kiss, the languid stroke of his tongue.

He motioned toward the table, waiting for her to proceed. She crossed her arms over her breasts and glared at him. Her hair cascaded to her waist, the color a dramatic transition from rich gold at the roots to pale silver at the ends. Frost Keeper hair.

"What does your master gain by you seducing me?"

"His motives have no bearing on the outcome. The end became inevitable when you fell out of the sky and landed in his lap."

Her gaze narrowed and her lips pressed into a stubborn line. "The only thing inevitable about this situation is your failure. Did you show him your finger? Can you imagine what the shield will do to your..." She gestured in the general direction of his groin.

"I don't want to argue with you."

"No, you want to fuck me."

He chuckled and turned toward the table leaving her in the middle of the sitting room. The guest suite was luxurious. He'd thought more comfortable surroundings might put her at ease. Apparently, he'd underestimated her stubbornness.

Filling two goblets with wine, he returned to his hostile companion and handed her one. "You gave yourself to me willingly when you believed I was a dream."

"You're a manipulative bastard and you shouldn't have brought that up." She paused to smell the wine before taking a generous gulp.

"What are trainees told about the mystic shield? Is it mandatory or something you choose?"

She meandered past him and headed for the table. "Why should I answer your questions when you won't answer mine?"

"I will answer three questions, so choose them carefully."

"Is Lord Nyx your master?"

He shook his head, disappointed by her haste. "You know Lord Nyx is my master. You just wasted your first question."

She licked her lips, staring down into her wine.

"Seek the answers you need not those you want. I will not make this offer again."

"What must I do to be set free?"

He smiled. "Now that is a very good question. You must return to my master what was stolen from him by the Sacred Order of the Veil. Then, and only then, will you be free to return to your dimension."

"What has this to do with your seducing me?"

"Is that your final question?"

"No." She tossed her hair behind her shoulders, holding the robe in place with her hands. "You're trying to confuse me, not inform me. I hate playing games."

He swept his hand toward the table. "Why don't we sit and partake, while you figure out how to best me."

Her expression distant and thoughtful, she slipped into one of the chairs. He set a bowl of steaming soup in front of her

and handed her a spoon. "I thought something light would be best as you're still recovering."

She sampled the soup and finished her wine before she decided on her final question. "What *exactly* must I do to right this wrong?"

"Surrender to me, Minuette." He hadn't meant to speak her name, but it rolled across his tongue tenderly. "You will be ravished. There's no changing that. But if you resist me for too long, the master will come and claim you himself. With the master it will not be seduction. It will be true ravishment."

"I still don't understand. I've done nothing to your master. I've never met the man. Why must I be ravished for the crimes he claims my order—"

"The Sacred Order of the Veil stole his future. It is within your power to restore it to him."

"You're talking in riddles. Just spell it out. What does he want from me?"

"I've answered more than three questions. This you must figure out for yourself."

Minuette turned her attention on her steaming bowl of soup. Lord Nyx had been robbed of his future? What was that supposed to mean? She despised word games and the healer had definitely won this round.

She tried not to look at him, but her curious gaze gravitated to his face. Saved from being pretty by a strong jaw line, the rest of his features were arranged with elegance. Candlelight accented the subtle fire in his long dark hair. His

grim expression made the sparkling intensity of his emerald gaze all the more appealing.

"Are you feeling better?"

His deep voice sent warm tingles down her spine. This was no casual dinner companion. He must figure out a way to breach her mystic shield or Lord Nyx would punish him. Determination burned in his gaze along with carnal hunger.

"How long have you served Lord Nyx?" She refused to think about what he intended once the meal was through.

"I have always served Lord Nyx."

"You were *born* into servitude?"

The corners of his mouth curved ever so slightly. "You presumed I was a slave. I only told you what will happen if I fail to seduce you."

"And I explained why you are doomed to fail."

Easing away from the table, he extended his legs, crossing them at the ankle. He waited until their gazes met before he spoke in a soft, caressing tone. "When I entered your mind, I was surprised by your loneliness. Why do you feel so isolated?"

What good would it do to deny it? He'd know she was lying. He'd been inside her mind. Heat rolled through her at the thought. Was that any less intimate than taking him into her body?

What the hell are you thinking? You can't give in to him!

Dragging her gaze away from his, she exhaled a shuddering breath. "One of the disadvantages of being a Veil Keeper is the need to avoid physical contact. Navigating the Veil requires an immense amount of energy and

concentration. Physical contact drains my energy and disrupts my concentration. Others are taught to avoid touching Veil Keepers."

"Were you persuaded to enter the order? You don't seem content."

Was he empathic? How was he reading her so effortlessly? She studied him for a moment. Demanding he activate a light source had been a mistake. She looked at his hands and remembered how they felt moving over her body. The sensual curve of his mouth promised more scorching kisses, more teasing licks. Sexual awareness pulsed between them, a silent reminder of the pleasure they had shared.

"There are many things about my vocation that differ from what I'd believed."

His eyebrows slashed upward with hardly any arch, drawing attention to his glistening gaze. "What is different?"

Endless hours of isolation, regimented discipline, she'd had no idea what would be expected of her once she entered the Sacred Order of the Veil. She understood some of the strictures, but others seemed arbitrary, needlessly controlling.

"It doesn't matter." Her gaze returned to his mouth. She longed for the warm caress of his lips, the thrilling slide of his tongue against hers. "My frustration won't help you seduce me, so why do you want to know?"

"Seduction begins in the mind, Minuette. Everything I learn—"

"I'd prefer you didn't call me by name. The proper way to address me is Priestess Cendar."

A slow salacious smile parted his lips. "My intentions for you are anything but proper. Would you like to hear what I intend to do?"

His gaze reflected the candlelight with mesmerizing intensity. She glanced away, fighting back a smile. "Probably not."

"Say my name."

She looked back at him, confused. "Why?"

"You were determined to learn it. I want to hear you say my name."

"Damos." She pushed back from the table and stood. Crossing the luxurious room, Minuette took in the elegant furnishings and gilt-framed paintings with calculating interest. "Does this building predate Kin Zylott's exile?"

"His *what*?"

The combination of astonishment and outrage in his tone made her look at him again. He'd moved into the sitting room, but stayed well back from her. "I guess the history of those events differ on this side of the Veil."

"What were you taught about Kin Zylott?"

Slowly licking her lips, Minuette debated what to say. The healer served Kin Zylott's son. He would likely resent the tale. Despite his master's cruelty, Damos was obviously loyal.

"Speak truthfully," he encouraged her, his hands clasped behind his back.

"Can your master hear us?"

His gaze narrowed on her face. "Why would that concern you?"

"What I was taught may annoy you, but it will likely infuriate him. I would rather not incur his wrath because of events that took place before my birth."

"If anyone would incur his wrath it would be your teacher. Tell your tale."

"Maudlyn Cendar was high priestess at the time of—"

"Cendar. What relation was she to you?"

Minuette smiled despite his rude interruption. His assessing gaze and shrewd intelligence didn't miss much. "My aunt, but I never knew her. As I said these events took place before my birth."

He inclined his head. "Pardon my interruption. Please continue."

She wasn't sure why he wanted to know what she'd been taught about the Zylott defection, but she saw no harm in indulging him, and it postponed what he had planned.

"Maudlyn's death was never fully explained. Most believe it was an accident, others suspect foul play. She died without naming her successor, something that had never happened before."

"Has a man never led the Veil Keepers?"

Minuette thought about that for a moment. Sacha had been the only high priestess under which she served. "Veil Keeper abilities are predominant to females. I don't know the exact ratio, but women greatly outnumber men. To my knowledge we have always had a high priestess."

"How was the position filled after your aunt's untimely death?"

"A series of competitions were held to determine the four strongest Veil Keepers. The final four were subjected to the Ordeal, a secret ritual that only the bravest even attempt. Sacha, formerly of the Order of Flame, emerged victorious and was named our new high priestess."

"Who else attempted the Ordeal?"

"Kin Zylott was one of the four. You must know all this, why are you questioning me?"

"I know what I was taught. I want to know what you believe."

Judging from his appearance, the events took place before his birth as well. They each knew only what they had been told. "Kin didn't accept defeat graciously. He claimed Sacha had cheated, that she was contaminated with *Setti-iede*."

"Were his allegations investigated?" His voice sounded tense, revealed his agitation.

Why was he upset by her explanation? The healer was Fahroni, one of the people victimized by the renegade Keepers. Perhaps if she hurried to that part of the story, they could find a common ground.

"Kin was jealous. Sacha bested him. It was as simple as that. Kin was warned to cease his slander or face the consequences. When he refused to accept the new high priestess, the order had no choice but to exile him."

"According to Keeper history what became of Kin Zylott?"

"He fled to this dimension and established a kingdom in his own name. He enslaved the native Fahroni and has exploited them to this day."

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Chapter Five

Nyx paced his office like a caged animal. He didn't care what Minuette thought when he'd turned and stormed from the room. He'd been too angry to maintain his role, so he'd locked her in the guest suite and fled.

Jealous? His father had been exiled because he was jealous? The allegation was so preposterous it should have made him laugh. As if that weren't enough she also accused them of exploiting the Fahroni. Nyx's mother had been Fahroni! The native people welcomed the outcast Keepers with kindness and cooperation.

"You look ready to murder, my friend. What has you in such a state?"

Without the limitations of a corporeal body, the Guardians could appear and disappear at will. Xenos had a bad habit of materializing without warning. Nyx turned to face his friend and supervisor. "A woman. What else has the power to make a man seethe?"

The first time Xenos had appeared to Nyx, the Guardian had chosen an image he thought would put the young man at ease. After six years Nyx had grown accustomed to having lengthy conversations with the likeness of his dead father, but it had taken many interactions before Nyx accepted that he wasn't hallucinating.

Tonight the choice couldn't have been less appropriate. "The Veil Keepers are taught that you ... or rather my father

was exiled because he refused to accept Sacha as high priestess."

Xenos shrugged. "In essence is that not what happened? He did refuse to serve her and she used her newly-acquired authority to have him banished."

"Yes, but his evidence against her was never taken into consideration. No one..." He let the sentence trail away. Xenos knew every detail of the situation. There was no need to explain. "What brings you here, sir?"

"A woman." The Guardian smiled, crossing his arms across his chest. "I granted you access to the Nexus Chambers, which makes me responsible for your actions. We are very much in support of your quest to—"

"Oh gods, not you too. I just got this lecture from Tye. Everything happens for a reason." Nyx met the Guardian's gaze. Xenos' eyes glowed subtly. "You taught me that. The Veil parted and she dropped into my back yard. Do you believe that was a coincidence?"

"It is not my place to judge, only to make certain you do not misuse the powers I have given you."

"I understand."

"You have such potential, but you must look to the future." The Guardian's form fluctuated, his shape translucent now.

"That's what I'm trying to do. I'm trying to rebuild the future the Veil Keepers stole from me."

"Did this Veil Keeper bring about your pain?"

Nyx shook his head. "You rehearsed this with Tye. Didn't you?"

"What do you feel when you take this woman in your arms?"

"What I feel is irrelevant."

Xenos said nothing for a moment. He faded in and out of focus, making Nyx blink. "Nothing productive is accomplished while fixated on the past. Even in your bitterness you realize this. There is a connection between you and Minuette. Don't let your hate destroy what she will offer you."

Nyx didn't reply, so Xenos faded completely out of sight.

* * * *

High Priestess Sacha stepped out of the Veil and into a sunny clearing far from prying eyes. Her temple was in an uproar. If her mystic energy were not so depleted she would have postponed this meeting.

Like an insidious addiction her dependency on *Setti* essence had grown over the years. Her first *Setti* hybrid lover hadn't revealed what he was until after she was dependent on him. Soon his mediocre infusions weren't strong enough, so she'd offered her body, and bartered her order, to more powerful hybrid males.

"Why are you still clothed?"

The throaty rasp of Midox's voice made Sacha tremble. Midox was his title not his name. He'd used her body in every way imaginable for more years than she cared to remember, and still he refused to tell her his name.

"I risk much coming here today." She disintegrated her purple robe with a cleansing pulse. "I should have rescheduled our meeting."

"You need what I give you as much as I hunger for the grip of your wet pussy."

His mother had been a Fahroni breeder, captured from the dimension bordering the Keeper realm. Full-blooded *Setti* couldn't leave their home world, so they'd created a race of hybrid spies.

The Fahroni were nearly indistinguishable from Mystic Keepers. Midox stood tall and proud, his flame-red hair rippling in the breeze. Harsh angles and prominent cheekbones comprised his striking features. She had never thought him handsome, but power and vitality emanated from his posture and his night-black gaze.

Theirs was not an affectionate relationship. It was a fundamental power exchange. She needed his *Setti* essence and he enjoyed fucking her.

"If you're in a hurry, let's get right to it." His gaze gleamed with mockery. He only bothered with preliminaries so her body could accommodate his. "Turn around and grab your ankles and I'll infuse you."

Sacha was tempted to part the Veil and return to her temple. His smug smile and condescending demeanor infuriated her. She hesitated. If she insulted him, he might abandon her, and she could no longer function without the power she gained during their infusions.

He always took her from behind. At the height of passion he wasn't always able to conceal his true appearance. His *Setti* form was so grotesque just one glimpse of it had given her nightmares for months.

With a sigh of resignation, she turned and knelt in the grass. The fastenings on his clothing whispered as he freed his cock and the appendage she tried not to think about. Was it a tail? A tentacle? A secondary penis? She'd never seen it and prayed she never would.

He knelt behind her and pushed her legs apart. His cock nudged her entrance, and he growled above her ear. "You're not even wet. Do you want me to hurt you? I'd be happy to oblige."

"No, sir." She panted. "I'm just distracted. You wouldn't believe everything that's gone wrong."

With his usual compassion, he grabbed her thighs and said, "Brace yourself on your forearms."

He hardly gave her time to obey. Lifting her shins to his shoulders he buried his face between her legs. His tongue stroked her, lavishing hot, wet attention on her reluctant folds. Passion stirred despite her distraction, obeying his mouth's commands. He sucked her clit and thrust his tongue into her cunt, taking her to the brink of orgasm before he pulled away.

She moaned as he lowered her knees to the grass. "You don't come until I'm inside you."

"Yes, Midox."

When he pushed into her again her core accepted his thick length, stretching tight around his massive cock. She clawed at the grass, her nipples sensitized by the sheer pressure of his penetration. None of the others could give her what Midox gave. They hadn't even come close.

He thrust and she cried out. The first drive always stung, then her body adjusted, melted, and creamed. Cupping her breasts, he rolled her nipples as he rocked into her snug pussy.

She arched into each forceful thrust. If she didn't abandon herself completely the brutal bastard would ride her until she was raw. He demanded total surrender, could sense any hesitation, any emotional reserve.

Without breaking rhythm with his cock, he parted her ass cheeks and found her other hole. She tried not to tense, to accept his other appendage into her well-trained body. They had tried every conceivable variation over the years. This arrangement suited them best.

He drove into her anal passage as she pushed back against him, taking his full length in one smooth lunge.

"Yes." He groaned. "Oh, yes. So few can take all of me."

She moved her knees farther apart and braced herself against the ground, knowing what would follow. His hard, forceful thrusts jarred her entire body. He grasped her hips as he pounded into her. Orgasm after orgasm pelted her like sensory hail, exploding in violent bursts. She screamed, burying her face in her hands as he thrust his full lengths into her.

His cock pulsed rhythmically, while the mysterious appendage swelled within her backside. *Now, fill me now. I'm so ready.* She nearly whimpered with need. He pumped wave after scalding wave of *Setti* essence into her ravenous body. She absorbed it as fast as he released it, greedily squeezing out every drop.

Chuckling at her antics, he smacked her behind, and slowly withdrew. "Feel better?"

"Oh, stars, yes."

He adjusted his clothing before she turned over, hiding his body from view.

"Why are your levels so depleted? I've never sensed your need to be this great before."

He sat beside her fully dressed as she lay naked in the sunlight, the breeze playing over her damp skin. Her nipples tingled and a distant smile parted her lips. If it weren't for those times she'd glimpsed what he really was, Sacha might be content with Midox.

"Three people were murdered in my temple." She pushed her hair out of her eyes. "I've been running ragged trying to puzzle it out."

His dark gaze swept the length of her naked body before returning to her face. "That wouldn't deplete your *Setti* energy. An investigation doesn't require *Setti* skills."

"It's complicated."

He grasped her chin and turned her face toward him, waiting until she looked into his eyes. "Who did you murder, Sacha, and why? Was it someone of consequence?"

"I provide you with information and you infuse me with *Setti* power." She jerked her face out of his hold and stood, manifesting a clean purple robe. She refused to meet his gaze. "What goes on within my temple has nothing to do with you."

He didn't bother to stand as she prepared to leave. "You know I'll find out eventually. Why not spare me the aggravation?"

With her hands on her hips and her heart pounding, she did her best to stare him down. "The Time Master outlived his usefulness, and to be honest he knew too much. I had to be able to explain his demise, so I sacrificed my own lover to put this matter to rest."

"Your lover and the Time Master, you said there were three?"

"One of my priestesses was involved. It was first believed she'd killed both men. Then it became apparent they killed each other over her. The poor creature felt so guilty about the tragedy she took her own life."

"How convenient."

"Convenient?" she snapped. "Nothing about this has been convenient and all was done to conceal the *Setti* influence within the Sacred Order of the Veil."

He laughed. "How touching. You killed them all for me?"

She glared. "I did it to protect our partnership. Does our arrangement mean nothing to you?"

"You're a fine piece of ass, Sacha, and you use plenty of my essence to stay that way. Has no one noticed how youthful you look, while the rest of the Keepers decay?"

"Would you prefer I let my face wrinkle and my breasts sag?"

"What I prefer is irrelevant." He shrugged. "I'm being reassigned."

"What?" She rushed to him, her mouth so dry she could barely speak. He couldn't mean it. What would she do?

"I have pressing matters calling me away. I'm not sure when I'll see you again."

"What pressing matters? Away to where?" Her throat constricted as she whispered, "Can I come with you?"

He laughed. "What about your order? All the people counting on you?"

She covered her mouth with one trembling hand, tears swimming before her eyes. "How will I survive without you? None of the others..."

"Do you know what Midox means? Do you have any idea who I am?"

Anger and humiliation washed over her by turns. "You won't even tell me your name."

"Nor shall I tell you now. Midox is the *Setti* word for ruler, king, emperor. That's why my essence is more potent than the other *Setti* hybrids you've fucked."

She ignored his crudity and looked into his eyes. "Will I ever see you again?"

"I don't know. That depends on my other assignment. I have one question before I go. What was the name of your lover?"

Chills raced down Sacha's spine and she was tempted to lie. He would only punish her if she did. Midox always knew when she lied. "Brodi."

His eyes widened and his lips compressed. Why had the name upset him? "The illegitimate son of the Death Master?"

"Yes. Does that mean something to you?"

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He inclined his head. "It means our paths will cross again."

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Chapter Six

The healer didn't return that night, so Minuette explored the rooms. She hoped to find a way to escape, but finally settled for clues. The suite was on the third floor of a massive fortress, part castle and part palace. From what little she could see through the wide windows it looked as if the house had been built in stages over many centuries. It had to predate the Zylott defection. To whom had it originally belonged?

A lavish bathing chamber and spacious bedroom adjoined the main sitting room. She curled up on the bed for a few hours, refusing to crawl beneath the covers.

After the short nap, she turned her attention to the film sealing her palms. She tried scrubbing it off in the bathroom. She scratched at it until her skin bled. The master's sorcery had put it there and she suspected sorcery alone would remove it.

The door in the outer room opened and she hurried out of the bathroom. Her steps came skidding to a halt when she saw her visitors. Two burly men with scowling faces awaited in the open threshold.

"You are to come with us."

The one who spoke glanced at her, while the other averted his gaze.

"Why?" A hard knot of tension twisted her belly. "Where are you taking me?" This didn't seem like a social call.

They said nothing else. One grabbed one arm and one the other and they lifted her off her feet. She wiggled and kicked, and bombarded them with questions all to no avail. They carried her down one corridor after another, then descended a narrow staircase. She minimized her struggles on the stairs, not wanting to break her neck.

"Does this castle have a dungeon? Am I to be clasped in chains?"

One of the guards snorted, the other ignored her completely. Four flights down she counted, paying more attention than she let them believe. They were below ground level now. At least wall torches led the way. She'd had her fill of stumbling around in the dark with the healer the night before.

The guards turned to her left and set her down inside a perfectly square room. Dismal gray stone constructed the walls, ceiling, and floor. Directly across from the door stood a man, stripped to the waist, his wrists clasped in metal cuffs and extended above his head.

Oh stars, it *was* a dungeon!

She could only see the man's back, but the unusual color of his hair identified Damos, the healer. "What is ... Why is he chained?"

A door to her right opened and two men strode in. One wore a robe identical to the one adorning her body. A wide hood had been drawn up, concealing the person's face. The strange symbols embroidered around the hem shimmered in the torchlight. The master. Why was he here? And who was this other man?

The guards grabbed her arms and held her firmly as the man near the master unfurled a long whip, cracking it in the air as if to test his aim.

I will be brought to you each night and taken away at dawn. I will be punished each time I fail. Each punishment will be more severe until I succeed, or I am dead.

This couldn't be happening. They couldn't mean to whip the gentle healer because he'd—

Crack!

The whip lashed the healer's back, and his body jerked against the chains. A long, angry welt rose almost immediately.

"Stop it! He's done nothing wrong. He followed your commands!"

Crack!

She jerked and twisted within the guards' firm grip as the whip struck again and again. Sixteen raised welts crisscrossed the healer's back when the master raised his hand.

"That is one for each hour you wasted, Damos. Do not fail me again."

Minuette sank to her knees as the guards released her. Through it all the healer hadn't made a sound. The master and his minion retreated through the same door they had used to enter. The guards left as well and Minuette was alone in the dungeon with the shackled healer.

She pushed to her feet and went to him. "I'm so sorry. I had..." She was going to say she'd had no idea. But that wasn't true. He had warned her.

His fists clenched tightly, his eyes squeezed shut, as he sagged in the restraints.

"Damos?" He slowly opened his eyes. "I am so sorry."

"If I unseal your palms can you get us out of here?" His voice was barely a whisper.

Hope pounded through her with painful intensity. Yes! They would help each other escape. "I'm not sure I can navigate the Veil yet, but I can certainly get us out of this fortress."

"Can you reach my hands?"

He sounded so weak, her heart turned over in her breast. His long hair hung down over his face. She paused to tuck it behind his ears, then stretched onto her toes and pressed her hands to his. He entwined their fingers. Tingling heat saturated her skin and sank into her hands.

"See if that did it. The pain is distracting, but that should have worked."

She stepped back and examined her palms. The film was gone. She was free!

For one wicked instant she thought about garnering all of her energy and simply parting the Veil. As weak as she was, she'd have no control over where she emerged, but she'd be in her own dimension.

His pain clouded gaze intensified and he solemnly nodded his head. "Go ahead. I understand. I don't think he'll kill me. I'm too valuable to waste."

Guilt tore through her, stalling her breath. She couldn't just leave him here.

Summoning a thin stream of *iede*, she unlocked his cuffs and he collapsed into her arms. His head rested on her shoulder, his arms loosely circling her back.

"Is there somewhere we can go where he will not think to look, preferably not too far away?"

He nodded unsteadily and raised his head. "I know just the place."

"Send the image to my mind and I will take us there."

* * * *

Midox Gibrath paced the corridor outside his father's chamber. Two burly guards flanked the doorway, ensuring the Supreme Midox of the *Setti* realm's privacy. Gibrath seldom sought his father's advice, but he couldn't remember ever being this upset before.

The guards snapped to attention, responding to a telepathic command. The door between them swung open and Gibrath accepted his father's invitation.

Supreme Midox Hakon sat upon his throne. His two primary legs spread out before him, his lesser legs extended behind. His muscular torso was nearly humanoid in shape, but his neck was twice as long. Seven rows of diagonal slits filtered air directly into his lungs. *Setti* skin was transparent leaving their internal organs visible.

Long and narrow, his father's face bore a distinct geometric pattern that extended across his chest and abdomen. Large, perfectly round eyes were his only facial feature. *Setti* beings didn't eat or speak so they had no use for mouths. Scent was provided by the quivering slits angled

across his chest. The antennas scattered atop his head deciphered sound vibrations better than any humanoid ear.

Gibrath spent so much time in his Fahroni form his father's appearance came as a bit of a shock. He'd nearly forgotten how awe inspiring a full-blooded *Setti* could be.

A naked female was chained to a breeding bench on the far side of the room. Gibrath didn't recognize her species. Her skin was a pale shade of blue. From the stunned expression on her delicate face it appeared Hakon had just finished fucking her.

Feel free to look, and touch if you like, but no one else mounts her until she conceives.

Gibrath turned from the female with a negligent shake of his head. *I've not come for entertainment. I need your advice.*

Hakon angled his head, his black eyes unblinking. *This might be a first. You've always been so sure of yourself. What can I do for you?*

My seed is most compatible with Fahroni and Mystic Keepers. All of my other efforts have had unsatisfactory results.

Surely, this doesn't surprise you. What brings you here today?

Gibrath clasped his hands behind his back, shifting his weight to his lesser legs. *My Fahroni son is amazing. His control exceeds my wildest expectations. I was about to make first contact and begin his training in earnest, when a tragedy beset him and pushed all other thoughts from his mind.*

What tragedy?

His wife was murdered and my grandson with her.

Hakon's air slits flared and his head angled to one side.
*Have you taken revenge? No one murders one of my line
without paying with their life!*

*My investigation has taken a startling twist. I'm not sure
how to proceed.*

Investigation? Hakon stood and approached his son.
Gibrath could see the infuriated pounding of his twin hearts.
Does the culprit yet live? Must I see to this myself?

*No, Father. The culprit is dead, but I believe he had an
accomplice.*

*The accomplice dies also. I see no reason for my counsel
on this.*

Gibrath took a deep breath, his air slits flaring wide. *If this
were a simple case of retribution, I would not have troubled
you. The accomplice is High Priestess Sacha and she has no
idea what she's done.*

*Your Veil Keeper slut killed your grandchild? I don't
understand.*

The breeder moaned and tugged against her bonds,
drawing Gibrath's attention. *It's complicated.*

*Have you figured out who the Guardians have granted
access to the Nexus Chambers?*

No, sire. He dragged his gaze back to his father and
focused his mind on his quandary. *So long as our enemy can
move freely between dimensions we have need of the Veil
Keepers.*

Hakon inclined his head. *I begin to see the nature of your
dilemma.*

Is it better to let her live, knowing she played a part in the murder of my progeny? Or should I end her life and seek another within the order?

Hakon's head swayed from side to side in a decidedly serpentine fashion. *Focus on uncovering the Chosen one. Once we gain access to the Nexus Chambers, we will be less dependent on the Veil Keepers. We will have more options at that time.*

Gibrath nodded and backed out of the chamber. He'd exhausted his efforts to determine who the Guardians had contacted, but only a fool would reveal any weakness to the Supreme Midox of the *Setti* realm.

* * * *

Stretched out on his stomach on the soft fur-strewn bed, Nyx flinched every time Minuette's gentle fingers applied a cool compress to his back.

You're a manipulative bastard, Nyx. There's no doubt about it. With each tender gesture, each sympathetic murmur, she inadvertently made him feel like shit. He wanted a chance to woo her, to explain all the misconceptions she held about his people and *him*, to gradually win her...

His thoughts came grinding to a halt. Gradually win her love? His mind recoiled from the insidious thought. Minuette would be easy to love. Her quick mind and fiery spirit had already won his begrudging respect, but he would never love again. He had given his heart without reservation before and it had nearly cost him his soul. He needed Minuette's cooperation not her affection.

He'd taken them to a small secluded cottage not as far from his fortress as he'd led her to believe. The film covering her palms was still in place. He'd only created the illusion that it disappeared. As the illusion dispersed the film would miraculously reform.

"Why didn't you escape long ago?" Emotion clogged her tone. Nyx was glad he couldn't see her face. His guilt was already unbearable. "Why did you stay with someone like *him*?"

"There is much about my master you don't understand."

"You told me you're not a slave. Do you serve him willingly?"

Awkwardly pushing and pivoting at the same time, he managed to sit facing her. His wounds were illusions as well; the whip had been enchanted.

"You should rest. Let me—" She reached out with the damp cloth, but he caught her wrist and captured her gaze.

"I am not a slave, because there are no slaves in Zylott. Much if not all of what you've been taught simply isn't true."

Confusion replaced the pity in her wide blue eyes.

Don't rush this. Take it a step at a time.

"When the Keeper refugees arrived in this dimension they were greeted with warmth and hospitality. Kin Zylott wed the Fahroni princess and united several smaller kingdoms. The people named the new kingdom in his honor. He was not the monster you've been led to believe."

"Then why ... What is Lord Nyx to you? Are there laws against such abuse? Should we notify the authorities?"

How could he continue without reinforcing her hatred of Lord Nyx? He tensed at the prospect, frustrated, yet determined to make her understand. She was listening. He would reveal the truth in stages.

"Have you given any thought to what I've told you about Lord Nyx?"

"I thought of little else after you stormed out last night." She lowered her hand to her lap, the robe drooping off one shoulder. Gods, how he wanted to touch her, to take her in his arms. "Why were you so angry?"

"Because you have been misled." The statement cut like a two-edged sword, making him flinch from his own words.

She touched his shoulder. "Are you in pain?"

"This is nothing," he said truthfully. "I've been in agony for years."

"What are you talking about?"

"Her name was Cherrine Drahbin. The fortress we escaped originally belonged to her family. She was the last of an old, noble line, and Lord Nyx took her to wife."

Minuette dropped the cloth into a bowl filled with cool water and turned her attention completely on him. "You're speaking of her in the past tense. What happened to her?"

"Three weeks after Lord Nyx confirmed she was with child a Veil Keeper came to this dimension and tortured her. He raped her so brutally ... I could not save her."

Her hand flew to her mouth and tears escaped the corners of her eyes. She shook her head as if to deny the events he'd just described. "You said he was robbed of his future," she whispered. "The baby died with his wife."

She stood and crossed the small cottage, staring out the window into the twilight. They'd been here for several hours as she tended his illusionary wounds.

Turning to face him across the cottage, she folded her arms across her breasts. "This is a tragedy. No one will deny that, but how does he know it was a Veil Keeper?"

"Cherrine survived for two agonizing days. All my skill, even my sorcery, couldn't keep death from claiming her."

She rushed back to the bed, her hands clutching the front of the robe. "He blames you, doesn't he? And you blame yourself. That's why you agreed to—Wait, you didn't answer my question. Did Cherrine tell him her assailant was a Veil Keeper?"

"She saw them come through the Veil. There was never any doubt."

"You just said 'them.' Was there more than one attacker?"

Nyx gritted his teeth and turned his face away. Grief rolled over him in waves far more painful than any physical wound. "The accomplice watched from the hem of the Veil while the man raped Cherrine over and over again."

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Chapter Seven

Trembling with suppressed emotions, Minuette forced herself to think. It all made perfect sense in some dark, demented way. When a Veil Keeper stood in the 'hem of the Veil,' they could see but not be seen. Others with mystic abilities could often sense Keepers there.

"Does Lord Nyx know who did this horrible thing? Were they brought to justice?"

"The rapist no longer lives."

"Did he—"

"Ironically, the rapist died at the hands of a Veil Keeper."

"And the accomplice?"

He heaved an audible sigh. "We must have proof. No one in the Keeper realm is going to take Lord Nyx at his word."

She was quiet for a moment as her brain absorbed all the facts. Her eyes returned to Damos and she slowly licked her lips. "He not only expected you to seduce me, he wanted you to get me with child."

Damos nodded and stood. They were less than an arm's length apart, still he made no move to touch her. "When the Veil parted and you literally landed in his back yard, it was almost like a sign, a second chance."

"But he had to coerce you to do his dirty work. That doesn't sound like divine intervention. That's forcing the hand of fate."

He stroked her cheek with the back of his knuckles and stared into her eyes. "I wanted you the first time I saw you. I just can't bear the thought of rape."

She shuddered. Just the mention of the crime turned her blood cold.

"Now you know more than you were ever meant to know."

"I understand—sort of, but one thing makes no sense. Even if his plan had succeeded the child would have been yours. How does that restore his heir, his 'future'?"

His gaze nearly glowed with emerald intensity. He parted his lips as if he would speak, then with a heavy sigh, turned away. "He would have adopted the child and cherished it as his own. Since losing Cherrine, the thought of being intimate with a woman is repellent to Lord Nyx."

Minuette felt a swell of compassion and promptly shoved it back. "What about me? Did he expect me to leave my child here and blithely walk away, or was I to be held prisoner indefinitely?"

"There are many times my master is unable to think beyond the pain."

Even this horrible loss didn't justify what Lord Nyx had attempted. She turned from Damos and started back across the room. His hand encircled her wrist, preventing her retreat.

"I've been more than indulgent." He drew her toward him, his gaze intent upon her face. "Will you explain something to me?"

Her eyelids drooped at the teasing brush of his fingertips. "That depends what you want to know."

"Why did you become a Veil Keeper? You're the Frost Princess. You could have bonded with a male from the Order of Flame and lived a long and happy life."

"I thought you knew nothing of Keeper ways." His warm, engaging gaze made flutters erupt in her belly.

"I've developed an interest recently."

"Those with the ability to manipulate the Veil are obligated to at least apply. Preliminary testing showed my *iede* to be unusually powerful, so I wasn't given the option of withdrawing my application."

"You're lonely."

It wasn't a question. "I've never been more miserable in my life. I love my work, but I hate the rules and regulations. It's almost as if the high priestess wants to keep us isolated."

"Then stay here with me. This is a vast dimension. We can go anywhere you like."

She lowered her gaze. His offer was far too tempting. No responsibilities, no pressure, just the devotion of a loving man. "I have to go back. As you said, 'I'm not just a Veil Keeper'." With a hesitant smile, Minuette raised her head and placed her hands on his shoulders. "Why don't you come with me? You might like the Keeper realm."

"I have obligations as well, at least for now."

Combing her fingers through his hair she smiled into his eyes. "I wish I didn't have a mystic shield. I want you to make love to me. Our shared dream was incredible. I'd love to experience that pleasure for real before I return to my crystal prison."

He caught her wrist and brought her hand to his mouth, pressing a kiss against her palm. "Do you mean that, Minuette? Do you want me to make love to you?"

"You say it with such longing." She chuckled. "Do you know something I don't know?"

"I can't force my way beyond your shield. The harder I try the more powerful it will become. But if you want me, really want me, the shield will disperse."

Her heart lodged in her throat, making it impossible to speak. Did he mean it? There was no reason for him to lie. He'd be a fool to try again, unless he'd figured out the secret. Swallowing awkwardly, she cupped the side of his face. "What if you're wrong? I don't want to risk hurting you."

"My source is infallible. If you want me, I'm yours."

A tremor of excitement skittered down her spine. "We can do all the things you showed me in the dream meld?"

"All that and a whole lot more!"

He swept her against his chest and she started to wrap her arms around him. "What about your back? The welts are just starting to fade."

"Give me the cloth." She passed it to him and he spoke an incantation. "Now drape it over my back." He turned and she spread the cloth wide across his abused back. After repeating the musical phrase several times, he told her to remove the cloth.

She gasped. "They're gone. How did you do that?"

He took the cloth from her and grinned. "Magic."

Nyx had nearly forgotten his back until Minuette reminded him.

I'd love to experience that pleasure for real before I return to my crystal prison. He couldn't believe she'd said those words. He'd been prepared to woo her for weeks, to win her trust over time.

He shouldn't touch her until she knew the whole truth, but they'd already gained such ground. "Are you sure this is what you want?"

Staring deeply into his eyes, she unfastened the robe and parted the material, leaving it hanging open, a plush frame for her naked body. The black velvet garment accented her alabaster skin. Her sleek hair spread over her shoulders, cascading to her waist. One long tendril trailed across her breast, drawing his gaze to the firm, round globe and its lush twin. Rosy and tightly drawn, her nipples begged for attention.

"You're so beautiful."

She smiled, a hint of uncertainty lingering in her gaze. "You're sure I won't hurt you?"

"Not if you trust me." He knelt before her and eased the robe off, tossing it onto the bed behind her. "We have to wait until you're desperate to have me inside before I breach your mystic shield. If you're feeling any hesitation, you have to tell me or you will hurt me. The shield is interfaced with your emotions, so it will do no good to lie."

"Maybe I'll just let you bring me pleasure and never breach my shield."

He pinched her bottom. "You'll be begging soon enough, vixen." Cupping her breasts, he rubbed her nipples with his thumbs. "You liked this before. How does it feel?"

"Nice."

"Nice will never do." Splaying his fingers against her back, he lowered his other hand to her hip, and bent his head to her breasts. Licking and nibbling, suckling and flicking, he worked his way from one nipple to the other and back again. Thrilled by her responsiveness, he paused for a look. Her nipples were pebble hard and shiny, her breasts slightly fuller than before.

"I ache," she whispered.

"That's a good start, but it's a long way from desperate." He slipped out of his pants and led her to the bed, spreading out on his back. Folding his hands behind his head, he grinned up at her. "I won't move until you tell me I can. I'm yours to do with as you will. Touch me. Taste me. Do anything you like. I'm yours to command."

Minuette trembled as she looked at Damos spread out before her in naked splendor. She'd never seen a body so finely made. Even in their shared dream she'd only seen him from behind. Long, muscular legs drew her attention naturally to his ridged cock. Both long and thick, his erection thrilled and frightened her. How was that going to fit inside her body?

His abdomen rippled, his chest was broad and well-defined. With his arms folded as they were, his biceps appeared especially large, strong, male. He was perfect.

"Are you going to do more than look?"

"Oh, definitely." She crawled onto the bed beside him and ran both hands up one leg. From ankle to groin in one fluid motion, she felt the bunch and flex of his muscle beneath her palms.

Avoiding his cock for the present, she set off on her maiden voyage into masculine flesh. How could he feel so hard and so soft all at the same time? Warm, smooth skin stretched tight over rock hard muscle. Fascinated by the contrast, she wandered from his arms to his chest and lower. She skipped his sex again and caressed his legs.

"You're the one who needs to be desperate, Minuette. Touch my cock or give me permission to move."

His harsh tone drew her attention to his tense face. He looked miserable. "Does it hurt when it's like this?" She closed her fingers around his shaft and brushed his cock head with her thumb.

"Yes, it hurts. It needs to be inside you. But you're not ready yet."

Sliding her hand up and down, she felt the distinct throb of the blood inside him. She cupped his balls with her other hand, rolling them gently with her thumb.

Touch me. Taste me. Do anything you like. I'm yours to command.

Emboldened by his obvious pleasure in her touch, she kissed the plush tip of his cock. He groaned and feminine power spiraled through her, heady and intoxicating. Parting her lips she took just the head into her mouth and circled him with her tongue. Faintly salty, hot, male, he tasted like temptation.

"I'll let you do that as long as you like, but not until we conquer your shield." His voice sounded strangled, desperate, his body trembled visibly. With one lingering lick, she released him from her mouth, and turned her face toward his.

"Come up here and straddle my face."

"What?" Just the description sounded shocking.

"I want to lick your pussy. Come here."

She had certainly enjoyed it in the dream meld, but he hadn't done it like this. Crawling up along his body, she moved into position, straddling his face. Self-conscious, she crossed her arms over her breasts. This felt a bit obscene.

"Part your folds for me, sweetheart. We both know I have to be careful this close to your mystic shield."

Realizing what he meant, it took a few seconds for her to muster the courage to touch herself. She parted the way and his tongue followed, licking and stroking her creamy slit. She sighed. His gentle caress sent tingling heat curling deep into her core. Oh, this was wonderful, even better than the dream.

"Would you like a taste of what it will feel like to have me inside you?"

She had no idea what he meant, but his mouth felt so good she didn't really care. Coating his finger with her cream, he worked his way back until his fingertip pressed against her tightly puckered hole. Her eyes widened. She started to protest, but his lips closed around her clit. He suckled carefully on her sensitive flesh as his finger pushed into her bottom.

"Oh, that feels..." He dragged almost out then pushed back in. She gasped, then moaned as tension gathered low in her belly.

Her breasts ached, her nipples tightened. She rocked between his lips and his finger. Scalding heat cascaded through her a moment before he withdrew.

"No! Why did you stop? That felt wonderful."

"Turn over. This will feel even better." He moved off the bed and helped her lie down, before he knelt between her thighs. "Once we've dispersed your shield, I want you to ride my face again. But right now I need to see what I'm doing. I can't afford to make a mistake."

"I understand."

His mouth returned to her breasts. He seemed fascinated by her nipples. His tongue flicked, licked, and circled, until she tossed restlessly. He sealed his lips around her crest and drew firmly. She groaned. Stinging darts of pleasure shot from her breasts to her clit.

He pushed her legs up and back, spreading her thighs wide. Minuette felt brazen, wanton, yet empty and needy all at the same time. He parted her folds with his thumbs and focused entirely on her clit. Circle, flick, circle, flick, he drove her passion higher. She arched, he held her down.

Pleasure built, the rhythmic precursor to a spectacular orgasm. He immediately raised his head and waited for the pleasure to recede.

"Are you *ever* going to let me come?" she cried.

"Soon. We're almost there."

Panting harshly and desperate with need, she kicked out at him.

"What do you want more than anything?"

"I want to squeeze you as I come."

He circled her clit with his finger. "How badly do you want me inside you?"

"Badly! Please, now."

He didn't hesitate. Hooking her knees over his elbows, he kept her legs spread wide and filled her slick passage with one violent thrust. She cried out. He gasped and shuddered, then they both stilled.

"Did we do it?" she whispered.

"Am I inside you?"

She laughed. Her inner muscles stretched tight around his thick cock. He was buried to the hilt, both her hymen and her mystic shield conquered by their mutual need. "Thank you. Oh, thank you."

He chuckled and guided her legs to his waist. "We've barely begun. Hook your ankles behind my back."

His mouth covered hers as she secured her legs and took him a little bit deeper. With soft, tender kisses he explored her mouth. His lips slid, his tongue delved, he leisurely tasted her.

He didn't attempt to move, seemed content just to be inside her. Even in the dream meld it hadn't been like this. His cock felt enormous, overwhelming, wonderful! She smiled against his lips and shifted her hips restlessly.

"Am I hurting you? I felt a physical barrier too. You should have told me you were a virgin."

She tightened her inner muscles and grinned mischievously. "I didn't feel like a virgin after the dream meld."

"Well, you feel like a virgin now. You're so fucking tight it's killing me. We're going to have to take this really slow."

Balancing on his knees he slipped his hands beneath her bottom and drew nearly out of her core. She hissed. He groaned. Then, he pushed back in and they sighed together.

"You're driving me crazy." She unhooked her ankles and raised her legs high against his sides. "If it hurts, I'll tell you. Stop teasing me."

His thumb centered over her clit, but he thrust more forcefully. "I like teasing you, and you like being teased." Pairing each distinct penetration with a tantalizing flick against her clit, he soon had her gasping and arching, poised on the brink of release.

She was afraid to reveal how close she was, afraid he'd deprive her again.

"Nothing's stopping us now, sweetheart. Let me feel you come."

Grasping him tightly with her thighs she surrendered to the pleasure. Tingling heat gripped her core and expanded through her abdomen. She cried out, shaking beneath him, hands clutching the bedspread.

"Very nice." He gathered her in his arms and rolled to his back, arranging her on top of him, straddling his hips. "Now you take me, as hard and as fast as you like."

She braced her hands against his chest and lifted her hips. Inch by tantalizing inch his thick length emerged from her core. She looked down, realizing just how much of him had been inside her. "Oh my."

He clasped her hips and thrust, burying himself to the balls.

She gasped. "I thought it was my turn."

"Just helping you find the rhythm." He panted harshly, despite his playful smile.

With his hands on her hips and his body lunging steadily beneath her, she quickly matched his rhythm. Her breasts jostled with each forceful thrust. He reared up and captured her nipple between his teeth. She cried out at the unexpected nip, but her body understood. She shattered in waves of tingling pleasure.

He stroked her gently, massaging her breasts and rolling her nipples as he surged with firm, steady pressure. She caressed his chest, his abdomen, his shoulders, hungry for the hot hard feel of his body beneath her hands, between her thighs, deep in her desire slick pussy.

How had she survived without him?

How would she find the strength to leave?

They came together the final time. Minuette clutched him to her breasts, her heart aching with the bittersweet release.

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Chapter Eight

After bathing in the stream behind the cottage they slept for several hours. Nyx awakened first. Minuette snuggled against him so sweetly, so trustingly, it made his chest clench. Before they made love again, he would tell her the whole truth.

He brushed the hair back from her brow and moonlight touched her face. His breath caught in his lungs and his heart missed a beat. Staggeringly beautiful, she'd surrendered herself to him. No, she'd surrendered to Damos, the healer, not Lord Nyx.

Minuette, I'm not who you think I am. He rehearsed the words in his mind, dreading her reaction. *I'm the cruel master, the ruthless tyrant Veil Keepers are taught to fear. I'm the half-crazed sorcerer who will steal your soul.*

Xenos had known this would happen. Xenos always knew. He'd told Nyx nothing productive would happen while he was fixated on the past. All Nyx wanted was to move beyond the pain, to feel whole again. In his fury and bitterness, he'd thought a child would ease the way, would allow him to build a future despite the devastation.

None of it mattered now. Nyx knew he couldn't keep her. His heart ached at the prospect of releasing her, of never seeing her again. She had responsibilities in the Keeper realm, people who depended on her. Despite how her tenderness moved him, he had to let her go.

Carefully disentangling himself from her warm, naked body, he crossed to the window and stared out into the night. Cherrine had been royalty, as was Minuette. Still the two women were nothing alike. Cherrine had been prim and proper, continually concerned with deportment and propriety. Minuette was a free spirit stifled by circumstance.

Minuette's slender arms slipped around his middle, her breasts pressed against his back. "What are you thinking about?" He didn't answer and she urged him to turn around. Luminous in the moonlight, her gaze stared up at him. "Are you all right?"

He wanted to laugh. Never in his life had he been so conflicted.

"I must tell you something and I'm not sure how to start."
She smiled. "When the water's cold—"

"It's easier to just jump in." If only it were that simple.
"Regardless of what happens between us, I want you to understand that tonight was *not* part of..."

"The deal you made with Lord Nyx?"

He put his hands on her shoulders, gazing into her eyes. "I made love to you because I sensed the aching void you try so hard to conceal. I know what it's like to be alone. I thought we could comfort each other. I wanted to ease your emptiness, and hoped you could ease mine. Lord Nyx is—"

"I don't want to talk about Lord Nyx or the Sacred Order of the Veil. Tonight I am Minuette and you are Damos. Nothing exists beyond this cottage."

Heaving a heavy sigh, he enfolded her in his arms. "All right. Just for tonight, but in the morning we must talk."

"Deal." She looped her arms around his neck and kissed his mouth. Her tongue moved boldly, her hands combing through his hair.

He returned her kiss with equal fervor, his emotions raw, exposed. She released desires within him he had buried long ago. Her soft body ignited lust, but he wanted so much more. Not even with Cherrine had his need been so acute. He longed for the soul-deep bonding of a true mate.

Not now! Not with a Veil Keeper. It couldn't be true. She was supposed to be his enemy. How could she hold the other half of his soul?

Nyx swept her into his arms and carried her to the bed.

"Maybe I wanted to try the table or floor." She tugged playfully on his hair.

"Maybe we have unfinished business between your pussy and my mouth."

She laughed. "That's right. You said something about giving me a longer ride."

He set her down beside the bed and spread out on his back, determined to think of nothing but physical gratification. "Straddle my face as you did before, only in the opposite direction. I think you'll find the position enjoyable."

She narrowed her gaze warily as she climbed on top of him, one knee on either side of his face. "Oh, I see." Leaning forward, she braced herself on her forearms, her mouth hovering over his cock.

Tension wound like a spring through Nyx as he anticipated the wet heat of her mouth. Gently parting her folds, he admired the carnal beauty of her rosy flesh.

Her moist breath stirred against his sensitive cock head, so he circled her clit playfully. It became a game, a teasing competition. He flicked his tongue across her nub, making her murmur and squirm. She suckled just his tip until he moaned. Then, she took him deep into her mouth and sucked in earnest.

With her mystic shield no longer a deterrent, he was free to explore, to devour every fold and secret furrow. He thrust into her core, nibbled on her clit, and lapped up her body's sweet cream. Her throaty moans urged him on, made him bolder, more determined to ignore the hot slide of her mouth.

She took him deep.

He used his fingers.

"That's not fair!" she gasped, momentarily releasing his cock.

"There is no fair or unfair, only what feels good. Does this feel good?" She whimpered and her core gripped his fingers. "I'll take that as a yes." He centered his mouth over her clit, while his fingers slid, creating a distinct rhythm.

To his astonishment, he felt her hand insinuate itself between his thighs. She didn't cup his balls or—Gods, the little vixen used her finger!

He hadn't intended on coming in her mouth, but her finger felt so damn good. She matched each shallow thrust with the deeper motion of her mouth, and Nyx lost control.

Arching his hips off the bed, he thrust to the back of her mouth and released his seed down her throat.

"You are a very naughty girl," Damos growled as Minuette rolled to his side. She grinned from ear to ear, pleased by her victory.

"I can't imagine where I got the idea."

"Surely you don't think I'm finished with you."

She chuckled. "I certainly hope not. You got yours. Where's mine?"

He pounced on her and she cried out, shocked by his sudden aggression.

"Minuette." He waited until she met his gaze to finish. "I will never hurt you. I thought you would have realized that by now."

"I have. You just startled me."

"Well," he knelt between her legs and bent her knees, opening her to his ravenous stare, "there is still unfinished business between your pussy and my mouth. Do you have any objections?"

"I'll let you know."

He grinned and lowered his head between her thighs. She'd been on the verge of orgasm when she sent him over the edge. His hands remained on her thighs and he continued her arousal using only his mouth. Feathering tiny kisses over her hairless mound, his warm breath caressed her damp folds. He took his time, tormenting her with his patience.

"Please." She tangled her fingers in his hair and arched against his mouth. The faint vibration of his chuckle was almost enough to make her come. Almost.

"Turn over. I want you on your hands and knees."

Without hesitation she flipped over onto her belly, then pulled her knees up under her. Her core pulsed with demand and her skin felt sensitized, almost sunburned.

His chuckle sounded so salacious she glanced over her shoulder at him. "Are you going to do more than look?" She challenged him with his own words.

"Oh, definitely."

He cupped her ass with both hands, squeezing firmly as he bent to nip one rounded cheek. "You have a fabulous ass, little vixen. It makes me want to do very wicked things."

A shiver of excitement shook her slender frame as she pictured his massive cock pushing into her bottom. "I don't think I want to do that."

"And I have nothing with which to lubricate you, so for now your virgin ass is safe with me."

Spreading her bottom wide, he exposed her tiny hole and rimmed it with his tongue. "Oh!" She shivered and tingled. Her pussy throbbed jealously, impatient to be filled. He could use his tongue, his fingers, or his cock, she didn't care. Each stroke made the emptiness worse.

He released her bottom and slipped two fingers into her core. She greeted him with an enthusiastic squeeze.

"You're really wet, but it might be too soon to take you again." He moved his fingers and she arched against his hand. "Are you sore or does this feel good?"

"It feels good. I want *you* inside me."

"As milady commands."

Despite her urgings, he entered her slowly, allowing her body plenty of time to adjust. His fingers stroked her clit as

his thick shaft pushed deeper and deeper, stretching her wider and wider. Had he been this big before?

"Almost there."

She panted into the bedspread, clutching the fabric with her hands. The stinging burn receded and all she felt was full. His hot, hard, throbbing cock filled her to overflowing.

Pressing against her back, he slipped his hands beneath her and cupped her breasts. "Tell me how that feels?"

"You're ... huge."

"Do you want me to pull out?"

"Gods, no! Just give me a minute."

"Take all the time you need."

He caressed her breasts, teasing her nipples, tugging, rolling, pinching. One hand remained on her breast, while the other slid along her belly. He stroked her mound, traced her delicate folds, and circled her clit.

Minuette tried to focus on the sensations awakening within her body, but his tenderness stirred her heart. His caring made her long for more than physical release.

A slow melting heat swirled through her core, still her heart ached painfully. Her body eased his way with liquid welcome, allowing him to move. He drew back, while his finger stroked her clit. She sighed and lifted her hips.

This was carnal pleasure. He was fucking her masterfully. Why couldn't her greedy heart be satisfied? He couldn't offer her more and she had no right to ask. She'd known the situation when she started this.

His hands grasped her hips, his movements sure and steady. Minuette reached back and grabbed his wrist,

interrupting his rhythm. She wanted to be wicked, sexual, utterly abandoned to forbidden pleasures. She needed the fire to burn so hot it incinerated her discontent.

"Fuck my ass," she whispered. "I want you to."

"What?" He sounded as shocked as she felt.

Had she actually said the words out loud?

"You heard me. I want to know every pleasure the carnal world has to offer."

His harsh panting was the only sound for a long time. "I can't take you like that without preparing you first. You would feel nothing but pain."

"At least I would feel something," she cried.

He pulled out and turned her to face him as they knelt on the bed. "What is this? What's wrong? You don't really want me to hurt you."

She covered her face with her hands, unwilling to share her pain. She'd been alone for so long. This glimpse of intimacy only accented her isolation. "I can't do this." She sobbed. "I can't pretend. You're making love to me, but we're not in love. I want you to fuck me instead."

He pulled her hands away from her face and pressed a gentle kiss to her lips. "No, you just don't want to pretend. I understand the longing. You make me feel the same. I care about you as I have not cared in a very long time." Sweeping her into his arms, he eased her back onto the bed. "Take me willingly into your body and look into my eyes."

She parted her thighs and raised her arms, inviting him with a hesitant smile. Moving between her legs, he arched over her, surged into her tight heat with one smooth drive.

He slipped his forearm beneath her neck, propping himself on his elbow. His gaze locked with hers and he moved in her core, strong steady strokes that communicated as much as his expression.

Affection, heat, compassion, need, he showed her his heart as he gave her his body. His free hand caressed her face, but his gaze never left her eyes. Passion burned brighter and she saw his pain, his weariness and longing.

She canted her hips and took him deeper, offering what comfort her body could provide. They clung to each other, two wounded souls, seeking shelter from life's storm. He thrust to the hilt. She wrapped her legs around his hips, clutching him to her heart. They cried out together, unprepared for the intensity of their desire.

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Chapter Nine

When Minuette awoke it was light. Damos lay beside her, his gaze intent on her face. "How long have you been awake?" She smiled sleepily and stretched her arms over his head. His expression remained guarded.

"Not long." He tucked a strand of her hair behind her ear, his fingers lingering against her cheek. "I have something I must do and while I'm away I want your word you won't leave the cottage."

"If you're worried about my safety, take me with you."

"I'll seal the cottage. You'll be perfectly safe, but the spell is broken if you open a door or a window."

"Where are you going?" He seemed distant and wary this morning, the tender lover who'd held her through the night all but gone.

"It shouldn't take long. I'll bring in water so you can wash up while I'm away."

"Take this film off my palms and I won't need water to bathe. Why did it re-form? I thought you'd removed it." He glanced at her hands, then crawled out of bed. Clearly something was bothering him. She sighed and sat up, tucking the covers under her arms. "You said we needed to talk. Is now a good time, or are you going to continue acting like a stranger?"

"If I release your palms will you promise not to leave until after I return?"

"Why won't you tell me where you're going?"

He raked his fingers through his hair and pulled on his pants, each movement revealing his agitation. "There are things you must know before you return to the Keeper realm. You'll soon have little reason to trust me. I want to show you certain things regarding your order that will help you understand. I don't want you to return to the temple. It's far too dangerous."

"What are you talking about?" Her stomach knotted with anxiety. "Why will I soon not trust you?"

"We'll talk when I return."

He wouldn't meet her gaze and Minuette wanted to shake him. They'd made love four times, kissing, touching, drowning in each other's eyes. Now he wouldn't even look at her.

"What means the most to you in the entire universe?"

"My family." What was wrong with him?

"Swear upon the safety of your family that you will be here when I return."

"All right."

"Say it."

"You're acting like a lunatic." She huffed. "I swear upon the safety of my family that I will be here when you return."

Heat infused her palms, stinging, burning. She yelped. The film evaporated. "It was never really gone, was it? You just wanted me to think it was."

He ignored her question and moved through the cottage chanting under his breath. He was acting more and more like a sorcerer and less like a healer.

You'll soon have little reason to trust me. She couldn't get those words out of her mind.

"As soon as I close the door behind me, the cottage will be sealed. You must not open—"

"The door or any of the windows. Yeah, I get it. How long will you be gone?"

"I'm not sure." He opened the door to leave.

"Is your name even Damos?"

He looked into her eyes, his gaze clouded with pain. "My name is Damos Kinson. Not everything I told you was a lie."

* * * *

Nyx sorted through his notes and data crystals trying to find the most damning evidence. He knew far more than he could prove. That had been the problem all along. He couldn't present his case to the Steering Committee until the proof was overwhelming. The high priestess was one of their members and he was the enemy.

Minuette must be convinced of her order's corruption before she returned to the Keeper realm. He didn't want her anywhere near the high priestess and his little vixen was far too stubborn for her own good.

"You're going to let her go? After all you shared. You're going to return her to her family?"

Nyx cringed. Damn Xenos and his timing. Nyx didn't even bother to look up. "Last time you appeared you tried to convince me to let her go. Are Guardians always so indecisive?"

"You're scared shitless."

That brought his head up. "I just want to keep her safe."

"You just want to keep her period, but you're afraid to even try."

Stashing two data crystals in his pocket, Nyx pushed back from his desk and stood. Xenos hadn't taken on form. A bluish radiance indicated his location. Still his voice was audible.

"I'm going to tell her what I know about her order. I'm going to do my damndest to keep her away from the high priestess, and I'm going to tell her who I am."

"Are you going to tell her you love her?"

Nyx snorted. "As if she'd believe Lord Nyx."

"Everything happens for a reason. A wise man once told you that."

The Guardian's laughter echoed in the room long after his light faded from view.

* * * *

A firm tapping on the door drew Minuette from her troubled thoughts. Damos hadn't been gone long. Could he have returned already? She opened the shutter just far enough to peek out, without drawing attention to the window. A tall, red-haired man stood on the front porch in a robe identical to the one Damos had given her.

Was this Lord Nyx? Her heart lurched and she frantically searched her memory. The only time she'd seen the sorcerer was when he'd punished Damos. She hadn't seen Nyx's face or his hair. This could be anyone.

The man knocked again, louder this time.

"Priestess Cendar, I know you're in there. Damos sent me to escort you."

Bullshit. There was no way Damos would send someone after her. He'd made her swear on the safety of her family. She eased the shutter closed and moved away from the window. This was a trick and she wasn't falling for it. But what should she do?

The stranger knocked again. "Minuette, let me in. I mean you no harm. I am here to protect you."

A mystic compulsion accompanied his words. She took two steps toward the door before she realized what she was doing.

The door disappeared and they stood face to face. Minuette gasped and manifested *iede*, preparing for battle.

"Calm down. I will not hurt you."

She cupped her hands, protecting the powdery substance that enabled her mystic abilities. The door was still there; he'd made it transparent, but the cottage was still sealed. With sharp, angular features and smoldering ebony eyes, he looked Fahreni and yet something about him wasn't right.

If he could enter, he would have by now. Damos' spell held firm. "Who are you?"

"Didn't he tell you about me? No, I don't suppose that he would." He leaned his forearm against the doorframe and flashed an indolent smile. "Open the door. You have nothing to fear from me. I'm here to protect your unborn child."

"My what?"

"I trusted Damos to protect them last time and look how that ended."

She gasped, backing farther away from the door. "You *are* Lord Nyx."

"Lord Nyx?" His brow furrowed and his confusion seemed genuine. "What are you talking about? Who do you think you've been fucking for the past day and a half?"

Aghast, she stared at the stranger, her world reeling. If Damos was Lord Nyx, then who the hell was he?

"You're carrying my grandchild and I mean to see this one born."

Kin Zylott was dead. This couldn't be real, or Nyx was illegitimate. But this person looked no older than Nyx. She couldn't focus, couldn't make sense of the madness.

"Let me in, Minuette."

When he said her name she felt the compulsion again. Stubbornness alone allowed her to resist. "Not a chance. I don't know who you really are, or what you want with me, but—"

"It sounds like I'm the only one who hasn't filled your head full of lies. Every word I've spoken is true. You are with child, and I will see it safely born, with or without your cooperation."

He extended his hands toward the threshold and pulses of energy bombarded the door.

Minuette recoiled from the sensations inundating her body. Icy cold, an acrid stench, the metallic taste of blood. Her stomach heaved. *Setti!* This man possessed *Setti* power.

She tossed *iede* into the air directly in front of her. "Reveal!" As she gazed through the sparkling cloud the creature's true form appeared. Hideously twisted, with

multiple limbs, his large black eyes were the only feature on his long, narrow face.

Gathering mystic energy into the center of her body, Minuette prepared to part the Veil. An oath made to a liar became null and void.

Not everything I told you was a lie.

Damos' tormented tone followed her into the Veil.

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Chapter Ten

Minuette tried not to startle every time someone knocked on her door. She'd been back in her home dimension for nearly a week. After a tearful reunion with her family, she'd gone into seclusion. No one blamed her. No one questioned her. They patiently waited until she was ready to share.

"Can I come in?" Elita's hopeful tone immediately followed her tap on the door.

"It's not locked."

Elita Mere stepped into the room, her pastel-blue eyes filled with compassion. She'd pulled her silver-blonde hair back into a thick coil that reached the middle of her back.

"Your mother made me promise to go away if you asked. I'm glad you let me in."

Minuette had grown up with Elita. She couldn't remember a time when they hadn't been best friends. "So what are the gossips saying about me? Am I the talk of the dimension?"

"Yes and no. Everyone is concerned, but I haven't heard anything unkind."

Minuette laughed. Elita was a terrible liar. "What brings you by today?"

"I wanted to make sure you were all right."

"And..."

Elita lowered her gaze, her cheeks turning pink. "And my cousin put me up to it. Tavon is dying to talk to you."

"We can't have our Life Keepers dying on us. There aren't that many to spare."

Elita smiled. "Don't let his bonded mate scare you. She looks more ferocious than she is."

"Bonded mate? When did Tavon apply for *Pim Noctar*?"

"It's probably better if they explain. Are you up for a quick visit? They're waiting downstairs."

Somehow Minuette doubted the visit would be quick as they made their way downstairs. The afternoon sun bathed the sitting room in gold light, drawing Minuette's attention to the Death Keeper. Short, spiky black hair and the coldest eyes Minuette had ever seen, this was Tavon's bonded mate?

"Minuette, this is Rammi Delmont."

The Death Keeper inclined her head, the customary greeting for a Veil Keeper. Minuette had barely taken her seat before Rammi started speaking.

"Master Tilden and I have been working with Lord Nyx for some time. Because of the recent murder of Master Tilden's son, he turned the investigation over completely to Lord Nyx."

Minuette swallowed. Apparently Tavon wasn't the one anxious to speak with her. It seemed appropriate that Lord Nyx was in league with the Death Master. "What does this have to do with me?"

"When Lord Nyx returned to the cottage it was saturated with *Setti* energy. He was frantic. He feared the worst until he realized the safety seal hadn't been broken. He verified that you'd returned and we haven't heard from him since."

He'd been worried about her. He'd ... "That's all fascinating, but why are you here?"

"I hate to pressure you this soon after your trauma, but—"

"Tact has never been a Death Keeper skill?"

Rammi smiled and her face transformed. Her silver eyes softened and her white teeth flashed. She was actually rather pretty. "I was going to say patience isn't one of my virtues, but that works too."

"They need to know what happened at the cottage." Elita sat beside her cousin facing Minuette. "Can you talk about it?"

"I've spent the past six days trying to understand what happened at the cottage. The person who can make sense of what happened is the last person I want to see right now."

"I understand why you feel that way, but I've given you as much time as I dare."

Minuette sprang up out of her chair and spun to face Damos—Lord Nyx.

"I can't believe you'd dare..." She turned on the Keepers. "You brought him here? I want *all* of you out of my house!"

"They didn't bring me here. I haven't left your side since you returned. There is far more at stake than you and me. I know you understand that now. I've never encountered such a concentration of *Setti* energy. I need to know what happened while I was gone."

She glanced at the Keepers, then back at her ... lover. "I need to speak with *Lord Nyx* alone."

"Are you sure?" Elita's gaze moved warily between Minuette and the sorcerer.

Minuette nodded. "We have a few things to settle before anything else can be planned."

"We'll be just across the hall."

Nyx waited until the others left before he spoke again. "I tried to tell you. I returned to the fortress to bring you proof about the high priestess. I knew once you realized who I was you wouldn't believe a word I said."

He hadn't left her side. He'd guarded her, protected her, unseen yet ever present.

He'd lied; he'd manipulated her. Any self-respecting woman would hate him.

Regardless of what happens between us, I want you to understand that tonight was not part of...

"You used me."

He didn't deny it.

I made love to you because I sensed the aching void you try so hard to conceal. When I melded with your dream, I wanted nothing so much as to comfort you. I understand what it's like to be alone.

Over and over his words had echoed through her mind. She'd given up trying to hate him and determined to feel nothing at all.

"What happened at the cottage?"

"I met your father."

Her casual announcement rocked him back a step. "My father appeared to you? How do you know he was my father? What did he look like? Do you know his name? What did he want with you?"

She shook her head, confused by his barrage of questions. "You don't deny it? You're half *Setti*?"

His features became an expressionless mask, his gaze inscrutable. "My biological father is a *Setti* hybrid. I am one-

quarter *Setti*. I've always considered Kin Zylott my true father."

"This is unbelievable." She finger combed her hair out of her eyes. A small part of her had held on to the hope that the creature was lying.

He moved a bit closer without crowding her. "Describe your visitor to me."

"Why do you know so little about your biological father? He knew quite a lot about you."

"This hybrid assumed my father's shape and came to my mother's bed. It was only after I started manifesting unusual abilities that my mother confessed her suspicions. *Setti* hybrids do this frequently. They impregnate unknowing women and then one day the child just disappears."

Horried by the implication, she turned her face away. How could she hope to protect her child from the *Setti* beast? "Why didn't you disappear?"

"My mother suspected what had happened and hired mystic guards to protect me until I was old enough to protect myself." He cleared his throat and fidgeted, obviously uncomfortable with the topic. "He's attempted to claim me countless times. I've eluded him."

"He tried to claim your child a little sooner."

Trancelike he moved toward her and placed his hand low on her belly.

Minuette needed to know for sure, so she allowed his touch. "Am I?"

"Yes." He spoke the word without inflection, concealing his reaction to the news.

"I have no symptoms yet, but I figured he would know." She twisted away from his hand and took a step back. "It seems your plan worked, Lord Nyx. A Veil Keeper will bear you a child."

He reached for her hand. She snatched it away, warning him off with a glare.

"I abandoned my plan long before I made love to you. I never meant—"

"You held me captive, manipulated and lied to me. This is *exactly* what you meant to happen."

Regret burned in his gaze, making her heart flutter in her breast. She'd never met anyone more adept at hiding their emotions. It shocked her that he would allow himself to appear vulnerable.

"You're right. I have no defense. I did everything you say." He reached for her hand again, his fingers lightly enveloping hers. Warm and strong, his hand felt wonderful. "The only time I touched you within the scope of my plan was in the shared dream. When I made love to you in the cottage it was because we needed each other."

"This is irrelevant." Her entire being rebelled against the lie. Regardless of her determination to feel nothing, her heart still longed for him. "You mentioned the high priestess. What does she have to do with all this?"

"I believe she's a *Setti* slave." He halted her protestations with a gentle smile. "Let Rammi explain it to you. She has no reason to lie."

"There are many things I don't understand about this, but one thing seems paramount. It is very rare for a Mystic Keeper to conceive except with their bonded mate."

He framed her face with his palms and kissed her gently on the mouth. "Do you believe that's true or was I just damn lucky?"

Without waiting for her to reply, Nyx opened the sitting room door. The other Keepers filed in, their expressions quizzical. For the next hour Rammi explained what they knew about the *Setti* realm. Minuette listened with a mixture of fascination and horror.

"*Setti* hybrids can move between dimensions at will?" Tavon sounded thoughtful. How could he be so calm?

Rammi shook her head. "There are very specific limitations. They can move between the *Setti* realm and the other dimension that contributed to their birth."

"So a Keeper/*Setti* hybrid could appear in this dimension whenever they chose?" Elita asked.

"Keeper/*Setti* hybrids are extremely rare. Thankfully there are only a handful of species compatible with full *Setti* genetics. Unfortunately, the same cannot be said of the *Setti* hybrids. They are much more successful in producing offspring." Nyx offered the information in a nearly expressionless tone.

Minuette looked at Rammi. Did the Death Keeper know about Nyx's biological father?

"Hybrids can also create dimensional links by getting some poor fool addicted to their essence." Rammi crossed her legs and placed her hand on Tavon's thigh. The casual, intimate

gesture made Minuette feel hollow inside. "*Setti* energy is like a drug, the more you get the more you want, until nothing else matters. This sort of link only allows the hybrid access to the slave. If they want to go somewhere within the slave's dimension the slave has to take them there."

Minuette looked at Nyx. "This is what you think has happened to High Priestess Sacha?"

Rammi answered for him. "The evidence is all right there, just put the pieces together. She bested the Ordeal at an age when most Veil Keepers are still in training. Everyone who has ever crossed her has met with a mysterious accident. Including her lover Brodi, who was one vicious son of a bitch. On a more superficial note, why does she still look like she's twenty?"

"If this is true, then we can trap him. I have no desire to live the rest of my life in fear."

"What are you thinking?" Nyx appeared none too pleased by her sudden enthusiasm.

"He's a Fahreni/*Setti* hybrid so he can move freely through your dimension, but he has to have a slave link to come after me here. Is that correct?"

He nodded stiffly, his gaze dubious.

"So, I go confront my high priestess about her indifference to my abduction."

Rammi looked at Nyx, her silver gaze sparkling. "It's brilliant. There's no way he'll resist such a temptation."

"Oh, he'll take the bait all right," Nyx agreed. "And he just might take her all the way back to the *Setti* realm."

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Chapter Eleven

"I want to do this. No, I *have* to do this. I won't live my life in fear."

Nyx knew Minuette was right, but everything within him balked at the idea of putting her in danger. "We'll take every precaution. Rammi will notify Tilden and I'll see if there is anything Xenos can do. Guardians are generally required to remain neutral, but it doesn't hurt to ask."

"Tilden?" She smiled. "The Death Master terrifies most people and you call him by name. Who is Xenos?"

"My boss."

"You don't consider yourself subordinate to your king?" Amusement lightened her tone though she managed to suppress her smile.

"Sef is my brother. I honed many of my mystic abilities at his expense. Xenos is the most powerful being I've ever encountered. There's no comparison."

They'd returned to Minuette's bedroom shortly after her friends left. She'd contacted the Temple of the Veil and scheduled an appointment with the high priestess, then sent a comm crystal to her parents, warning them she had a visitor.

"How will your parents react to my being here?"

"That depends on how I react to your being here."

He paused, all playfulness falling away. "I will not leave you, but if you'd rather not know I'm here—"

"It's a little too late for that." She moved closer, her skirts swishing against his robe. "You've really been here all this time?"

"I wasn't sure what happened at the cottage, but it was obvious someone meant you harm. There was no way I was leaving your side."

"Why?"

"Because I love you."

She smiled, running her hands up his chest. "I thought it might be something like that."

"You're supposed to say I love you too." He pulled her into his arms.

"I'm still angry with you."

"What can I do to make amends?"

"Show me how passionately you love me over and over again."

He angled his head and covered her mouth with his. Sliding and caressing, he moved against her lips. He nibbled and licked, sucking gently on her lower lip. She raked her fingers through his hair and deepened the kiss. Their mouths moved together, her tongue rimmed his lips.

"I'll love you with my mouth," he whispered against her lips. His tongue pushed into her mouth, stroking her, tasting her.

His fingers searched for the fastenings on her gown. Swirls of silver and gold, the material outlined her full breasts and flared in wide pleats from her waist. As beautiful as the garment was, he wanted her out of it.

"How does this blasted thing come off?"

She stepped back with a sensual smile and held her arms out to the side. "Like this." The dress disintegrated in a burst of sparkling powder, leaving her skin dusted with glimmering specks.

"You fashion your garments from *iede*?"

"Most Keepers do."

He gazed at her glitter-dusted body, awed by her uninhibited beauty. "I like this dress even better."

She smiled. "I just bet you do." Reaching for the clasp at his shoulder, she helped him remove his robe. "Do the symbols have meaning or are they merely decoration?" She traced one bright green glyph as she set the robe aside.

"Each has an individual meaning and they can be combined in a variety of ways to form concepts and phrases. It's the ancient language of my mother's people."

"Do many Fahreni have mystical abilities?"

He circled one of her nipples with his fingertip. "I'm having trouble concentrating. Can we postpone the history lesson until after I ravish you?"

"Are you going to ravish me?"

"Most definitely." He held out his hand and conjured a midnight blue vial, with a long spiraling stopper.

"What is that?" She'd remained where she was, several paces from the bed.

He set the container down on the nightstand and held out his hand. "Come here and I'll show you."

"I'm not sure I want to know." Her warm gaze moved over his naked body.

Returning to her side, he took her by the hand and drew her to the bedside. "You've already conceived so *Pim Noctar* is not an option. It would be too hard on the child. My mother's people also have a bonding ritual. It may seem strange to you, but the result would be the same. We would be bonded mates."

"What do we have to do?"

"I offer my body to you and you accept each offering. Then you do the same for me. If you accept everything I offer and offer everything in return, our spirits will unite as our bodies join. We'll become bonded mates."

She glanced at the vial he'd conjured. "Is that what you didn't have the other night?"

"Yes." He lifted her chin, waiting until she looked at him. "That wasn't what you needed then, but it is part of this ritual. Are you willing to surrender even that to me?"

"You offered me your love. I'll hold nothing back."

He kissed her brow and traced her mouth with his thumb. "Then, bond with me."

He picked up the vial and pulled out the stopper. The spicy scent escaped into the air. "This is potent. We must be careful. It can heighten sensation to the point of pain." Covering the narrow mouth of the vial, he coated his index finger. He spread the oily substance over his lips and hers, then set the vial aside.

"It tingles. Can I taste it?"

"Yes, but only from my lips." Looking into her eyes he began the ritual that would unite them for all time. "I offer you my mouth, my kiss, my words of encouragement."

She hesitated, her lips glistening. "Are there specific words I should say?"

"Just say what's in your heart."

"I accept your mouth. I revel in your kiss. I crave your words of encouragement. I offer you my lips, my kiss, the loving stroke of my tongue."

Desire surged through him at her throaty tone and the images her words ignited. He kissed her. Their lips slid easily, and her tongue ventured forth and tasted the oil. He captured her moan in his open mouth. Holding her face between his hands he took the kiss deeper, reveling in her eager response. Her tongue returned each stroke, curled around and slid against his.

Breathless and dizzy, he finally eased away, handing her the vial. "Offer me your breasts. I want to adore them with my mouth."

Understanding, she took the oil and coated her nipples and areolas. She returned the vial to the nightstand and raised her arms, clasping her hands behind her head. "Touch my breasts, enjoy my nipples. I wait for the stroke of your tongue."

He bent to her breasts and licked the sweet oil off her sensitive flesh. Her nipples gathered, the color deepening from pink to dusky rose. He suckled firmly, savoring the hard peak as it rolled against his tongue.

"Touch me, my love. Know my body better than you know your own." He guided her hand to his chest as he continued to suckle her breasts. Her warm fingers explored his torso, his shoulders and arms, his hips.

She continued to touch him, while he reached again for the vial. He spread a thin layer over the tip of his cock, then held the vial out to her. "Dip your finger in the oil." Her wicked grin told him she had figured out where this was leading. "Taste my cock, sweet vixen, while your finger heightens the pleasure. I offer myself to you."

He braced his legs far apart as she sank to her knees. Parting her lips, she accepted his offer with her warm, wet mouth. Her tongue swirled around his cock head, spreading the oil as she tasted him. Heat saturated his entire length. His thighs flexed. He groaned.

Her mouth moved up and down, her tongue circling his tip. She took him deeper and sucked harder, until his legs shook and his butt clenched. Then her fingers traced his crack, reminding him of his other offer. Forcing his muscles to relax, he made room for her oiled finger.

She took her time about it, caressing, teasing before she pushed inside. He gasped, his cock bucking in her mouth as she impaled him. Her finger slid in and out. Her mouth moved up and down.

Gasping and shaky, he dragged himself out of her mouth. "As soon as I come, the ritual's over. I can't take any more of that."

Licking her lips, she smiled up at him. "I was just starting to enjoy that."

"Lie back on the bed with your legs hanging over the side." Minuette moved into position as he retrieved the dark blue vial. Her gaze strayed to his cock. She could still feel it sliding in and out of her mouth. It had made her feel wicked and

wanton. Her nipples tingled and her heartbeat raced. Was this passion or a side effect of the oil? Even in the cottage the sight of his naked body made her hot, wet, and ready to be filled.

"Part your thighs and offer me your pussy."

She drew up her knees and spread her legs wide, unashamed of her sexuality. "I offer myself freely. Take me any way you like. I trust you to pleasure me."

With a feral growl, he knelt beside the bed and lowered his head between her thighs. His tongue stroked from her anus to her clit, flicking her creamy folds. He pushed two fingers into her core. Heat erupted as he thrust. He must have coated them with oil.

She came hard and fast, her body cramping, the sensation more pain than pleasure. "I think that's too much." She panted. "It burns."

He pulled out his fingers and lifted her against his mouth, soothing her with his tongue. He licked and thrust, transforming the sting into demanding pulses of desire. Wild, rash images exploded within her mind. She wiggled away from him and turned over, offering her rounded ass, her cream-slick cunt.

"Take me, Damos. Make the bonding real. I offer you everything."

His warm mouth traced her spine downward and wandered across her smooth bottom. He caressed, kissed, and licked her, then parted her cheeks, exposing her virgin hole. Cool liquid dripped against her anus and he circled her with his fingertips. Her heart pounded and she was suspended

somewhere between ecstasy and dread. His touch warmed the oil. She shivered.

He pushed in with one slick finger, his other hand easing between her legs. As he prepared her for his entry, he smoothed oil over her clit. His fingers rubbed around and across her sensitive nub, while he positioned his cock to breach her ass.

"Push back against me. Make the offering real, so I can begin the true bonding."

Bracing her legs, she pushed back as he drove forward. Tight, stinging pressure. She gasped and moaned. More, deeper, he stretched her, filled her, claimed her. Minuette cried out softly and rocked forward, easing away from the invasion.

His arm banded her hips and he pulled her back, pushing his cock even deeper. "You said you trusted me to give you pleasure. Now show me you're a woman of your word. Relax. Let your body accept me. I will bring you release."

Accept him? He'd felt huge in her pussy. This would never work. The man was just too damn big. His fingers stroked her clit, while his thumb teased her folds, and the burning pain in her bottom receded. Amazed, she released her pent up breath and subtly lifted her hips.

Ever so slowly he drew out, pausing with just the tip of his cock still inside her. That felt incredible. She couldn't believe how good it felt. He rubbed her clit as he pushed back in. Following the same pattern, he allowed her to concentrate on the outstroke and stimulated her as he thrust inward.

Her pussy fluttered with pre-orgasmic pulses. "Is it okay for me to come?" She gasped out the question. Only he knew the rules and he'd said he couldn't until the very end.

He laughed. "Please do. I can't complete the ritual until we move on to the final phase." He sped the pace just enough to push her over the edge. Her core contracted and her rear passage massaged him as pleasure burst within her.

Rolling to their sides, he kept his cock buried inside her. He stroked her breasts and belly, fascinated by her soft skin.

"Aren't you going to..."

"I'm waiting for the offer. That's an essential part of this ritual."

She eased away from him, separating their bodies as she turned to face him. "I offer you my heart. It may not be protected by a mystic shield, but I've trusted it to no one else."

He slipped his arm beneath her neck and pulled her leg up high on his hip, surging into her pussy with one possessive thrust. "I accept your heart, sweet vixen, and I'll keep it safe. I'll cherish you with my body, spirit, and mind."

Before she could reply to the vow his mouth claimed hers. His cock thrust with demanding urgency, his tongue matching each thrust. She'd made the offer and he had accepted. No reply was necessary.

She closed her eyes and reached for his mind, going where she'd never dared before. He lowered his mental shields and let her feel his hunger, his passionate desire to make her happy, his determination to start anew. Amazed at the intensity of his emotions, she shared herself with him.

Mystic Keepers 2: Zylott Wars (Collection)
by Aubrey Ross

They joined, united, bonded, one body, one soul, one mind.

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Chapter Twelve

"What can I do for you, Minuette?"

The high priestess hadn't even used her proper titles. Had the insult been intentional or merely an oversight? Minuette took a deep breath, forcing herself to release her anxiety and center her focus. She wasn't alone. The office was surrounded by Death Keepers. They were concealed in the Shadow realm. Undetectable to the regal woman seated behind her desk.

"Do I no longer have a place within the Sacred Order of the Veil?"

The high priestess' eyes narrowed and she folded her hands on the desktop. "Why would you ask me that?"

"I was beset by Veil fever and taken captive in the Kingdom of Zylott. The Flame Princess, Lorrان, was captured at the same time."

"I am aware of your captivity."

Minuette raised her eyebrows and angled her head as she stared at the other woman. Rammi was right. Sacha looked a fraction of her age.

"If you were aware of my captivity, why was no action taken by the order to—"

A flash of greenish light drew Minuette's attention to the other side of the room. It was him! The trap had worked. The *Setti* hybrid had appeared.

He moved faster than Minuette could see. One moment he was across the room, the next his hand was around her

throat. "Very clever, little one. I should have seen this coming, but no matter. I can sense them now."

"Midox, what are you talking about? She came through the Veil alone."

Lamplight gleamed in his flame-red hair as he slowly shook his head. "We're surrounded by Keepers, you fool. Death Keepers would be my guess. Back them off or I'll snap your neck!" He sneered into Minuette's face.

"You're not going to hurt me. Your grandchild is not yet viable."

"Grandchild?" The high priestess gasped, her affront almost believable. "Wait a minute. She's still in training. There's no way she could be pregnant."

With his hand still around Minuette's throat, he turned to face Sacha. "She obviously knows what you are, which means you're no use to me."

"No use?" Her eyes blazed and her cheeks flushed as she glared back at him.

"I'm afraid our partnership is terminated, effective immediately."

The Death Keepers rushed from the Shadow realm, but none were fast enough. The high priestess crumpled to the floor in a graceless heap, her neck neatly snapped in two.

Minuette trembled, bile burning her throat. He'd never moved. He'd murdered her with a thought.

"Let her go," Nyx's strong, clear voice demanded from behind them. "I'll go with you peacefully, if you let her go."

The *Setti* hybrid turned, still clutching Minuette, and gazed upon his son.

"We meet at last. Do you know who I am?"

Nyx glared, his fists tightly clenched. "I know what you did to my mother."

"I'd say she never knew the difference, but..." Nyx lunged toward him and the hybrid laughed. He dragged Minuette in front of him and wrapped his arm around her neck. "I will kill."

"No you won't." Nyx sounded almost casual. "You'd be breaking *Setti* law."

The hybrid's black eyes narrowed. "What do you know of *Setti* law?"

"Do you think I have no interest in my heritage?"

Why was he being so talkative? Did he expect to negotiate his way out of this? The Death Keepers were no better. They all held pulse rifles, but not one had fired a shot. What was going on?

On my signal go completely limp. The command was barely discernable. He wanted to make sure it wasn't overheard. Apparently they did have a plan.

Now!

Minuette went limp. The hybrid's hands moved to catch her as a gray net flew out of nowhere and landed on top of him. He let go of her as his attention turned to the burning fibers of the Shadow net.

Rolling out of the way, she came to her feet a step behind Nyx. He sent pulses of energy into the hybrid's chest. The hybrid screamed and thrashed within the net, his form fluctuating.

"He's vulnerable in his *Setti* form. He'll be easier to kill," Nyx panted, the continual barrage obviously taxing his energy.

Rammi and Tilden, the Death Master, emerged from the Shadow realm. Minuette didn't know which one had thrown the net, but they were a welcome sight. The Death Master adjusted his pulse rifle, preparing to fire.

"No!" Nyx cried. "Wait until I ... He must..."

Minuette's Light Keeper mentor had taught her some unconventional skills. She gathered her mystic energy and manifested fistfuls of *iede*. Casting it onto the hybrid she shouted, "Transform."

The hybrid shrieked and flailed. His body contorted, twisted, and writhed as it morphed from his Fahroni to his *Setti* form.

Nyx launched himself at the hybrid, the momentum toppling them. Straddling the creature's chest, Nyx let out a battle cry. He forced disruptive energy directly into the hybrid's twin hearts. The hearts stopped beating, but the hybrid raised his hand and released an energy beam. He slumped to the floor dead.

A woman screamed. Nyx scrambled off the body. Rammi knelt beside Minuette and frantically checked for a pulse. The front of Minuette's dress was scorched black from the hybrid's shot.

Leaping over Minuette, Nyx knelt across from Rammi. He scanned his mate from head to toe meticulously assessing the damage. Her heart still beat, her breathing was shallow, but there was so much internal damage.

Desperation and hopelessness crashed over him. He was a healer! He could save her life. *Like you saved Cherrine?* He forced the doubt from his mind and focused entirely on Minuette.

"Get your mate," he told Rammi. "I cannot do this alone."

Nyx went to work mending her torn tissue and fusing ripped blood vessels. Her external burns would have to wait. He had to stop the bleeding. His hands hovered over her abdomen and tears blurred his vision.

"Is the child still alive?" Tilden asked.

Nyx could only nod, his throat too tight to speak. A tiny spark of life still nestled within her womb. His child. Their child was still alive!

"What caused the damage?" the Life Keeper asked as he knelt where Rammi had been.

"Setti pulse. Work on her lungs, they are hemorrhaging."

The Life Keeper needed no more direction. He went right to work. Nyx could feel his skill and power as they labored in tandem. Hours passed in tense silence as Rammi and Tilden silently watched. One scowl from the Death Master had sent the Death Keepers back into the Shadow realm.

The Life Keeper wiped his brow with his sleeve and sat back on his heels. "Her lungs are stabilized. How are her other organs?"

"I'm nearly finished. Start on her burns."

The Life Keeper nodded and sent a cleansing pulse over her chest dissolving her charred garment and the majority of dead skin. Nyx moved his attention to her shoulders, while

the Life Keeper worked on her torso. Only when her skin was pink and healthy again did Nyx get annoyed.

He stood and shrugged out of his robe, spreading it over her naked breasts. The Life Keeper chuckled, rolled his shoulders, and struggled to his feet. "I've seen breasts before, Lord Nyx. I'm a healer, just like you."

"And a damn good one, but she has spectacular breasts."

"I honestly didn't notice."

"Well, I sure as hell did!"

Nyx glared at the Death Master, but Tilden only grinned. Nyx turned back to the Life Keeper and extended his hand. "I am forever in your debt. I could not have saved her alone."

"I'm glad I could be of service. The Keepers owe you more than they'll ever know."

Nyx chuckled and lifted Minuette into his arms. "Your bonded mate has been filling your head with nonsense. I'm an ordinary man."

"Yeah, right." Rammi laughed. "You're an ordinary *sorcerer* who just exposed a *Setti* alliance no one believed was real."

Nyx glanced at his fallen foe—his father—and sadly shook his head.

"Go. I'll finish up here," the Death Master offered.

Nyx accepted with a grateful nod, but he felt compelled to add, "This will not stop the *Setti*. The high priestess called him Midox. That is the *Setti* word for king. Only hybrids sired by the Supreme Midox himself are allowed to use that title. This battle may be won, my friend, but the war is far from over."

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Epilogue

Minuette blinked repeatedly as her eyes adjusted to the sunlight. She remembered the hybrid blasting her and then incredible pain. She sat and pushed the sheet to her waist. Her wounds were healed, her skin unscathed. "How did you do it? I don't even have a scar."

Nyx sat on the edge of the bed and gently cupped her breast. They were back in his cottage in the Kingdom of Zylott, but she had no memory of how they'd gotten here.

"There was no way I was going to let anything happen to the most beautiful breasts I've ever seen."

She slapped his hand away. "Is that all I am to you?"

He smiled into her eyes. She'd never seen him so happy. "Never again will you be able to doubt how much I love you."

"Because you saved my breasts?" She laughed, intrigued by his playful mood.

"Because I made the ultimate sacrifice, and I made it just for you."

"What are you talking about?"

"I, Damos Kinson, Lord Nyx of Zylott, asked a *Keeper* for help."

She laughed again, leaning back against the pillows, purposely leaving the sheet bunched around her waist. "Such a sacrifice." He just stared at her and she enjoyed his gaze. He made her feel beautiful, desirable, wanted.

"How bad was it?" she asked after a long pause. "Is our baby all right?"

"You and our daughter are both fully recovered."

Shaking her head, she smiled at him. "It is much too soon for even you to know the gender of our child."

He shot her a challenging look. "It just so happens I dreamed of our daughter last night and she told me her name."

"Oh, you liar, she did not. Now you're teasing me."

"All right. Maybe she didn't speak, but I saw her clearly."

"What will she look like?"

"She'll have your smile, hair like mine, and crystal blue eyes."

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Zylott Wars 2: Ransom

Aubrey Ross

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Prologue

Undetectable to corporeal beings, Cyd soared through the Keeper realm, focused, determined, seeking unwitting accomplices.

He didn't have much time. Hakon, his half-brother, had yet to learn of their defeat. Once word of Gibrath's death reached the *Setti* realm the opportunity would be lost. Hakon had put too much stake in Gibrath's abilities, depended too heavily on his brutality.

Cyd's strategy was subtler, more insidious. In time, Hakon would see the wisdom of his approach. But first, Hakon would rage, he would demand vengeance, and Cyd intended to appease him with progress already made.

The first couple he encountered was far too old, their life force already waning. They'd never survive the infusion. He rushed on, passing through building after building. Scanning. Searching.

Bittersweet rebellion, adolescent angst, the emotions rippled through the night, teasing Cyd, attracting him. He concentrated, bringing the emotions into focus. Oh yes, he could work with this. He located the source and abandoned the main settlement. In the large open loft of a secluded woodland lodge, the young couple had just begun.

Cyd watched for a time, fascinated by their eagerness, their graceless urgency. What they lacked in skill, they made up for with enthusiasm. They kissed, tongues darting from one mouth to the other. They touched each other

everywhere, not just the places needed for sexual stimulation; they couldn't seem to get enough.

The female climbed onto the bed and arranged herself on her back. She skimmed her hands along her body, drawing her lover's attention to every lush curve. Cyd had transcended the need for a corporeal body decades before, but her large, round breasts and long, shapely legs ignited desires he hadn't felt in years.

Had he stumbled upon a rare Keeper who could germinate *Setti* seed? One step at a time. She must survive the transformation to slave before he could attempt the conversion to breeder.

Anxious to begin, Cyd sank into the body of the Keeper male. Sensations assailed him. Light flashed, sound erupted, pain seared his skin, and pleasure shocked him. He gasped, or rather, the Keeper male gasped, struggling against Cyd's domination. Cyd hadn't expected resistance. He frequently took over a host without the slightest detection.

"What's wrong?" The female sat up, her dark gaze filled with concern.

"There's something ... I can feel—" With a violent pulse, Cyd rendered the Keeper male unconscious and took a slow, deep breath. "I need to be inside you, so badly I can't think."

"Your eyes look strange. Are you sure you're all right?"

He took her slender hand and guided it to his cock, sliding their entwined fingers up and down the thick length. He'd chosen a fabulous body, prime, strong, wonderfully endowed. "You make me wild."

She smiled, pleased by the praise and the physical proof of his claim. Her dark eyes sparkled and she parted her lips. Desire shuddered through Cyd. She was the ideal combination of daring and innocence. She wanted to experiment, to test the boundaries of her sexuality, which served his purpose perfectly.

"Can I ... taste you this time?"

Cyd grinned. "I'd like nothing more." She crawled toward the edge of the bed. "No, my love, lay back. I want to touch you while you pleasure me." Obviously unsure, she took a long time to lie down. Cyd pulled her shoulders to the edge of the high mattress and angled her head over the side.

Her tongue darted out, moistening her lips. He traced her luscious mouth with the head of his cock, groaning as her clever tongue flicked the sensitive tip. Wet heat engulfed him as he pushed inside. Gods, how he'd missed this! Why had he waited so long?

Reining in his demanding desire, he moved slowly in her mouth. Her lips formed a snug circle around him, while her tongue continued to swirl. Her words had given him the impression she'd never done this before, but her lips and tongue combined in a sensual dance that soon had him groaning.

He maintained the steady rocking of his hips while his hands explored. Her breasts felt as wonderful as they looked, soft, yet firm, warm and resilient. He cupped them, squeezed, and rolled her nipples, watching as they gathered into tight, red peaks.

"Bend your knees and open your legs for me. I want to touch you." He thrust into her mouth as she arranged herself for his pleasure. Grasping her inner thighs, he pushed her legs wide. Hunger, raw and aching, surged through him. Passion-slick folds peeked out from between her dusky slit. He would taste her glistening cream before they'd finished. He'd keep her here for hours, infusing her again and again.

She sucked firmly, her urgent mewling speeding him toward completion. He pushed two fingers into her wet pussy. Her inner muscles pulsed and Cyd closed his eyes. She was so hot! He couldn't wait to feel these muscles caressing his cock.

His borrowed body wouldn't wait any longer. He saturated the Keeper male's semen with *Setti* essence and released the first infusion down her throat.

Her hands grasped his hips as her body shuddered violently. Her snug cunt pulsed around his fingers. Cyd grinned. She wasn't just compatible with *Setti* essence, she'd revel in every minute of her conversion.

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Chapter One

Keeper Academy Dimension 290-2

"She's staring at you again."

Tye Kinson glanced beyond his companion, encountering the desire-darkened gaze of Rahna Delmont. "She's adorable, but I'd prefer to live beyond this solar cycle." He sat with Elita Mere at a small table in one corner of the cafeteria. The lustful trainee giggled and said something behind her hand to the girl seated beside her. More giggles ensued. Tye shook his head. "Her father is the Death Master. Does she really think I'm that stupid?"

"Adorable?" Amusement sparkled in Elita's crystal blue eyes. She'd drawn her silver-blond hair into a smooth roll at the back of her head. Reserved, professional, Elita discouraged familiarity with her ultra-conservative clothes and stern expressions. "Rahna would be so disappointed. She tries hard to be sassy and sexy. There's no way she'd find *adorable* flattering."

Tye's attraction to Elita had increased steadily over the past few months. He was posing as a Shadow Keeper trainee while he gathered information for his brother. According to Tye's fictitious dossier, his family spent the majority of their time in other dimensions, so his official Keeper training was just beginning despite his age of thirty-five.

Trainees were taught basic Keeper skills at the Academy before being dispersed to their individual orders for

specialized training. One instructor from each Keeper order supervised the initial phase of training. Elita Mere represented the Order of Light.

"I'm not interested in Rahna." He met Elita's gaze and smiled. "And I'm not allowed to pursue my interests until I complete my initial training."

The playful gleam vanished from Elita's eyes. "If that means what I think it means, there's something you should know."

"I know you have no bonded mate. I asked your cousin the first day I saw you." He let his gaze move over her face, absorbing the subtle beauty of each feature. "Are you involved with someone?"

She raised her glass and took a sip before responding. "I applied to the Sacred Order of the Veil."

Stiffly inclining his head, Tye manufactured a smile. "Congratulations." His tone sounded remarkably sincere despite the disappointment knotting his gut. It really was for the best. Casual affairs had never interested him and his line of work made long-term relationships challenging. "You'll make a fabulous Veil Keeper."

"They haven't accepted my application yet." As she met his gaze, a splash of color accented her high cheekbones, perfectly matching the deep rose of her full lips.

"They will." Stars, he wanted to touch her, kiss and caress her until she cried out his name. "You're intelligent, disciplined, proficient—"

Her laughter interrupted his list. "I evaluate my students based strictly on their performance. Flattery won't help."

"I'd welcome the opportunity for you to judge my performance, but it sounds like we're destined for separate paths."

She smiled and Tye fought back a groan. Desire rushed through his body, speeding his heart and hardening his cock. Talk about perfect timing. He developed a galactic class hard-on just in time to walk across the cafeteria and past Rahna Delmont!

Elita pushed back her chair and stood. "I need to stop by my office. I'll see you in training room C."

Graceful, elegant—and cold—Elita's untouchable demeanor didn't fool Tye for a second. She used her stoic persona as a barricade against the world. His inquiries had yet to reveal the source of her mistrust, but something or someone had hurt Elita Mere.

Too bad she wasn't his assignment. She fascinated him, intrigued him, attracted—

"Do you know what they're saying about you?" Rahna slipped into the chair Elita had just vacated.

He looked at the trainee objectively. She was a beautiful young woman, bursting with vitality and sexual curiosity. Her thick, blue/black hair framed a heart-shaped face, dominated by smoldering dark eyes. The wide, square neckline of her formfitting top showcased her high, round breasts. Her flesh-colored leggings made her appear naked from the waist down.

She obviously had an itch she needed scratched. But Tye had no intention of doing the scratching. How could he discourage her without upsetting her?

"*They* can say whatever they like. My only concern is getting through this phase of training."

Her silky brows arched as challenge ignited within her gaze. "Your conversation with Mistress Ice appeared anything but professional. Is her skin as cold as her stare?"

His eyes narrowed. Intimate interaction with the trainees was strictly forbidden. If others believed he and Elita were lovers, her professional reputation would be ruined, she might lose her position.

"Not the type to kiss and tell?" Rahna lowered her tone to a purring whisper.

"I'm not the type to kiss at all. I haven't touched Mistress Elita."

"I told them they were wrong." She licked her lips, overt invitation smoldering in her eyes. "Why don't we get out of here and—"

"I'm old enough to be your father. Pick on someone your own size." He hoped to soften the rejection with his playful jibe.

She laughed and leaned forward, drawing his attention to her impressive cleavage. "You are *not* old enough to be my father and I suspect you're exactly my size."

"It's not going to happen." He crossed his arms over his chest.

"I'm always up for a challenge." She stood and leaned her hip against the table, displaying her figure to perfection. "And I bet I can have you up for the challenge in a matter of minutes. Give me half a chance."

Anger sliced through his frustration. She was a stubborn little fool. Better to piss off Rahna than her father. "I'm already up, sweetheart." He stood as well. Her gaze gravitated to the distinct ridge in the front of his pants and an approving smile curved her lips. "Your *appeal* is not the problem. I'm not taking on the Death Master for a delectable piece of ass." He walked out of the cafeteria before she could respond.

The afternoon session transpired in a blur. The Frost Keeper mentor lectured on the use of mental shields, while Tye stole countless glances at Elita. What was it about the Light Keeper that attracted him? She wasn't the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen. Rahna had more to offer physically. Elita's quiet reserve challenged him. He wanted to make her laugh and see her entire body flush with passion's heat.

Concluding his dissertation, the Frost Keeper dismissed the class. Tye headed for his skimmer in the shuttle lot behind the training center. Every three days Tye met with his brother in the Nexus Chamber. It would be a short conversation today. He'd learned nothing useful since their last meeting.

Nexus Chambers allowed a chosen few to pass between dimensions. Tye only knew the incantation that allowed him to pass between the Keeper dimension and the Kingdom of Zylott. His brother, Lord Nyx, worked with the Guardians directly and had access to numerous Nexus Chambers.

"I think I've figured it out."

Tye released his breath in a frustrated hiss and turned to face Rahna. "You've figured out what?"

"Why you won't touch me."

"You're too young and I never—"

"I'm not asking you to bond with me, for stars' sake. I find you attractive and I want to spend a couple days exploring that attraction. What harm can there be in that?"

"I don't have casual affairs and there could never be anything more than sex between us. Your father would never allow it. I'm not elite and you're the—"

"I know who I am!" She crossed her arms under her breasts, accenting the abundant mounds. "Is Mistress Ice really more appealing than me?"

He despised the trainees' derogatory title for Elita. He wanted to lash out every time he heard it. Beneath that icy veneer beat a passionate heart. Tye could sense her repressed spirit, longed to set her free. "I told you before. I am not involved with Mistress Elita. Pursuing a relationship with her isn't any more appropriate than giving you what you obviously want."

"To hell with appropriate! I want to be rash and reckless. I want to live while I'm young enough to enjoy life."

He shook his head. "You'll have years with your bonded mate to explore every pleasure you can imagine. I can't be the one to—"

She threw back her head and laughed, making her breasts quiver. "You think I'm a virgin? You honestly believe I've never been fucked before?"

He stared at her silently, wanting the awkward conversation ended.

"I bet I know positions and variations that would make you blush." She turned and cocked her hip, showing off her tight little ass. "I figured out a long time ago that men are more fun than boys. If I was wrong and you're still a boy..." Not bothering to finish the insult, she stepped into the Shadow realm and disappeared.

Tye muttered a curse under his breath and climbed onto his skimmer. This was all he needed. He couldn't have the woman he wanted and didn't want the woman determined to seduce him. Straddling the hovercraft, he activated the engine with a mystic pulse.

Elita's lovely face haunted him, mocked him with her unshakable composure. He wanted to take down her hair and rumple her clothing. He wanted ... If she truly meant to become a Veil Keeper what he wanted was irrelevant. For a minimum of two years she would be completely out of reach.

Who knew where he'd be in two months, much less two years. Rahna's live-for-the-moment philosophy was far more compatible with his lifestyle, but he wanted Elita.

What a pain in the ass!

The skills he'd learned at Drahbin Fortress allowed him to emulate many Keeper abilities. Fahroni sorcery didn't require *iede*. Tye created the illusion of a sparkling gray powder whenever he used his mystic abilities, reinforcing his role as a Shadow Keeper trainee.

His brother waited in the Nexus Chamber. Angular features and fierce eyes kept many from approaching Lord Nyx, which was the way he preferred it.

"You're late." Nyx crossed his arms over his chest, but a suspicious sparkle brightened his green eyes.

"I probably should have postponed our meeting. I have nothing to report."

"They haven't made any sort of announcement?" Nyx's gaze narrowed and he clasped his hands behind his back. The emerald green symbols on his black robe glistened. "Typical."

"What are you talking about?"

"Minuette went to confront the high priestess. Her apathy during Minuette's incarceration—"

"You released Minuette? When did this happen?"

"Minuette is no longer my hostage, but she remains in Zylott."

Tye fought back a smile. His brother's refusal to return the Veil Keeper had created quite a stir. Something powerful was developing between the two. Tye had suspected as much the first time Nyx mentioned her name. "You deserve whatever happiness you can find. I wish you well." A rare smile parted Nyx's lips and Tye grinned in return. "What happened while Minuette was with the high priestess?"

The smile vanished. "A *Setti* hybrid appeared and murdered the high priestess. I suppose the Steering Committee is still sorting through the facts."

"The high priestess is dead?" Nyx nodded. Why would the general population be kept in the dark? "What happened to the hybrid?"

Nyx glanced away, his posture stiff and agitated. "Minuette forced him into his *Setti* form and I stopped his hearts."

Tye hesitated. He'd guessed Nyx's secret years ago. Would it ease his brother's burden if he confessed what he knew? The time had never seemed right before. Tye was still uncertain of Nyx's reaction, but the opportunity might never come again.

"Was this hybrid the one who—appeared to Mother?"

For a long, silent moment Nyx just stared. His gaze gleamed like the symbols on his robe, cold and bright. Then gradually the tension eased from his stance. "How long have you known?"

"You're not just my brother, you're my mentor. I've seen the full extent of your power."

"Do others suspect?"

"No one questions your loyalty. Even the gossips only wonder how you're able to control..."

"The beast within?" His tone sounded rough and sarcastic.

Tye nodded.

"Does Sef know? What of Felise and Adara? Am I—"

"None of our siblings suspect. It was only my exposure to your abilities that made me curious. How did you find out? Can you sense your *Setti* self or—"

"This tale must never leave this room. Swear it!"

Gazing directly into his brother's eyes, Tye said, "I swear."

"I was seventeen when Mother came to me." After a short pause, Nyx continued in a quiet, controlled tone. "She'd watched my abilities exceed anything a Fahroni sorcerer could achieve and could no longer ignore the truth. She explained that a being came to her in the shape of her husband. She didn't realize the difference until it was too late."

"It's a common *Setti* hybrid trick."

Nyx inclined his head. "Mother was terrified and ashamed. She never told Father. She convinced herself she'd imagined the visitations, that it had been some sort of nightmare. Then I developed *Setti* abilities."

"The hybrid appeared to Mother more than once?"

"Many times, over many years."

"Then it's possible—"

"I don't believe he succeeded a second time," Nyx insisted, his gaze blazing with conviction. "I am the only one who has exhibited unusual abilities. No. I'm certain. I'm the only one."

Tye wasn't quite so sure, but he didn't argue. "Do you know who he is—or was?"

"I've yet to learn his name, but the high priestess called him Midox."

Only hybrids sired by the supreme ruler of the *Setti* realm were allowed to use that title. A shiver coursed down Tye's spine. His brother was *Setti* royalty and he had killed his sire. There was sure to be ramifications from his actions.

Rahna's passion-drugged gaze flashed within Tye's memory. "Is it possible that the *Setti* invasion has spread beyond the Sacred Order of the Veil?"

"What makes you ask?"

"There's a trainee in my class who ... During the induction process the slave becomes almost desperate for sex, correct?"

"Yes. After the hybrid infuses them the first few times they often withhold their essence until the slave will do anything to

get it. I've seen this repeatedly in the Veil Keepers. Are you certain this trainee has been infused by a hybrid?"

"No. Many Keepers experience a spike in hormones at about this age. I'll talk with her tomorrow and see—"

"If she is being converted by a *Setti* hybrid, the last thing she'll want to do is talk."

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Chapter Two

Leering stares and curious glances followed Tye as he entered training room C the following morning. Muffled comments and poorly concealed chuckles erupted in his wake. Elita swept the trainees with an assessing gaze.

What was this about?

"Sorry I'm late," Tye muttered, taking his seat.

Elita's gaze focused on Tye and heat suffused her skin. She'd thought these feelings dead and buried when she lost Galid. No man since had tempted her to risk such pain again. But Tye appealed to her, attracted her, fascinated her.

And she wasn't sure why.

Three of her fellow instructors had been summoned by the Steering Committee, leaving only Lareth, the Frost Keeper mentor, and her. Lareth suggested they dismiss the trainees after the midmorning break and Elita agreed.

Over the past several days the Steering Committee had questioned half the dimension. Elita knew far more than she was supposed to about what was happening. Her best friend, Minuette, was now the bonded mate of Lord Nyx, the Zylott sorcerer who exposed the *Setti* infiltration of the Sacred Order of the Veil. If it were not for Minuette, Elita would be as confused as everyone else.

The Steering Committee didn't want word of the *Setti* invasion to spread until they gathered as much information as possible. It had all happened so quickly and the ramifications had yet to unfold.

Anxious to take advantage of their unexpected break, the trainees hurried from the room. Lareth called Elita's name as she headed for the door.

"Yes?"

"Is what they're saying true?" Accusation sharpened the question, made his blue eyes cold.

"You'll have to be a little more specific."

He crossed to her and lowered his voice. Was he afraid they'd be overheard? "The new trainee has been bragging about your relationship. I realize he's not our typical trainee, but you should have warned him to be discreet. If word of your involvement gets back to—"

"Who told you this nonsense?" She crossed her arms over her breasts, torn between anger and vulnerability. "I'm not having a *relationship* with anyone."

"The entire class was buzzing with the rumors. Didn't you notice their reaction when your—when Tye walked into the room?"

"I don't believe this." Her stomach tightened into a hard, aching knot. "Why would he do this to me?" She turned on the ball of her foot and rushed from the room.

The Sacred Order of the Veil would deny her admittance if even a hint of scandal attached itself to her name. Tye knew it was forbidden for her to physically interact with a trainee. He'd said as much the day before.

The trainee dormitories were arranged in three rows on the other side of a grassy commons from the training center. An info-crystal in the lobby of the largest building told Elita Tye's room number. She stormed to his building and rushed

up the stairs. As she emerged from the stairwell, she skidded to a halt.

Rahna knelt before the door to Tye's room, chanting quietly. Ducking back into the stairwell, Elita manifested Light *iede* and hid her presence from the trainee. Rahna was of the Order of Shadow. The Shadow realm should have allowed her to emerge inside Tye's room, unless Tye had erected a mystic barrier.

Constructing mystic barriers was an advanced skill. Why was Tye bothering with the fundamentals if he had already mastered complex abilities?

And why was Rahna attempting to penetrate the barrier? No trainee could...

Rahna grinned and pushed the door inward. Unbelievable. Elita rushed in after the younger woman, scrambling out of the way as Rahna turned to reactivate the lock.

What was going on here? Elita wasn't comfortable in her role as spy, but this entire situation felt wrong. Tye shouldn't have been able to construct a barrier and Rahna shouldn't have been able to open the door. They were both in their first phase of training.

Rahna crossed to the window and peeked out. Chuckling softly, she moved to the unmade bed and dissolved her clothes with a powerful cleansing pulse. Elita fought back a groan. Was this all there was to it? Rahna was surprising her lover?

The trainee lay on the bed and summoned Shadow cords, binding her wrists to the metal frame. Elita huddled in the corner diagonal from the bed. Could she rush past Tye as he

entered without giving herself away? Unlike Shadow Keepers, she couldn't pass through physical obstacles.

Disappointment and anger churned within Elita. He'd flirted with her, hinted at an attraction he wanted to explore. And all the while he was banging the Death Master's daughter.

Tye eased the door open and crept into the room, holding an unusual weapon in his right hand. He'd obviously realized someone had disturbed the room's seal. He kicked the door closed and spoke a foreign phrase as he tucked the pistol into the back of his pants. His bright, hazel gaze took in Rahna's display with one assessing sweep.

"What are you doing here?" His voice snapped with agitation.

"I would think that was obvious." Rahna's legs were crossed, knees bent.

"Get out. This isn't funny."

She uncrossed her legs, her dark eyes luminous. "It's not meant to be funny. I'm a prisoner of your pleasure. Take me. Do whatever you want."

"I want you to get dressed and get out."

"Not until you give me what I need." She parted her thighs, brazenly displaying her creamy folds.

Elita covered her mouth with her hand, shocked and dumbfounded. Why was Rahna behaving this way? Tye was obviously not expecting her, didn't seem pleased by the surprise.

"I told you before this is not going to happen."

Rahna's gaze narrowed and her lips pressed into a disapproving line. "All I have to do is scream."

Anger hardened Tye's expression as he moved to the head of the bed. He attempted to unbind the Shadow cords. Elita watched him closely. He grasped the strands then shook his hands, muttering a curse. Why didn't he just disintegrate them?

Rahna watched as well; her naked body angled toward him and her eyes widening. "You're not a Shadow Keeper. You're one of *them*. Aren't you?"

"Tell me who did this to you." He gave up on the Shadow cords. She was spread before him naked and eager, still, his gaze never left her face. "Did he use the shape of someone you know or did he cast you into sexual thrall?"

"Can you do what he did?" Releasing the cords, she knelt on the bed and grasped the front of his shirt. "Please. I'll do anything."

"Rahna, it's like a drug, powerful and addictive. You need help and I can get it for you, but—"

"No!" She shoved him away. "I don't need help. I need more. Can you give it to me or not?"

"I'm not *Setti* and you do not want to be their slave." He held her upper arms as she tried to twist away. "Tell me who did this. Tell me—"

She jerked out of his grasp and scrambled off the bed. "You'll regret this! All I wanted was ... Why wouldn't you just..."

Manifesting clothes as she went, Rahna rushed across the room. Elita followed close behind, through the doorway and halfway down the hall. Casting off her Light shroud, Elita caught Rahna's arm. "Tye is right. You need help. Let me—"

"You were spying on us?" Rahna's dark eyes widened. "You have no idea what it's like, the pleasure, the power. I must find him. I will have more!" Twisting out of her grasp, Rahna darted into the Shadow realm.

Shit!

"Elita."

She turned and found Tye standing in the doorway to his room.

"Why were you in my bedroom?" Anger tightened his lips and narrowed his eyes, but his tone was carefully controlled.

"Who are you?"

He motioned toward his room. Elita shook her head.

"Someone might see me. Rumors are already—"

"That didn't stop you before." He looked up and down the hallway. "No one is about and you can do your disappearing act on the way out."

She hurried past him and entered his room, struggling to comprehend all she'd seen. "What are you doing in this dimension?"

"I'm helping my brother investigate the *Setti* infiltration."

Understanding unfurled within her. How could she have been so blind? Tye's coloring was slightly different, but the resemblance in his features was undeniable. "Your brother is Lord Nyx?"

He nodded. "I need to let him know about Rahna. We thought—had hoped—there was no contact beyond the Sacred Order of the Veil."

"Do you think the same hybrid that infused the high priestess infused Rahna?"

"It's possible." He raked his hair with his fingers, revealing his agitation. "That would explain why she's so depleted. I need to talk to Nyx."

"Should I inform her father? He would be the best person to locate her."

"No. Nyx can find her faster."

She hesitated. Questions raced through her mind. There was so much she wanted to know. But Rahna was in danger. Her well-being must come first. After only a glimpse at the real Tye, they were being pulled in opposite directions.

"Will you return to Zylott now?"

He looked into her eyes, his smile filled with longing. "Will you miss me if I do?"

Elita didn't reply. She manifested Light *iede* and disappeared.

* * * *

"Tilden's daughter? Are you sure?"

Tye understood the horror in his brother's voice. The Death Master had been their ally from the beginning. It would break his heart to learn his daughter had been abused by a *Setti* hybrid.

"She's depleted to the point of desperation. The hybrid has just begun the process or—"

"She was infused by the hybrid I killed." Determination hardened Nyx's tone and ignited his gaze. "I'll find her."

Swallowing past the considerable lump in his throat, Tye nodded. "I'll let Master Tilden know what's going on. Where will you take Rahna? She needs to be detoxified."

"Bring Tilden to the fortress. We're better equipped to deal with this there."

Tye opened the door to the Keeper dimension as Nyx summoned the Shadow realm. Hidden deep in a dense forest, the entrance to the Nexus Chamber looked like a cave. Tye emerged from the cave and climbed aboard his skimmer, activating the vehicle with a mystic pulse. Pausing long enough to slip on protective goggles, he maneuvered through the trees. He'd have to wait until the Steering Committee adjourned before he approached the Death Master. Tye checked the directional gauge on the skimmer's control panel, ensuring he headed toward Emation, the Keeper capital.

The forest gave way to wide, undulating hills. Increasing his speed, Tye flew across the clearing. Sunlight warmed his face and a mild breeze rippled his hair. Still dread lay like a rock in the pit of his stomach. How would he ever find the words?

A scream disrupted the serene setting. Tye slowed the skimmer and looked around. Had he only imagined the sound? Mystic power vibrated within him, intensifying his senses. He'd felt the scream, not actually heard it.

A ripple of terror sharpened by hopelessness and pain stabbed into Tye. *Not again!* He knew these feelings too well, had experienced them before. Focusing on the desperate echo, Tye turned his skimmer and saturated the vehicle with mystic energy. The hovercraft shuddered beneath him, obeying his mental command.

Not far into the surrounding trees, Tye spotted the victim. Young and slender, with dark brown hair, the woman lingered

near death, whimpering with each ragged breath. Compassion and fury cramped his abdomen, compounded by the inevitable helplessness.

The scene was too familiar. His brother's mate, Cherrine, had suffered as this woman was suffering. They'd lost Cherrine to death and despair. Tye leapt from the skimmer and rushed toward the woman, slamming into an energy barrier. His skin burned, his eyes stung, and a putrid stench filled his nose. *Setti* energy! She'd been raped by a hybrid, infused against her will.

Gathering energy into the center of his chest, Tye dispersed the barrier. The woman's anguish burst out, knocking him backward. He didn't have much time. Others would come in response to her terror. He didn't want them to find her like this. Straightening her bruised and bloodied legs, he tugged off his tunic and covered her naked body, hiding the extent of her indignity.

The Veil parted in two places. Death Keepers rushed him from one side, Light Keepers from the other. Tye threw his hands in the air. "She needs a Life Keeper, now! We have a *Setti* hybrid on the loose."

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Chapter Three

Elita sat behind her desk, staring at the stack of data crystals. This early in the training phase the reports were often garbled and unintelligible. She lifted one, preparing to activate the crystal, when a firm knock interrupted her task.

"Come in," she called, setting the crystal aside.

Minuette pushed the door open, but remained in the archway. "Nyx asked me to come get you."

Moving out from behind her desk, Elita noted the worry shining in her friend's eyes. "What's wrong?"

"I only know bits and pieces. I'll tell you what I know when we get there."

Anxiety radiated off Minuette, so Elita didn't ask where they were going. Minuette parted the Veil, took hold of Elita's upper arm, and the world fell away. Darkness enveloped them, sound faded, and they went hurling through space.

They emerged in the lobby of the Steering Committee's headquarters and tension banded Elita's chest. It was late. The Committee should have adjourned hours ago.

"What's going on?" Elita was almost afraid to ask.

"This is what I know. I was hoping you could fill in some of the blanks. Nyx contacted me and told me to have the sorcerers prepare for a detoxification. I wasn't sure what he meant, but his men seemed to understand. Then a short while later I sensed his anxiety, so I contacted him. He said Tye had been arrested and he needed you."

Elita's heart lurched within her breast. Why would they arrest Tye and what did this have to do with her? "Where is he?"

"They're all in the central chamber. I was going to ask permission to enter when Nyx sent me for you."

"You don't know why Tye was arrested?"

"I know only what I've told you."

Accepting this with a reluctant nod, Elita approached the massive arched doors leading to the central chamber. She activated the comm crystal and identified herself. The doors swung open. Fortifying herself with a deep breath, she entered the large, vaulted chamber.

Tye was bound hand and foot to a chair at one end of the long, narrow table. Lord Nyx stood at his side. Only the orders of Light and Shadow were represented at the table. Apparently, Flame and Frost weren't involved in this ordeal.

"Who summoned you?" Master Tilden asked as she neared the table.

"I did," Lord Nyx replied.

Elita tried to relax. Her brother, the Light Master, and her nephew Tavon sat on one side of the table. Master Tilden and Jarek, the Shadow Master, sat on the other.

"How can I help you, Lord Nyx?"

"Allegations have been brought against my brother. I believe you can—"

"He's confessed to being a spy!" Her brother pushed back his chair and stood. "Why should we believe anything either of you say?"

"I don't expect you to believe me." Nyx's expression remained inscrutable, his tone calm. "Will you believe the words of your own sister?"

Dylon swung his gaze toward Elita, eyes narrowed with accusation. She squared her shoulders. It would take more than a glare to intimidate her. After the death of their parents, Dylon had attempted to run her life. She was perfectly capable of making her own decisions and not afraid to speak her mind.

"How long have you known you were harboring a spy?" Dylon demanded.

"I discovered his true identity earlier today."

"Tye Kinson of Zylott is accused of rape resulting in death." Before Elita could respond to this shocking announcement, the Death Master went on, "He is also accused of raping my daughter. According to Rahna, he no sooner left her than he went in search of his next victim. He was found with the body of his second victim, his tunic covered in blood. Rahna is so overcome she had to be sedated."

"When did these attacks take place?" Her hands trembled visibly, so she slipped them into the pockets of her uniform pants. What had Tye told them? What did Lord Nyx expect her to say?

Rahna will die if she is not detoxified. Tilden's honor will not allow him to accept my word over hers. And we still have a Setti hybrid on the loose.

She recognized Lord Nyx's voice within her mind. No one except immediate family had ever been able to speak to her telepathically.

"Stop coaching her!" Tilden slapped the tabletop with his open palm. "I didn't hear what you said, but you just told her something."

"I sensed it as well." Dylon approached her, his gaze assessing. "You asked when the attacks took place. You also said you discovered Tye's deception. Are the two issues in some way related?"

She looked at the Death Master's fierce visage. How could she possibly explain what she'd witnessed in Tye's room? He'd never believe her. They'd brand her a liar and nothing would be resolved. "I accessed the dormitories' central comm crystal and asked directions to Tye's private room. The time of that inquiry should be logged in the comm crystal. I spent approximately an hour with him and then he told me he had a meeting with his brother."

Muttering curses under his breath, the Death Master verified the time of her inquiry. "It is as she says. Why would Rahna lie?"

"Master Tilden," she waited for him to look at her, "your daughter *has* been victimized, but Tye is not her attacker."

He turned on Tye, eyes blazing. "Why have you refused to defend yourself? You have spoken not one word since Rahna left."

"This tragedy is only compounded by anything I might say." Tye stared straight ahead, his features held in an expressionless mask. "I told you I found the girl in the field

after the hybrid left her and I told you I never touched your daughter. Anything else only complicates the situation."

Tilden's gaze narrowed and he looked again at Elita. "What were you doing in a dorm room alone with a trainee for over an hour?"

"That has no bearing on these proceedings." Tye jerked sharply against his bonds.

"Answer him," her brother reinforced.

"What do you think we were doing?" She wanted the farce to end. Rahna needed treatment in Zylott. If they got Master Tilden away from the others, perhaps he'd be more reasonable. "I'd been attracted to Tye since he joined our class, but instructors are forbidden to interact with trainees. He said something yesterday that led me to believe the attraction was mutual. I went to his room today to explain why I was unable to pursue a relationship with him. Moments after I arrived he tendered his resignation from the training program. Do I really need to spell out the rest?"

"You spent the afternoon in his bed?" Dylan sounded incredulous.

She laughed. "Apparently I do. Yes. I am Tye's lover. Tye and I had sex. And before anyone goes down that path, I was more than willing. I pursued him. Now will you please release him? This has all been a gross misunderstanding."

"Why did Rahna..." Tilden raked his hands through his long, dark hair, his gaze tormented.

Elita rounded the table and went to him as Dylan set Tye free. "I noticed her odd behavior yesterday. Tye figured out

what was wrong. This is her way of shifting the focus of the blame."

He looked at Nyx, obviously needing someone to blame. "You killed the *Setti* hybrid. I was there, I watched it die. I disposed ... oh gods. This is my fault! They're using her to punish me."

Acting on instinct alone, Elita took Tilden's face between her hands and forced him to meet her gaze. He could have sent her flying across the room with a thought, but it didn't matter. She could sense his pain.

"No one is to blame, except the *Setti*. We must work together to help Rahna and to prevent any more attacks."

He pressed his lips together and managed a stiff nod.

Nyx came up beside her and she stepped back. "Rahna could have been infused by the hybrid I killed, but the other attack happened after. We must locate this other hybrid before anyone else is hurt."

"How does one hunt a *Setti* hybrid?" Jarek, the Shadow Master, asked.

"I will send hunters to assist your Shadow Keepers. Hybrids are vulnerable in their *Setti* form." Nyx looked at the Death Master's devastated expression. The compassion in his gaze shocked Elita. She hadn't realized Nyx was capable of kindness. "With your permission, sir, I would like to take your daughter to my fortress. We have dealt with this sort of attack before."

"What about Elita?" Dylan asked.

"What about me?"

The Light Master walked up to Tye, staring up into the younger man's eyes. "She is a Light Princess. You don't fuck a Light Princess and jaunt back to your home dimension."

"Dylon! I'm a mature woman. What I choose to do—"

"You're right, of course, Master Dylon." Tye stared directly into Dylon's angry face. Neither man spared her a glance. "I would be honored to bond with Elita, *if* she will have me."

Thank the stars! He was giving her an out.

"Oh, she will have you. She agreed to the bonding when she sought you out in your room."

"Dylon!" She grabbed her brother by the arm and dragged him away from Tye. "I will not be forced to—"

"Did he force himself into your body or did you take him willingly?" His voice dropped to barely a whisper and he went on in a rush. "You're ruined, Elita. The Academy will dismiss you. The Sacred Order of the Veil will reject you. No elite Keeper will have a castoff Zylott whore."

Gasping, she jerked back as if he'd dealt a physical blow. Tye stepped between them. "You will mind your tongue or I'll disintegrate it. Elita is not a whore!"

"She is what you have made her, but not for long. I am willing to fight for her honor."

Tye laughed, a harsh, disbelieving sound. "You are the only one maligning her honor."

Ignoring Tye, Dylon glared at Elita. "You *will* bond with him."

Pain eroded her shock, leaving brutal honesty. Dylon was right. With one rash conversation, she'd left herself no choice.

* * * *

The palace shook with the force of Hakon's fury. Cyd knew his half-brother would be upset, but even he hadn't anticipated this level of emotion.

Where is Gibrath's body?

The question screamed through Cyd's mind. His luminescence decreased in size and intensity, the metaphysical equivalent of a cringe. *The Death Keepers incinerated his remains. There is no hope of reanimation.*

How is this possible? My son is dead! I will not stand for it.

Cyd drifted nearer to Hakon's throne, well out of reach of his spindly arms and muscular legs. The Supreme Midox's twin hearts beat frantically within his chest. Transparent skin made it difficult to hide one's physical reactions.

Anticipating your displeasure, Cyd began, I've begun a campaign to make them pay. You have felt it beneficial to keep our influence contained within the Sacred Order of the Veil. This development nullifies our need for secrecy. I say we launch a full-scale attack on the Mystic Keepers.

Kicking over a food tray with one of his secondary legs, Hakon turned his narrow face away. *My only interest in the Mystic Keepers is their ability to navigate the Veil. They are too weak to convert to breeders. They are of no use to me.*

The second Keeper Cyd had attempted to infuse supported Hakon's attitude. *When I infused the Death Master's daughter she responded without hesitation to my Setti essence. I may be able to convert her completely.*

Hakon's unblinking eyes stared at Cyd. *The Death Master's daughter, you say?*

Yes, Supreme Midox. The very same man who incinerated your son.

For a long moment Hakon merely nodded. Cyd was about to back out of the chamber, content with the progress he'd made, when Hakon sent his thoughts again.

What of Gibrath's progeny? Should they live or die?

I know Gibrath held high hopes for his children. Cyd paused. Gibrath's offspring were nothing more than additional obstacles from Cyd's perspective, but Hakon would resent his ambition. *The son's abilities are undeniable, but I have never sensed anything but contempt from him.*

And the daughter?

I have had no contact with the daughter. Why wouldn't he just let it go? Hakon had other hybrid children—many of them. Somehow, Gibrath had always been special. Cyd was too smart to ignore that fact. *Shall I objectively assess her potential and report back to you?*

Yes. Assess Gibrath's daughter and let me know what you determine. He halted Cyd with an upraised hand as he drifted toward the door. *Should the Death Master's daughter survive the transformation, bring her to me.*

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Chapter Four

Tye looked at Elita's miserable expression and wanted to shout the palace down. This wasn't how it was supposed to be. The turbulent events of the past day hadn't lessened his desire. She'd revealed the depth of her character with her sacrifice. But he couldn't allow it to continue. He didn't want her to accept him because she had no choice.

Her bastard of a brother had activated *Pim Noctar*, the Keeper bonding ritual, insisting they spend the next twenty-four hours in a lavish suite at the Palace of Light. Elita had silently complied with each of her brother's directives. Her resignation fueled Tye's anger. He wanted to shake the Light Master until his teeth rattled.

He approached his reluctant mate. "When and if we bond, it will be because we want the joining." She turned away. Anticipating her retreat, he pivoted and lightly caught her face between his palms. "Nothing will be forced upon you."

Tye spoke a calming spell, soothing her senses, counteracting the sexual frenzy brought on by *Pim Noctar*. Elita tensed, shuddered, then relaxed. Her tongue darted out, moistening her lips, and she looked into his eyes.

"How did you do that?" Her voice sounded hesitant. "The urgency is gone. I can breathe again."

He brushed her cheek with his fingertips, his thumb tracing her full lower lip. "Most incantations can be reversed. We in Zylott feel *Pim Noctar* is manipulative and unnecessary. The

Steering Committee has used the ritual for generations to enforce their will."

"But we're taught it's only effective on those destined to bond. Once a Keeper finds their true mate—"

"Were we *destined* to bond? It's an incantation that heightens sexual attraction. My brother can reproduce the effects and he's not even a Keeper."

"Without *Pim Noctar* Keepers can't conceive."

His gaze focused on her lips. He didn't want to debate Keeper mandates and practices. He wanted to kiss her, touch her, act out the fantasies he'd accumulated over the long, lonely weeks.

"Keepers can only conceive with their bonded mate." He feathered kisses across her brow. "There are many ways for mates to bond, ways that don't involve mystic compulsions."

"Just like that," she snapped her fingers, "you reversed *Pim Noctar*."

"I don't pretend to be my brother, but I can manage a spell or two."

Emotions clouded her eyes and she turned her face away before he could decipher them. He'd never seen her like this. The autocratic instructor he'd known at the Academy had been replaced by a—princess. Dressed in a diaphanous gown of silver and gold, her glorious hair swept up and away from her delicate face, Elita appeared fragile and unsure.

He took her hand and raised it to his lips, pressing a kiss against her knuckles. "Your brother is a bully and I think he's full of shit. The Keeper elite might snub you, but you still

have options. The Sacred Order of the Veil is in an uproar. They're in no position to refuse anyone."

"They're in no position to *accept* anyone." She shifted her weight from one foot to the other, moving her hands to his chest. "Their first and only priority will be to choose the next high priestess."

He pulled her closer. "Sounds like you've got some time on your hands." Lifting her chin, he waited until she met his gaze. "Come with me to Zylott and just relax for a while. My brother is getting married in a couple weeks. It will be a spectacle like you've never imagined."

"Nyx and Minuette are already bonded."

"My oldest brother, King Sef."

Her blue eyes widened and she cocked her head. "Your brother is the High King of Zylott?"

Tye laughed, tucking a stray tendril of hair behind her ear. "How can you know about Nyx and not Sef?"

"I know very little about your dimension. I only met Nyx because of Minuette."

"How well do you know Minuette?"

"We've been best friends forever."

He smiled, his gaze caressing her face. "All the more reason to accept my offer. Let me show you my dimension. Or we can go somewhere new to both of us, but let's slip away, just you and me."

She swept the luxurious apartment with a slow, disdainful stare. "Can you take me to Zylott tonight? I'm not staying here."

Encouraged by the return of her feistiness, Tye grinned. He couldn't take her to the Nexus Chamber without his brother's permission. Tye saw no reason Nyx would refuse, but still, the Guardians had very strict rules. "I'll have to contact Nyx before we—"

"Nyx is busy with Rahna." She took his hand. "You can contact him in the morning."

"You have something in mind for tonight?"

"I'll show you." Tossing Light *iede* into the air, she rendered them invisible. "Don't let go of my hand or they'll be able to see you."

Just the faintest distortion in his vision assured Tye he was concealed within Elita's illusion. She eased the door open and they crept past two unsuspecting sentinels. Anger boiled within Tye. The Light Master had posted guards outside their door! Elita was his sister, for stars' sake. Why was he treating her like a prisoner?

Tension banded Tye's chest as she led him through the lavish corridors of the Light Palace. Her filmy gown flowed around her slender body with each step she took, teasing him, hinting at the shape hidden beneath its numerous pleats. Her formfitting instructor's uniform left less to the imagination, still, this garment was infinitely more appealing.

She took him into a library and looked around before releasing his hand. The illusion burst in a shower of sparkling flecks. Without explanation, she moved to one corner of the elegant room and threw *iede* onto the wainscoted wall. A wide section slid inward, then to the side.

"A secret passageway?"

She smiled and motioned for him to precede her. "How else would the family escape during a siege?"

He chuckled. "Has the Palace of Light ever come under siege?"

"Not during my lifetime." Joining him in the passageway, she closed the opening with more *iede*.

Tye brushed the shimmering residue from his shoulders and chest as Elita created a Light crystal. The small orb floated above her palm, illuminating an impressive section of the narrow passage. They set off, Elita leading the way.

"Does your brother know about this passage? Isn't this the first place he'll look?"

"He has no reason to look for us. Not even Dylan is boorish enough to interrupt a couple in the throes of *Pim Noctar*."

"Good point." They descended several flights of stairs. There was no hesitation in Elita's stride. "You've been down here before."

"This was my playground as a child. Minuette and I embarked on countless adventures, hunting for treasures and slaying dragons."

Tye laughed. "I can picture it."

A steep, winding staircase led them to the final corridor, which was really more of a tunnel than a hallway. Veins of white crystal threaded through the stone. They emerged in a shadowy cavern. Elita tossed the glowing orb into the humid air and the crystals surrounding them absorbed its light. The entire cavern glowed with golden illumination.

Tye turned in a slow, assessing circle. Countless crystals were embedded in the walls, the ceiling, even the smooth

stone floor. Light danced upon the rippling surface of a small pool at the far end of the cavern. Fed by a steady stream of water flowing down the glistening wall, the pool appeared clear and inviting.

"It's warm." Elita's voice gently intruded upon his wonder. "I thought it might help us relax."

"This is amazing. Thank you for sharing it with me."

Silence stretched between them as she strolled toward the pool. He stayed a step back, unsure how to begin. He actually knew very little about her. He only knew he wanted to learn. How long had she been without a lover? Was her brother always so domineering? Glancing around the crystal chamber, he heaved a frustrated sigh. Perhaps this wasn't such a good idea.

Tye moved up behind her. Placing his hands on her shoulders, he inhaled the sweet scent of her hair. "If you're not ready for this, we don't—"

She turned around, dislodging his hands. "Don't be a gentleman tonight. I know that's your nature, but I need to be thoroughly wicked. I want to throw caution to the wind and..."

"Spit in your brother's face?" he suggested with a smile.

"Figuratively." A blush blossomed on her cheeks and she glanced back at the pool.

"Is your gown conjured from *iede*?"

Her gaze returned to his. "Yes. Why do you ask?"

He grinned, tracing the scalloped neckline with his index finger. "If we're going to be 'thoroughly wicked,' we need some sort of bed."

"I can only manifest one garment at a time, but let me see what I can do." She held her hands out to her sides. The gown transformed into a thick fur-lined cloak.

"Can you take it off or will it disintegrate?"

"I can take it off. I just can't manifest another. It requires too much *iede*."

"We'll just have to be creative." He pulled her into his arms. "I've dreamed of touching you since the first day I saw you in class." Raising his hands to her hair, he searched for the pins or clips creating the upswept style.

Elita smiled and shook her head from side to side. In a glittering wave of silver, her hair cascaded around her shoulders, the silken strands sliding between his fingers and covering his arms. Tye released his breath in an appreciative sigh.

"It's inappropriate to have lustful thoughts about your instructor." Her tone was more relaxed now. Mischievousness shone in her clear blue eyes.

He reached for the clasp at the front of her cloak, amazed that his hands shook. She'd rescued him from death. How could he ever repay such a debt? Keeper justice was swift and merciless. Gazing into her guileless eyes, Tye paused. "I don't know how to thank you for what you did today."

She stepped back. "Is that why you're—"

"No." He cupped her shoulders, preventing any further retreat. "What I feel for you began long before today. You know that. I thought the attraction was mutual."

"It is." He detected a faint tremor in her voice.

Despite her confident demeanor and stubbornness, he had always sensed vulnerability in Elita. It was never more apparent than now. Pushing his fingers into her hair, he angled her face toward his. "We don't have to do this if you're not ready," he repeated, his gaze searching hers.

She released the clasp and let the cloak slip to the cavern floor. Tye fought for breath as he looked at her naked body. Wavering light played across her smooth skin, creating enticing shadows. Her gaze met his boldly, silently waiting for his reaction. His fingers tingled, desperate to begin a thorough exploration.

"Are you going to do more than stare?" she challenged.

"As soon as I can breathe again." He released an abrupt, slightly strangled laugh. "Stars, you're beautiful."

The hint of a smile curved the corners of her mouth. "You're a bit overdressed for the occasion." She pulled his tunic off over his head and caressed his chest as he removed his boots.

Desire sizzled through Tye. His fingers struggled with the laces at the front of his pants. With a throaty chuckle, Elita brushed his hands aside. Damn! He'd never been this eager for a woman before. Her scent thrilled him. Her beauty mesmerized. His heartbeat raced, accenting the persistent throbbing of his cock.

Had the Light Master cast a spell on him? Tye shivered violently.

"Cold?" Her tone gently mocked him.

He shook his head, filled with wonder and tenderness. "I knew you were ... I've dreamed of..." He laughed. "I feel like a bumbling schoolboy."

Slipping her hands inside his pants, she eased them down along his hips. "You don't look like a schoolboy." She encircled his shaft with one hand and squeezed his ass with the other. "I'm so glad you're not one of my students."

He kicked his pants aside and pulled her against him. "Not half as glad as I am."

His mouth settled over hers, ending the conversation. Her lips parted sweetly, her tongue greeting his with a sensual swirl. Warm and silken beneath his hands, her skin fascinated him. He stroked her back, her hips, her arms, wanting her to accept the feel of his hands on her body before he touched her intimately.

The gurgling pool beckoned. Perhaps a leisurely swim would give him some hope of controlling himself. But her body was so warm, her kiss so giving. He moved his hands to her face, forcing himself to slow down. Nibbling and nipping, he migrated from her lips to her jaw. She arched her neck, offering her throat and pressing her belly flush against his groin.

Heat flared deep in his abdomen. His cock bucked against her warmth. He cupped her breast, easing away so he could watch her nipple tighten beneath the firm stroke of his thumb.

He dipped his head and closed his lips around her nipple, flicking it with his tongue. Her fingers threaded through his

hair, holding him close, urging him on. He suckled and licked, reveling in the feel of her pebble-hard tip.

She parted her thighs and straddled his leg. His mouth moved to her other breast. Clutching his shoulders, she rocked her hips, grinding her mound against his muscular thigh. Her moist heat seared his skin, tantalized and aroused him. He wanted to savor this moment, make it last as long as possible. But his rebellious body wasn't cooperating with his mind.

He had to touch her, feel her pussy ripple, hear her cry out. With a ragged moan, he dragged his mouth away from her breast and spread her cloak on the cavern floor. He swept her into his arms, capturing her startled gasp with his mouth. Bending to one knee, he placed her on the cloak, pausing to appreciate the contrast of her blonde beauty and the rich, dark fur.

Her gaze never left his face as he stretched out beside her. Passion deepened her eyes from crystal blue to sapphire. Brushing her lips with soft kisses, he stroked her breasts and belly, addicted to the soft heat of her skin. He couldn't stop touching her, didn't want to stop.

Each breathless murmur, each restless arch assured him of her need. He pressed his hand over her mound, easing his fingers between her folds. Soft, hot, slick with passion's cream. He slid his fingers deeper, teasing her opening.

It wasn't enough. He had to see her, watch his body join with hers. He moved between her legs, pushing up on the backs of her knees. "Open for me, love. I want to look at you."

After a moment's hesitation, she relaxed her legs, allowing him to guide them up and back. The silvery curls covering her mound gleamed with moisture. Tye dragged air into his burning lungs. His cock jerked impatiently in response to her obvious eagerness. Leaning forward, he slowly traced her slit, only touching her with the head of his cock. Up and back, over and over until she whimpered. Hot, incredibly soft, her slick folds surrounded him, welcomed him, beckoned him deeper.

Determination surged through him. He would feel her come at least once before he surrendered to his own need. Holding her open with one hand, he pushed just his cock head into her opening. Stars, she was hot and tight. He circled her clit with his fingertips. Her inner muscles squeezed with each pass.

"Come for me, princess. I want to feel your pleasure."

Canting her hips, she tried to take him deeper. Tye wouldn't give in. He continued the teasing stimulation, his gaze intent upon her flushed face. She licked her lips and closed her eyes, her hands grasping the backs of her knees.

"Let go, sweetheart. Come for me."

He covered her clit with his thumb and rubbed. She cried out and arched her back. Her sweet pussy pulsed, driving Tye to the brink. He kept up the rhythm with his thumb and thrust his full length into her.

She bit back a scream and turned her head to the side, her body shuddering. Tight, hot—much too tight. "Why didn't you tell me?" He whispered the question against her lips, careful to keep any hint of accusation from his tone.

Mystic Keepers 2: Zylott Wars (Collection)
by Aubrey Ross

"It wasn't important."

"Like hell it wasn't. I wouldn't have hurt you if I'd known."

"It always hurts the first time."

"Not with a sorcerer."

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Chapter Five

Elita tried to relax and adjust to the thick penetration of Tye's body. In the tingling aftermath of her orgasm, she'd felt only a quick sting. He shifted his weight, slipping his hands under her and raising her bottom onto his thighs. Only her shoulders remained on the cloak, the rest of her body arched toward his.

He stroked her breasts, teasing her nipples. His gaze locked with hers. "I'm going to send you a healing pulse. Relax. It will ease the sting and let me move without hurting you."

He wasn't really hurting her. She just felt incredibly—full. His hands moved to her hips as tingling heat swirled through her abdomen. Her pussy quivered and her nipples tightened. "Oh!"

Smiling, he did it again. Pleasure vibrated her core and she released a new rush of cream. "Oh, indeed," he whispered.

He pulled back, nearly out of her. Elita tightened her inner muscles, protesting his withdrawal. Her body stretched around him as he surged back in. Supporting her hips at just the right angle, he fit their bodies together. She couldn't match his movements, could only accept, and feel.

The golden flecks in his hazel eyes gleamed. His expression turned fierce and possessive. He thrust deep, his hands clutching her hips. With a guttural moan he shook his head. His gaze cleared, his movements gentled.

She watched his face, hesitant and uneasy. Had it been a trick of the Light cave or a response to his desire? Warm and tender, his gaze caressed her face, while he filled her with smooth, steady strokes.

Emotion twisted through her, intensified by the sensations he unleashed within her body. She longed to truly open herself, to share her thoughts, her feelings, her ... He wasn't even a Keeper! How could she bond with a Zylott spy?

Tye was her lover, nothing more. They would enjoy mutual pleasure. She would never have a bonded mate. She'd accepted that fact long ago.

His skillful touch built the tension within her body, but Elita stubbornly guarded her heart. She concentrated on the slide of his thick shaft, the bunch and flex of his muscles, the heat of his gaze. It was all she was willing to surrender; it would have to be enough.

He moved faster, deeper. She clutched his upper arms and closed her eyes, reinforcing her emotional barriers. The affection shining in his gaze was too enticing, too tempting. Lifting her hips, he thrust to the hilt and spilled his seed deep inside.

He stretched her to the point of pain and Elita still felt empty. Rolling to his side, Tye tried to take her with him. Elita twisted and scurried off the cloak and out of reach. She sent a powerful cleansing pulse down the length of her body, then headed for the pool.

Tye watched her retreat in frustrated confusion. Why had she encouraged him to make love to her if she didn't really want him?

Rolling his shoulders, Tye sat up. *Talk to her, you ass. You can't leave it like this!*

He pushed to his feet and approached the pool. She arched backward, allowing the warm water to saturate her hair. The position thrust her breasts skyward and sent his libido into a tailspin. How could he want her again? They'd just finished, for stars' sake.

Warm water swirled around his hips as he waded into the pool, barely covering his burgeoning erection. Catching her hand, he pulled her toward him. "Talk to me."

"What do you want me to say?" She pushed her wet hair out of her eyes.

"Why didn't you tell me you were a virgin?"

"Because it would have led to a bunch of questions about a subject I'd rather not discuss."

A little more subtle than "butt the hell out," but the message came through loud and clear. "Your cousin mentioned someone named—"

"Tavon is my nephew, not my cousin. Is that who you're talking about?"

"The Death Master's son."

"His mother is my oldest sister."

"You're avoiding the issue."

She tugged her hand out of his grasp and dove beneath the water. Instinctively reaching for her, Tye snatched his hand back before his fingers tangled in her long hair. He couldn't force this. She'd explain when she was ready and not before. Until then he'd enjoy the view. The cave's mystic light

gave her skin a golden glow. She moved with grace and strength, her supple body slicing through the water.

The cavern's floor sloped gradually into the pool. Tye moved to the edge and sat, resting his forearms on his bent knees. Water lapped at his feet, occasionally surging as high as his thighs. She surfaced on the far side of the pool, near the small waterfall.

"Tavon told you about Galid?"

Tye fought back a smile. That hadn't taken long. "I asked him if you had a bonded mate and he said 'not since Galid.' Keepers bond for life, so I presumed you were a widow."

"In a way, I am." Though the water reached her shoulders, she crossed her arms over her breasts. Tye wanted to hold her, comfort her, but she wasn't ready for his embrace. "It took almost a year for our application to be processed." She paused for a shuddering breath. "Six days after the Steering Committee approved our joining, Galid was killed."

"How did he die?"

"He was a Death Keeper. All of his assignments came with inherent risks. Death Keepers thrive on the danger. That's part of what makes them so effective. Galid's partner completed their assignment, but not before the culprit..." She moved beneath the stream of water and said nothing more.

Tye watched the water caress her face, jealousy churning within him. Her first love, approved by the Committee to be her bonded mate. How could he compete with that?

What was wrong with him? He'd had sex with women before and never wanted more than passion. Why was he complicating this?

Tossing back her sodden hair, she waded toward him. "That was the past. This is the present, and I have no idea what the future holds."

Hope flitted just out of reach. If only it were that simple. Each step she took revealed more of her body, distracting him, arousing him. Her hair streamed over her shoulders, the wet strands parting over one breast, concealing the other. Desire ignited in her gaze, but Tye's heart rebelled. He didn't want just her passion. He wanted...

She eased his legs apart and knelt between them, wrapping her arms around his neck. "I didn't really think of myself as a virgin because of all the things ... Galid and I ... A year is a long time to wait."

The wistful hush in her tone fired Tye's blood. He would not be jealous of a ghost! But he'd be damned before she spent her life pining for one. A wicked plan coalesced within his mind. She obviously missed the pleasure Galid had given her. Perhaps Tye could use that same pleasure to guide her beyond the memories.

Framing her face with his hands, he touched his mouth to hers, not kissing, just caressing her lips with his. Her fingers combed through his hair and she parted her lips expectantly. He ignored the invitation.

He cupped her breast, shaping the warm resilient mound with his palm. She tried to slip her hand between their bodies, her destination obvious. He caught her wrist and pulled her hand behind her back, pressing her lower body flush with his.

"Let me touch you," she objected, tugging against his hold.

"After I touch you." He moved his hand to her other breast and rolled her nipple between his thumb and forefinger.

"You are touching me."

"But I want to lick you. Stand up." He didn't give her the opportunity to argue. Cupping her bottom with both hands, he lifted her to her feet and buried his face at the apex of her thighs.

"Tye!"

He grinned. Holding her firmly in place, he went to work on her clit, circling and flicking with the tip of his tongue. She remained stiff and annoyed for a moment, then relaxed against his mouth. Shifting restlessly, she raked her fingers through his hair.

Ravenous for the taste of her passion, he lifted one of her legs to his shoulder, opening her for a more thorough exploration.

"I need to—lie down," she panted.

Wrapping his arm around her thigh, he supported her, steadied her. His mouth moved against her pussy, teasing her clit and sucking her folds. She arched into his torrid kiss, trembling. He ventured deeper, parted her, and pushed up into her core, fucking her with his tongue. She arched, her fingers tightening in his hair as an orgasm shook her.

Tye swept her into his arms, turned, and laid her back against the smooth stone floor. Her breasts quivered and passion's haze had yet to leave her gaze. He pushed her legs up and back, opening her wide as he settled between her thighs.

His cock pulsed in time to his raging heartbeat. He needed to be inside her, thrusting hard and fast, but he needed her surrender more. She held her emotions in check even as she reveled in sexual abandon. It wasn't enough. Sex would never be enough with Elita.

Scooting down, he rested his cheek against her inner thigh. She roused enough to whisper his name. He ignored her questioning tone and pushed two fingers into her pussy, groaning as her heat enveloped him.

He slid his fingers in and out, watching her dusky flesh accept the substitute penetration. Cream gleamed on her folds and coated his fingers. Slipping his arm under her bent knee, he levered himself over her. He flicked her clit with his tongue, matching the rhythm to the thrusting of his fingers. Slow, rippling spasms passed along her inner walls, squeezing his fingers. He continued his onslaught, determined to banish Galid's ghost.

She came again and again, each release building in intensity, until she thrashed and bucked, her cries echoing off the cavern walls.

"Stop! No more. Please."

Sliding his fingers out, Tye soothed her with his mouth. He caressed and kissed, thrilled by how well he'd pleased her. He stroked her curls gently, easing away from her. Their gazes locked, hers filled with confusion. "Aren't you going to..."

"You found no pleasure when I took your virginity. Consider this an apology."

* * * *

Cyd hovered above the languid couple, desperate for energy. His attempts to take over the male had left him dangerously weak. The female had incredibly strong mental shields, while the male was an enigma. Cyd had thought them both Keepers, yet the male's mental pattern felt almost Fahroni.

The male's cock rose high and hard, ready for thrusting. Why didn't he fuck her? Cyd *needed* for them to fuck. He sent a strong compulsion into the male's brain, filling his mind with positions and possibilities.

The male groaned, his body shuddering. Cyd couldn't afford to be subtle. He had to get back to the *Setti* realm or his energy would disperse permanently.

"Are you all right?"

The male shook his head. Turning his back to the female, he wrapped his fingers around his cock and stroked vigorously.

"Why won't you finish what we started? I'm not sore or—"

"I don't want to fuck you, Elita." His tone snapped, harsh and caustic. "I want to *make love*, but you won't let me."

Her eyes brimmed with tears. The male didn't see them as he continued pumping his cock. She moved up behind him and touched his shoulder. "At least let me return the favor. I've never known pleasure like that."

His hand paused and his spine stiffened. His gaze remained cold. "You'd rather suck my cock than let me make love to you?"

"That's not what I meant!"

She turned away. He caught her arm and pulled her to his side, his expression intense, conflicted. "I'm sorry. I think your brother's spell is affecting me. This is not what I want for us. I won't take you again until you're ready to make love with me. I can't pretend that sex is enough."

"That's not fair." Her brow furrowed and she glanced with obvious longing at his massive erection. "I care about you, but I don't know if I'm capable of love. Would you rather I pretend—"

"No." He cupped the side of her face with one hand, his gaze moving over her features. "I can't do it again. I can't reach for your mind and feel nothing but resignation."

Damn him! This was no time for sentimentality. Cyd needed them to fuck. He blasted the male with sexual compulsion, rocking him back and dragging a strangled moan from his throat.

"You can't ignore it, Tye. The desire will only get stronger. Let me ease you as you eased me."

With a defeated sigh, the male scooted back from the water's edge. Her silvery hair spread over his thighs as she bent over him submissively. Cyd flew around the male, desperate to make use of his virile body. Never before had Cyd encountered a corporeal being he couldn't control.

She lowered her head and took the man's cock into her mouth, cupping his balls in one hand. Cyd tried a different approach. Gradually sinking into the male's mind, he established a telepathic link, insinuating his compulsions rather than forcing them.

Cyd focused on the female's breasts and the man reached beneath her, caressing her tempting flesh, rolling her nipples. Oh yes! This was much better. Tactile sensations passed across the link. Cyd could feel the male's pleasure, the warm softness of her breasts and the wet heat of her mouth.

Her lovely round ass and slick pussy were within easy reach of the male. He moved his hand between her legs and circled her clit with his fingers, gently teasing her. Cyd focused on her cunt. *Drill her! Fuck her with your fingers.*

The male thrust two fingers into her core, fast and hard. She made muffled sounds around his cock and arched into his touch. Cyd felt her inner muscles flutter and commanded the male to pull out.

Cyd sent his next compulsion and the male blurted out, "I want to fuck your ass."

Damn it! He hadn't meant for him to say it out loud.

The female raised her head, her eyes wide and luminous. "What?"

The male shook his head. "I don't know why I said that. I would never..."

A smile curved her lips. "You're blushing." She laughed. "You're actually blushing. Would you lose all respect for me if I said you wouldn't be the first?"

"Galid." He whispered the name.

She stroked his chest, her eyes bright with desire. "Now do you understand why I no longer considered myself a virgin?"

The male stood and moved away from the water. Cyd sent searing desire over the telepathic link.

"Stars!" He staggered to a stop, his hands clenching into fists. "Your brother's spell must have been stronger than I thought. I was sure I'd reversed it, but I've never burned like this."

She went to him and wrapped her arms around his lean waist. "Have you ever taken a woman like that or will I be your first?"

The insinuation thrilled Cyd. She was more than willing. She wanted a good ass fucking. The man eased her away, looking deep into her eyes. "I don't want to hurt you."

"But you do want to—fuck my ass?" She ended with a playful grin.

Still the male hesitated. Cyd gave him another telepathic push.

"Yes, please!"

Thank the gods!

She knelt on some sort of pelt and lowered her torso toward the floor, bracing herself on her forearms. Cyd filled the male's head with vivid images, showing him exactly what to do. Like a puppet, he obeyed. Kneeling behind the woman, he spread her ass cheeks, revealing her tightly puckered hole. He leaned in and dragged his tongue from her clit to her anus in one continuous sweep. Carnal energy vibrated all around them. Cyd absorbed it gleefully.

Gathering cream from her pussy, the man prepared her hole. Excitement, almost painful in its intensity, twisted through the male. Cyd sensed his confusion. He had no idea why he was so determined to fuck her ass. It would have

been better if she'd never done it before. Nothing generated sexual frenzy like reaming a virgin ass.

The male pushed his cock into her pussy just far enough to get it wet. She moaned and wiggled, wordlessly urging him on. He positioned himself to breach her then moved his hands to her hips. She arched her back as he pushed in. Cyd watched the male's thick cock sink into her ass, feeling the tight muscle give, expand, surrender.

Reaching around from the front, the man fingered her clit as he dragged his long shaft nearly out. She shuddered, her passage rippled, and she cried out. Orgasm in one stroke! Oh, she liked this.

Cyd urged the man on, absorbing their energy with greedy abandon. His finger rubbed her clit as he thrust in firm steady strokes. Hot and tight, her ass gripped the male's cock, speeding him toward release. Cyd saturated himself with their energy, stealing all he could while the couple was too abandoned to notice. The man pounded into her, and she cried out her pleasure with each forceful thrust.

Reluctantly dissolving his link with the male, Cyd paused to bask in their frenzy. Then he set a course through the vastness of space and time, and returned to the *Setti* realm.

* * * *

Tye rolled to his side, taking Elita with him. His cock was still buried in her ass, the last flutters of her orgasm finally fading. What had just happened to them? He was afraid to move, afraid to disturb the peaceful lethargy and feel passion's demand rise again.

"Are you okay?" He rubbed her shoulders and kissed her neck, anxiety tensing his muscles.

"I've never felt better." She giggled. "Are you okay?"

She slurred her words. Her body snuggled into the curve of his. Thank the stars, he hadn't hurt her, but why did she sound so odd? He tried to move, to separate their bodies. He couldn't even lift his arm. "I'm exhausted."

"Hold still."

He couldn't have done anything else. A tingling sensation swept from his head to his toes. "What was that?"

"A cleansing pulse. Why do you sound upset? That was incredible."

He needed to see her face, judge her expressions. Forcing his sluggish body to move, he pulled out and he turned her around. "Something very strange just happened to us."

She blinked repeatedly, fighting to keep her eyes open. "Not everyone enjoys that sort of play, but I don't think it's that unusual."

"Someone or something was controlling me, urging me on."

Her gaze narrowed, but her lips curved into a teasing smile. "You didn't enjoy what we just did?"

"It was the single most intense experience of my life."

"Mine too." She sounded pleased, dreamy—no, intoxicated.

"This isn't right. Something is definitely not right."

She laid her head on his shoulder and pressed her naked body against his side. "So sleepy."

He managed to fold her cloak over them before he followed her into sleep.

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by Aubrey Ross

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Chapter Six

The following morning, Nyx gave Tye permission to bring Elita through the Nexus Chamber. Overcome by a combination of confusion and lethargy, they dressed in silence. Elita swung her cloak onto her shoulders, then transformed it into an instructor's uniform. A pang of regret ricocheted through her being. The choice was no longer appropriate. With another dusting of *iede*, she manifested black pants and a light blue shirt.

Tye finished dressing by the time she settled on the outfit. He followed her from the Light cavern and down a different corridor. They emerged on the far side of the formal gardens behind the palace. The sun was directly overhead, drenching them in warmth and light.

"We slept half the day away." He shook his head in disbelief.

"I thought we would leave before dawn. I better conceal us again." He took her hand and she cast her illusion, offering him a wan smile. "Where is the Nexus Chamber?"

"We'll need a skimmer."

"That could be tricky. I'm not sure I can keep us out of sight."

"It will take several hours if we walk."

She nodded and led him through the garden, back toward the palace. Skimmers were quiet, but not silent. This could be interesting. They found a row of the small hovercraft near the main entrance. Elita looked around, anxiety knotting her

belly. The members of her immediate family could sense each other's illusions.

Holding tightly to her hand, Tye maneuvered one of the skimmers away from the palace wall. "How are we going to keep our hands together?"

"Climb on. I'll show you." He swung onto the skimmer and she climbed on in front of him. With his body plastered to her back, he could just reach the controls. She expanded the illusion, encompassing the hovercraft. "Even if the illusion holds, they'll be able to hear us."

"I'll take the back roads."

Once they passed the palace gates, Elita relaxed. She enjoyed the startled glances of the people they passed. Tye chose his path carefully, avoiding populated areas and main skimmer routes.

Her mind drifted back to the day before. Indulging her desire for Tye had offered the perfect outlet for her rebellion. But Tye touched her with tenderness and affection, stirred feelings she thought buried with Galid. Tye attracted her, moved her—scared her to death. It was better to remain emotionally distanced than risk her heart again.

The first time they'd made love had been so different from what happened after. *I don't want to fuck you, Elita. I want to make love ...* She'd always understood the difference, but it had never been as apparent as last night.

"It's probably safe to release the illusion. We'll be concealed by the trees the rest of the way."

Nodding, she ceased the flow of *iède*. She still felt incredibly tired. "What do you think happened last night?"

"I don't know." He spoke just above her ear. "All I'm certain of is that wasn't me."

The disturbing thought haunted her during the rest of the ride. Some Shadow Keepers could influence others with their minds, but even the strongest couldn't bend another to their will. Besides, Shadow Keepers couldn't render themselves invisible, they would need a Light Keeper to conceal them. She gave herself a mental shake. There were beings in many dimensions more powerful than Keepers. Lord Nyx had taught her that.

Tye brought the skimmer to a stop beneath a massive tree, helping her to the leaf strewn ground. Only stubborn rays of light found their way through the entwined branches. Elita filled her lungs with cool, fresh air before following Tye up a small, rocky slope.

He ducked through the mouth of a cave and Elita couldn't repress a smile. They seemed destined for caves on this adventure. Unlike the Light cavern, this cave was cold and dank. They went only a few paces before they reached the back wall.

Extending his arms to his sides, Tye recited an incantation. The stone undulated, faded, then disappeared, revealing a neat archway.

She preceded him into the Nexus Chamber. "How long have Zylott spies been sneaking into the Keeper dimension?"

"The Keepers have nothing to fear from Zylott. Surely you realize that by now."

"These chambers are not meant for casual transportation. Who gave you permission to bring her here?"

Elita turned her head toward the speaker, offended by his rude tone. He sat on a metal chair, his arms crossed over his chest. Were it not for his glowing blue eyes, she would have thought him an ordinary man.

When Tye didn't reply, Elita looked at him. The color had drained from his face; even his lips looked ashen. "What sort of specter are you?" Tye whispered.

She turned back to the 'specter' with new interest. The being crossed his legs and stroked his short trimmed beard. The intensity of his gaze decreased.

"I selected this image from your brother's memory thinking it would make communicating with him less complicated. He reacted in much the same way."

Tye moved closer, his gaze narrowed with suspicion. "Who are you? How did you get in here?"

"My name is Xenos. I am a Guardian."

Apparently Tye knew what that meant. His dark brows arched and he took a deep breath. "I mean no disrespect, but how can I be certain of your claim? Many races are capable of illusion."

"*Hezi aukton, rimen forn tor.*" Xenos spoke the incantation with a musical quality Tye hadn't managed. The archway behind them closed and Elita shivered. "I helped construct these chambers. Are you satisfied?"

"Nearly." Tye turned from the Guardian and closed his eyes.

"What is your business in Zylott?" Xenos turned his incandescent gaze on her. "For that matter, what is your name?"

"My name is Elita Mere and the rest is complicated."

Xenos smiled. "Why doesn't that surprise me?"

Tye came out of his trance and bowed his head toward the Guardian. "Forgive me, sir. Nyx confirmed your identity and apologizes for his tardiness."

"You are his brother Tye?"

"Yes, sir."

Xenos inclined his head, his expression turning thoughtful. "My original question still remains. Why is this woman in my chamber?"

"Much has happened since your last meeting with Nyx. He suggested I fill you in, but he is on his way."

"Proceed."

"Two Keeper women have been attacked by a *Setti* hybrid. One is Rahna Delmont, the Death Master's daughter. She is being detoxified. The other victim didn't survive the infusion."

"These were not Veil Keepers?"

Elita listened carefully to the conversation, watching their expressions, analyzing their tones.

"Rahna has barely begun her training as a Shadow Keeper. The other victim was of the Order of Light."

"Mere." Xenos looked at Elita. "Mere is the name of the Light Master. Is that not correct?"

"He's my brother."

A crackling drew her attention to the far wall. Light formed a perfect rectangle, then a portal opened and Nyx strode in, shaking his head at his brother. "Well, he hasn't incinerated you, so I presume you accepted his introduction." The light sarcasm in Nyx's tone made Elita smile.

"He looks just like Father," Tye protested. "Do you often converse with the dead?"

Nyx chuckled. "Just when Xenos is around."

Elita hated to intrude on their banter, but there was much left unsaid. "How is Rahna?"

"Recovering. These things take time."

The Guardian pushed to his feet and crossed the small chamber. As he moved, his image wavered. He wasn't solid! Did they realize they were speaking with a spirit?

"Has she described her attacker?" Xenos asked. "Do we have a *Setti*/Keeper hybrid on our hands?"

"I thought a full-blooded *Setti* could not breed with a Keeper." Nyx was all business now.

"To my knowledge, they cannot. But for a hybrid to take on the outward appearance of another, they must be of the same race."

Nyx nodded. "The hybrid I killed could not have taken on the appearance of a Keeper. He would have been limited to his Fahroni form."

"Correct."

"Then he was not Rahna's attacker. She shared her story with Minuette. She claims her lover was possessed by an entity. His face contorted and his eyes glowed. While under the control of this being, he infused her until she was addicted and then departed. Her lover has no memory of the events and has since ended the relationship."

Elita looked at Tye, trembling with trepidation. Nyx had just described what happened to them.

"We had a similar experience last night." Tye spoke with obvious reluctance. "Something was definitely influencing me. But I have no loss of memory."

Nyx and Xenos turned toward her at exactly the same time. Elita stepped back and held out her hands to ward them off. "Granted, what happened was strange, but I'm not lust crazed like Rahna."

Xenos' eyes ignited, their sapphire intensity sweeping her from head to foot. "She has not been infused. Did you feel drained after this—experience? Were you unusually fatigued?"

"We both were." Tye slipped his arm around her shoulders and drew her close against his side. "Do you understand what all this means? What sort of creature can do these things?"

"A *Setti* wraith, the most powerful of all the hybrids."

"What is a *Setti* wraith?" Nyx asked.

"A being half-*Setti* and half-Guardian."

Nyx shook his head, his dark eyebrows drawn together. "How is it possible for a *Setti* to impregnate a non-corporeal being?"

A bluish light erupted around Xenos. Elita blinked repeatedly, then turned her face away. The light faded and Xenos touched Nyx on the arm. The sorcerer gasped. "We are able to take on form. It is just unwise for us to do so."

"The *Setti* are powerful enough to force the Guardians?" The thought of such abuse sickened Elita and the underlying threat filled her with fear. How could they hope to best the *Setti* if not even the Guardians were safe?

"They captured her when she was a child and starved her until she solidified. After forcing her to bear three

abominations, they left her for dead." As he spoke, Xenos faded, leaving only the outline of his shape. "We were able to restore her energy, but her mind was shattered. She begged me to let her disperse, so I kept the others away."

Elita crossed her arms over her chest, blinking back tears. Pain radiated off the Guardian in tangible waves. "You knew her well." It wasn't really a question. Grief had colored every word.

"She was my daughter."

Tears escaped the corners of Elita's eyes. She didn't bother to brush them away.

"They led me to believe she'd been killed when all the time she was a captive in the *Setti* realm. If she hadn't survived their torture, I never would have known the truth."

Ignorance was a mercy in situations like this. Tye squeezed her shoulder and she looked up at him. Warmth and compassion gleamed in his gaze. A new flood of tears blinded her. She wanted to bury her face against his chest and weep.

Nyx drew them back to the present, his voice firm and direct. "How do we change our strategy to compensate for this new threat?"

"The only way to destroy a wraith is to trap it outside the *Setti* realm."

* * * *

Elita stood on the wall walk, staring out across Drahbin Fortress. Cool despite the bright sunshine, a brisk wind whipped her hair around her face. The compound was unlike anything Elita had ever seen, stark, yet majestic in its

simplicity. Beyond the outer wall stretched a vast forest and rugged, snow-capped mountains.

"Minuette said I'd find you here."

She recognized Tye's voice, but didn't turn around. "She just left."

"Did you enjoy your tour?"

The tour had been a ploy to get her away from Tye. Minuette was as curious about Elita's relationship with Tye as Elita was to hear the details of Nyx's tempestuous courtship of Minuette. "This place is fascinating." She hid her secretive smile as he stepped up beside her. "Are all the sorcerers men?"

They'd arrived at Drahbin Fortress six days before. Attentive and courteous, Tye seldom left her side. Each night they slept in each other's arms, but he made no move to touch her intimately. He was tormenting her with his patience, his expectation clear. He wouldn't take her again until she was ready to make love with him.

"Mystic abilities only manifest in Fahroni males. Some of our women are telepathic, but only females with Keeper blood have other abilities."

"I'm surprised more Fahroni don't seek out Keeper mates."

"Is that an invitation?" He smiled, capturing a lock of her hair as it danced in the wind. "The people of Zylott don't put the same emphasis on mystical abilities as the Keepers do. Many in Zylott equate mystic abilities with the *Setti* and want nothing to do with them. The masses rely on us to protect them, but sorcerers are treated with fear and mistrust, not deference."

She turned to face him. "That must be hard on you and the others."

"It can be frustrating." Releasing her hair, he traced her jaw line with his index finger. "How are you feeling today? Has your strength returned?"

"I feel damn lucky. I can't stop thinking about Rahna. If the wraith had infused me, I would have ended up like her." Intensity flared within his gaze, sending a warm tingle down her spine. She couldn't identify the exact combination of emotions contributing to his expression, but she couldn't mistake his devotion.

"I spoke with Xenos again this morning. He believes the wraith exhausted itself trying to take control, so it used us to garner enough energy to return to the *Setti* realm."

"How do we lure it back and trap it? This thing must be destroyed."

"This isn't your fight. You've sacrificed enough because of this abomination." Tye wrapped his arms around her, tucking her head beneath his chin.

Elita shivered. That was the word Xenos had used to describe the wraiths. She eased back enough to meet Tye's gaze without leaving his embrace. "Xenos has sacrificed. Rahna has suffered. What happened to us may have been beyond our control, but I regret nothing. This creature simply chose the wrong couple to manipulate. I'm making this my fight."

He smiled into her eyes. "Do you mean that?"

"Yes. It challenged us when it—"

"You honestly have no regrets?"

She slid her hands up his chest and locked her fingers behind his neck. "I can't pretend that loving you doesn't scare me witless. I never expected to care for anyone after I lost Galid. But—"

He interrupted her admission with a deep, lingering kiss. "Say it again."

"Which part?"

"The part about loving me."

She smiled. "I'm not going to make it that easy for you. I don't want to love you and I'm going to fight it every step of the way."

"But you love me?"

"I haven't decided yet."

He chuckled and kissed her again. "Yes, you have," he whispered against her lips.

"We're talking about the *Setti* wraith." She eased him away. "I don't believe its victims were random."

"Xenos agrees." Tye rested his hands on her hips, keeping her close. "After analyzing our information, he's convinced this is Hakon's revenge for Gibrath's death."

Her eyebrows scrunched together at the unfamiliar names.

"Sorry. Gibrath was the hybrid who was controlling the Veil Keepers."

"He was the one your brother killed?"

"Yes. Hakon is the Supreme Midox, the high king, of the *Setti* realm."

"He's still alive?"

"Unfortunately." Tye heaved a sigh. "Hakon was Gibrath's father."

"And Gibrath fathered Nyx?"

Tye's gaze shot to hers. "Minuette told you?" He didn't sound pleased.

"We're like sisters. We tell each other everything."

"Everything?" His brow raised in challenge.

"Almost everything." Heat suffused her face and a smile tugged at the corners of her mouth. "Was Gibrath the hybrid who appeared to your mother?"

"Yes." He turned from her and stared out into the distance, obviously uncomfortable with the subject. "Few know about my brother and it is best left that way."

"I understand."

He accepted her assurance with a nod. "Back to the wraiths. Hakon ascended to the throne not long ago. His father was the one who tortured Xenos' daughter."

"Then the wraiths are half-brothers to the high king?"

"Exactly. There are only two left. One was dispersed many years ago."

"If we lure it back to this dimension can Xenos trap it?"

Tye folded his arms over his chest and leaned against the wall. "The best place to lay the trap would be the Nexus Chamber, but what would we use for bait?"

"Is the wraith aware of Rahna's condition?"

His eyes narrowed. "What are you thinking?"

"Rahna survived multiple infusions. Is that as unusual as I think?"

"Yes. Her compatibility with *Setti* essence puts her in great danger. Hakon would like nothing better than to create a

Setti/Keeper hybrid. They've been trying, unsuccessfully, for years."

"Then it's safe to assume he will try and infuse her again?"

He released a sharp burst of laughter. "Do you want to tell the Death Master we need to use his daughter as bait?"

"We don't. We just need the wraith to believe he has found his opportunity."

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Chapter Seven

"I don't like this one bit." Tye paced his bedchamber. He'd spent the afternoon and most of the evening strategizing with Nyx. Despite their best efforts, they'd failed to devise a better way of trapping the *Setti* wraith. Elita sat on the edge of the bed, her gaze following his anxious movements.

"I'm a master illusionist. The wraith won't know the difference."

"That's what I'm afraid of. If Xenos can't—"

A blue flash of light preceded Xenos' disembodied voice. "May I enter?"

"Only if you're going to talk her out of this madness."

With another flash of light, the Guardian appeared between Tye and Elita. "I don't make a habit of monitoring conversations, but you were talking about me."

"Is the wraith aware of Rahna's condition?" Elita stood and joined them in the center of the room. Tye had avoided the question on the wall walk.

"Nyx has the entire fortress shielded," Tye admitted begrudgingly. "The *Setti* are unaware of what transpires within these walls."

"The wraith is weakened when it is away from its dimension and the Nexus Chamber is my domain," the Guardian said.

"Whose side are you on?"

"This conflict is escalating." Xenos' gaze intensified. "They grow bolder with each passing day. We must act swiftly and definitively."

Jaw clenched, nostrils flared, Tye fought against the logic in his words. He didn't want Elita in danger. The thought of subjecting her to the wraith's influence, even temporarily, clawed through his calm.

"You will escort Rahna back to the Keeper realm tomorrow morning." Elita placed her hand on his upper arm. "But in the Nexus Chamber, she will detain you and attempt to seduce you again."

"What if he waits until 'Rahna' succeeds in her seduction before he acts?"

"Then you better not enjoy it too much."

Silence stretched between them, fueled by Xenos' glowing eyes. Tye raked his fingers through his hair. "I still don't like it."

"Your conflict may work to our advantage. The wraith is empathic. Your disapproval will complete the illusion. I'll await you in the Nexus Chamber midmorning tomorrow."

Xenos blinked out of sight and Tye released a ragged breath.

Elita stepped in front of him, her gaze warm and caressing. "I'm not helpless. Why are you so upset by this?"

"I'm a sorcerer. I'm supposed to protect you."

"You *have* protected me. Were you any less of a sorcerer, the wraith would have succeeded in infusing me. Instead, it was so depleted it had to retreat to the *Setti* realm. Now

enough talk." She paused for a sexy smile. "We have unfinished business."

A warm rush of desire washed his anxiety aside. "Do we? What have we left undone?"

"We can't bond until this is over. An empath will sense the connection. But once we've vanquished the wraith, I want you to reactivate *Pim Noctar*."

He framed her face with his hands and searched her gaze. His heart thundered within his chest. "You must be certain. A bonding cannot be undone."

"I know."

"Emotions run high when danger looms. I'll not take advantage of your fear. When the crisis is past, we'll speak of this again."

She relented with a subtle nod. "The bonding can wait a little while longer, but I want you to finish making love to me. We've been interrupted twice, first by Galid's ghost, then by the *Setti* wraith. There are no specters here tonight."

He needed no further encouragement. Caressing her lips with his, he teased her with feathery kisses. She tried to anticipate his pattern and deepen the kiss. He flitted and nipped, deftly avoiding her seeking lips.

With a frustrated growl, she tangled her fingers in his hair and claimed his mouth. Tye smiled and her tongue surged past his lips, eager to explore. He returned the kiss with equal fervor, inhaling her breath, surrounding himself with her scent, her taste.

Each kiss, each caress confirmed what he'd suspected; Elita was his mate, the other half of his soul. Drawing her

close, he cradled the back of her head in the crook of his arm. He stroked her face as he took the kiss deeper.

She found her way beneath his tunic, stroking his bare back. He swept her into his arms and placed her on the bed. After tugging his tunic off over his head, he bent to pull off his boots. She watched him undress, an appreciative smile curving her kiss-swollen lips.

"Your turn." He climbed onto the bed as her garments disintegrated in a puff of sparkling *iede*. "I'll never get tired of seeing you do that." With the tip of one finger, he drew a mystic glyph in the shimmering residue directly above her heart.

"What is that?"

"It's an ancient Fahroni symbol."

"These decorate your brother's robes." He nodded. "What does it mean?"

"When the Fahroni are fortunate enough to find their soul's mate, they mark their skin with this symbol. In the middle, they place a smaller, individual glyph, making each brand unique."

"Brand? They burn these symbols into their skin?"

He felt her shudder and smiled. "Not with fire or conventional heat. The symbol is drawn on with a special ink and the mystic intensity of the soul bonding imprints it permanently beneath the skin."

"Do you want our bonding to include this exchange?"

"Only if you're agreeable." He cupped her breast, his finger and thumb framing her nipple. "We've the rest of our lives to work out the details."

Elita combed his hair with her fingers as his lips closed around her nipple. The strange symbol was still visible on the upper curve of her breast. *When the Fahroni are fortunate enough to find their soul's mate.* His words echoed through her mind.

Could a soul have more than one mate? Her heart leapt at the thought. Galid had been her first love, idealized by a young girl's heart. She saw Tye more clearly, which made her feelings even harder to deny.

His patient tenderness soothed her ragged heart, set her soul at ease. But what did she have to offer him? A soul bonding should be an exchange. Keepers were taught to find their equal and opposite. What did she have that was equal to Tye's love?

He eased her back against the pillows as his mouth moved to her other breast. The firm pull of his mouth sent tingles pulsing deep into her belly. She rubbed his arms, squeezed his shoulders, hungry for the feel of his body. Easing her legs apart, he settled between her thighs.

She watched his fingers move over her skin. So gentle, so careful, every touch communicated his devotion. Tenderness surged in response, suffusing her body with warmth. He slid farther down, lifting her legs to his shoulders. His hot breath wafted across her damp flesh.

"Would you like my mouth on you, princess? I want to taste your desire."

"Yes." She hardly recognized the desire-thickened sound of her own voice. "Taste me."

"Part the way for me. Show me what you want."

Surrender. Offer yourself freely. It all came down to trust. If her love were ever to equal his, she had to start with trust.

Her hands trembled as she parted her folds in brazen invitation. "Taste me. Take me."

He didn't hesitate. Licking slowly from front to back, he traced her slit again and again. He rimmed her opening, but stopped just short of her aching clit.

"Please, Tye. Lick my clit. I want to feel your tongue there."

Immediately he obliged, firmly stroking the swollen nub. Tension coiled within her, throbbed, escalated. She tilted her hips and tossed her head, gasping as sensations darted across her nerve endings. He took her right to the brink of orgasm, then raised his head.

She tangled her hands in his hair and he chuckled. "Not this time, princess. We come together or not at all." Pulling her up off the pillows, he took her place, and guided her into position, straddling his hips. Then to her astonishment, he folded his hands behind his head and gazed into her eyes.

If she wanted more, she had to take it. He offered her control, entrusted her with their pleasure. This was the first time she'd been on top, but how hard could it be? Balancing on her knees, she raised her hips and found his cock. Oh, it could be hard indeed.

Grinning at her silly tangent, she guided him to her core. His eyes narrowed and his breath hissed out. "Does that hurt?"

"I've wanted you so badly since the cave, I wasn't sure I'd survive."

She lowered herself onto his shaft, deeper, tighter, more!
"Oh, stars, that's good."

His throaty chuckle was her only answer, but his hands moved to her hips. He pushed her up, dragged her down, then pushed her up again. Over and over until she found the rhythm on her own. Bracing her hands on his shoulders, she impaled herself deeply, firmly. She gasped. He groaned, cupping her breasts with both hands.

Her inner muscles fluttered around his thickness, accenting each firm stroke. She closed her eyes, lost in the building storm.

"No, sweetheart, look at me. Watch my eyes. See my soul as we come together."

Staring into his eyes, she took him deeper, relaxed, and welcomed him with her whole body. *I love you.*

His eyes widened and he grinned, his gaze igniting with joy. *I love you too.* She'd done it! He was there inside her mind, caressing, surrounding her with heat and affection. She poured her feelings into his mind, holding nothing back.

They moved together, driven higher by the added intensity of their shared emotions. She arched, rocking her hips. He strained, matching each stroke. Pleasure burst within her. Sizzling across their telepathic link, her release triggered his. They clung to each other, lost in the wonder, breathless and replete.

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Chapter Eight

Tye stood in his brother's office staring at the likeness of Rahna. Even knowing it was an illusion, he could detect no fluctuation or flaw.

"It didn't sound like the wraith can read your thoughts, but try not to think too much." Elita chuckled. Throaty and purring, she mimicked Rahna's voice effortlessly. "You'll be distracted soon enough."

Turning to the wall, Tye spoke an incantation, opening a portal to the Nexus Chamber. Elita slipped past him and entered the room. He followed, pausing to close the portal.

Before he could turn around, a Shadow net trapped him. At least it looked like a Shadow net, but the cords didn't burn. Tromping down the truth in his mind, he struggled against the illusion. "Rahna, this isn't funny. Turn me loose!"

She spun him around and shoved him against the wall. Her gaze gleamed with dark desire. *Damn, she's good.*

"Did you really think it would be that easy?" she sneered. "You can't cure someone who doesn't want to be cured. You will tell me where to find him and you will tell me now."

What was she doing? This wasn't the plan! He tugged against the net. It held firm! It was supposed to be an illusion.

"How do these chambers work? Take me to the *Setti* realm."

"I will kill you before I let you fall into their hands. You don't know what you're asking."

She slapped him, snapping his head to one side. Tye tasted blood in his mouth. "I know exactly what I want and you're going to give it to me."

Oh, shit. Was this really Rahna?

"Even if I wanted to, I can't. This chamber only leads to the Keeper realm. Release me and we'll go back. You're obviously not detoxified."

"I don't want to be detoxified!"

The hairs on the back of Tye's neck bristled and the faint, acrid stench of *Setti* irritated his nose. The wraith was here!

"They will make you a slave, Rahna. Is that what you want?"

"I want what he gave me. I need it. I burn! Why did he desert me like this?"

I am here, child. You have nothing to fear. Open your mind and I can give you what you want.

Tye wasn't sure if the voice was audible or if the wraith's telepathic link reached them both.

"Where are you? Why can't I see you? Why did you abandon me?" She sounded miserable and lost, with just a hint of belligerence.

Accept me into your mind and I'll take away your pain.

"I wouldn't be in pain if you hadn't deserted me," she snapped. "Where are you? I want to see you. I need to touch you."

A luminescent cloud appeared between Tye and Elita. Fluctuating from blue to green and back again, it hovered in midair.

Elita reached out her hand.

"Rahna, don't!"

Her hand passed through the haze. "What sort of trick is this? If you have no body, what good are you to me?"

The cloud grew denser, taking on the basic shape of a man.

Tye held his breath as she reached out again. The wraith was still intangible.

"Damn you! I need you inside me. I need..."

I cannot use this male. He will not let me. Frustration pulsed through the wraith's words.

"Then take on form. Please, I need you so badly."

The wraith attempted to solidify again. Light within the cloud intensified, forcing Tye to squint. An image coalesced, morphing from humanoid to *Setti* in a sickening undulation.

Bright blue light flashed, forming a translucent sphere around the wraith. The creature screamed, pounding against the barrier with one human hand and one *Setti* claw.

Xenos appeared beside the sphere, his gaze ablaze with blue fire. "Never again will you harm an innocent." He constricted the sphere and the wraith shrieked, its grotesque body contorting in agony.

Elita released the illusion and the wraith screamed again, fury bombarding the room like telepathic hail. Tye tugged against the net and the illusion disintegrated.

"You both did extremely well. The Guardians are grateful."

I know who you are, the wraith shouted, continuing its struggle against the containment sphere. *How can you do this to me? Your daughter gave birth to me!*

You are an abomination that was never meant to be. You shall be turned over to my superiors for judgment. With another flash of blue light, Xenos transported the sphere out of the Nexus Chamber.

"Why did you attempt to make him solidify?" the Guardian asked Elita.

"You said it was unwise for a Guardian to take on form. The wraith is half-Guardian. Was there a better way?"

Xenos grinned. "No. I'm impressed by your ingenuity and rather embarrassed I didn't think of it myself. I have been without a corporeal form for so long I often forget its significance. From the emotions emanating from your mate, may I presume he was not included in your strategy change?"

She blushed and glanced at Tye. "We had no way of knowing how empathic the wraith was, and I wasn't taking any chances."

"Brilliantly executed, my dear. You have made us all proud." Without further comment, Xenos flashed out of sight.

Tye took Elita in his arms and kissed her sparkling lips. "You're covered in *iede*." He brushed the flecks from her soft cheek.

"So are you." She smiled.

"You really were amazing. You had me wondering if you were Rahna at one point, but did you have to bloody my lip?"

Resting her hands on his chest, she tenderly kissed the small wound. "What happens now?"

"What do you want to happen? I'm open to suggestions."

"Minuette and I were discussing the fact that most Veil Keepers are women and most Fahroni sorcerers are men. Do

you think Nyx would be at all interested in developing a cross-training program?"

"A cooperative endeavor between the Drahbin Fortress and the Sacred Order of the Veil?" He paused to consider the possibilities. "Has Minuette mentioned this to Nyx?"

"I don't think so. We were just tossing around the idea today, but I think it makes perfect sense. The Veil Keepers need strong leadership and new ideas. I suspect the fortress could benefit from some new ideas as well."

"It's a fascinating concept. I'll bring it up to Nyx." He kissed her brow and she snuggled close, resting her head on his shoulder.

"I think we should go back to our room now."

He smiled against her hair. "You'll get no argument from me."

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Epilogue

Cef waited for Hakon's rage to run its course. There was nothing else he could do. Reasoning with an infuriated *Setti* was impossible.

He is our brother! the Supreme Midox's voice screamed across their telepathic link. *Do you not care that they have captured your twin?*

Of course I care. I simply find more comfort in planning the next move than in releasing my emotions.

Is that meant to mock me? Hakon stomped across the room, kicking debris out of his way as he went.

What would be the point in mocking you? Will it free Cyd? Will it change the fact that these Keeper upstarts are making a fool of you?

Cef generally avoided provoking Hakon, but sensing his twin's capture had shaken Cef to his last molecule. If Hakon wasn't strong enough to lead the *Setti*, perhaps it was time for a change.

Gather every Fahroni hybrid you can find and saturate the Kingdom of Zylott. I want the Death Keeper's daughter found. Bring her to me dead or alive.

Cef anticipated the assignment with relish. *What about Gibrath's daughter?*

What about her?

Cyd told me her potential is immense. He has no idea why she hasn't exhibited abilities before now, but she will easily rival her brother.

Mystic Keepers 2: Zylott Wars (Collection)
by Aubrey Ross

Hakon angled his narrow head thoughtfully. *Then infuse her while she is still latent. She may be just what we need to destroy Nyx...*

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Zylott Wars 3: Rescue

Aubrey Ross

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Prologue

Setti Realm

Odele stood at the observation window, her reluctant admiration growing as the Terran hybrid continued his frantic resistance. His well defined muscles bunched and flexed with each attempt to avoid the stimulation of his handlers. Alloy shackles bound his wrists and ankles, reducing his rebellion to violent twists and infuriated jerks away from the unwanted attention.

He's magnificent. Isn't he?

Glancing at the transparent being hovering at her side, Odele smiled. "Indeed." She paused. Most of the inhabitants of the Setti realm were intimidated by Cef, but Odele had no reason to fear the wraith's unusual abilities. They wanted the same thing, and she'd figured out how they were going to get it. "I'll miss these demonstrations once Hakon has him destroyed."

Cef flared, his essence brightening from turquoise to sapphire. *Hakon has no right to order his destruction. We captured the Terran! He is ours to do with as we please.*

"Explain that to your brother. Hakon seems to think being Supreme Midox gives him the right to do as *he* pleases." Odele kept her gaze fixed on the captive. Cef's empathic abilities were staggering, but so were her mental shields.

Destroying the Terran would be foolish. Why are you provoking me?

She took a moment to respond, allowing the tension to build. Light gleamed off the captive's blue-black hair. He turned his head toward the observation window and snarled. All the training chambers featured large windows. The Setti wanted their captives to know they supervised each session, gauged the effectiveness of each technique. Incandescent blue erupted within the Terran's gaze, the same shade as Cef's essence.

"Have you verified his identity?" She shot Cef a sidelong glance.

Yes.

"Have you told Hakon what you learned?"

You know I haven't. What are you plotting? I tire of your games.

"Hakon is a fool." She clasped her hands behind her back, widening her stance. "I have despised him—"

Since he gave you to Gibrath?

Odele glared at Cef. Her resentment of Hakon began long before he discovered she was barren and disregarded her. She was the result of a lifetime of experimentation, a coveted Keeper/Setti hybrid, powerful beyond all others. But her inability to conceive had rendered her useless in the eyes of the Supreme Midox. The subsequent years of degradation at the hands of his brutish son only reinforced her hatred of Hakon. Well, Gibrath was dead and she was tired of waiting for one of Hakon's numerous enemies to solve her problem for her.

"Gibrath was popular with the hybrids." Her narrowed gaze remained on the captive. "Hakon is not."

I'm listening.

Meticulously guarding her thoughts, she lowered her voice to barely a whisper. "If we establish a claim to the throne in Gibrath's name, the hybrids will support us. If we attempt to overthrow Hakon outright, they will likely side with him."

I thought you were barren.

"I am!" She reined in her emotions and shielded her thoughts before she spoke again. "I know Hakon told you to bring Gibrath's daughter to him. If he cannot control her, he will not hesitate to destroy her."

What do you propose? She is my niece, I cannot impregnate her.

"No, but he can." She nodded toward the Terran. Wicked laughter filled her mind and Odele smiled. "We need only convince Hakon we're trying to convert her long enough for the Terran to get her with child."

And once she carries Gibrath's heir, we move against Hakon...

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Chapter One

Kinson Palace

Kingdom of Zylott

"Our attendants are Drahbin. Did Tye explain what that means?" Felise paused outside the bathing chamber, her hands tucked into the pockets of her simple robe. Elita, her brother's newly bonded mate, was from the Mystic Keeper dimension, so many Zylott customs were unfamiliar to her.

"The Fahroni and the Drahbin were the two warring clans your father united into the Kingdom of Zylott." Elita seemed pleased with her answer.

Felise exchanged a conspiratorial smile with her younger sister Adara. Elita obviously had no idea what delights awaited them in the bathing chamber. "True, but do you understand the primary difference between the Fahroni and the Drahbin?"

"Only Fahroni males have mystic abilities." Elita tugged on the belt securing her robe. "I know very little about the Drahbin."

Adara stepped up beside Felise. Golden flecks sparkled in her green eyes. "The Drahbin were bred to be empathic."

"It's actually more complicated than basic empathy." Felise leaned against the door to the bathing chamber. "The Drahbin can only experience certain emotions vicariously through others."

"The entire race is incapable of feeling emotions?" A frown knitted Elita's smooth brow.

"Not all emotions. They feel joy and sadness, anger and frustration, but passion and physical desire have been suppressed within them. Their empathic sensitivity is the only thing that keeps them from being—impotent." She whispered the last word.

"You said 'bred.' This was done to them intentionally?"

"Let's go inside. We can explain while we soak." Adara tried to reach past her and unlatch the door.

Felise staved her off with an upraised hand. "Elita wasn't raised with bathing attendants. She may find this uncomfortable."

"Let Lecith attend her. He can put anyone at ease."

"He? Your bathing attendants are male?"

Felise laughed. "You sound horrified. Father resisted many of these customs when he first arrived from your dimension, but Mother helped him understand that pleasure is not shameful."

"Will Tye be attended by Drahbin females?"

"Of course."

Elita's frown deepened to a scowl. Pressing her lips together, Felise fought back a grin and opened the door. Jealousy was natural when one wasn't used to their ways. Elita would soon learn she had nothing to fear. Attendants stimulated release with their hands, their mouths, and slender wands. They weren't allowed to remove their garments.

A lavish bathing chamber spread before them. Colorful tiles fit together in an intricate mosaic, covering the floor and walls. Highly arched, the transparent ceiling offered a delightful view of the afternoon sky.

Directly across from the door four Drahbin men stood in a neat row. Adorned in white linen trousers, their swarthy skin gleamed smooth and hairless, and anticipation shone in their dark eyes.

"Are they ... slaves?"

Felise shook her head. Her brothers often complained about the misconceptions Mystic Keepers harbored regarding the Kingdom of Zylott. "There are no slaves in this dimension. Attendant to the royal bath is a highly sought after position. Not only are they compensated monetarily—"

"They can only feel pleasure by giving pleasure, so the better they please you, the more they enjoy it," Adara explained with an impish grin. "Drahbin consorts are revered, cherished."

"You make them sound like pets." Elita glanced at the four attendants, then back at Adara. "You said they are bred to be this way. Who did this to them?"

"Is there a problem, Your Highness?" The tallest of the four men approached with loose-limbed assurance.

"No, Lecith. Our guest is just apprehensive. She fears you and your men are being exploited."

"With your permission, perhaps I can put her fears to rest."

Easing tension was Lecith's specialty. His charming smile and gentle hands were hard to resist. "Please proceed."

He bowed low in front of Elita. "I am Lecith, Chief Attendant to the Royal House of Kinson. I would be honored to care for you this afternoon. I'll answer your questions and do everything within my power to help you relax."

Felise grinned as he led Elita toward the opaque shower stalls. As Adara had said, Elita was in good hands.

"Are you ready, Your Highness?" Felise smiled at Merset, her favorite attendant. His hairless scalp accented the pleasing symmetry of his handsome features. Dark eyebrows and thick, long lashes framed his night black eyes. He took her hand and led her toward the showers. They would soak in the heated pool once their bodies had been scrubbed clean. She shrugged out of her robe and handed it to Merset. The spray activated as she stepped into the stall.

"Are you looking forward to tonight's festivities?" He waited as the water saturated her long hair.

"I'm thrilled Sef and Dori will finally bond. She had nearly given up hope." A king must have heirs. It was simply a fact of life. If Dori hadn't been able to conceive, Sef would have been forced to bond with another and keep Dori as his consort.

Merset drew Felise's hair over her shoulders and lathered the thick mass with fragrant shampoo. His strong fingers massaged her scalp and combed through the sudsy strands. Felise rested her hands on the stall in front of her, relaxing as he worked.

"I think it admirable that he didn't set her aside. Many would have long ago."

"My brother loves Dori with his whole heart. Even if he'd been forced to turn to another for children, Dori would have remained his true mate."

Warm and slick, Merset's hands rubbed her shoulders and caressed her arms. "King Sef is an honorable man. Zylott is

fortunate to have such a leader." He stepped into the stall with her, his hands cupping her breasts. "Shall I prepare a wand?"

Desire curled through Felise, erupting between her thighs with a distinct throb. Merset had introduced her to the pleasure of the wands, wielding them with such skill she trembled just thinking about them. "Elita would never recover from the shock. We better wait until tomorrow."

"Then shall I pleasure you with my fingers or my mouth?"

Felise loved the firm stroke of his tongue against her clit. He'd brought her to countless orgasms with his masterful kiss. Again she feared Elita's reaction to such a blatantly sexual act. "We'll have to make do with your fingers until my guest departs."

One of his hands continued to stroke her breast, while the other descended along her torso. Felise pressed her back against his chest, enjoying the warm water raining down on them. His mouth opened against the side of her neck, sucking hard enough to send tingles down her spine without marking her skin.

His pants abraded her bottom, a teasing reminder of all they were forbidden. He could bring her to orgasm, sharing her pleasure empathically, by whatever means he chose so long as her maidenhead remained intact. She shifted restlessly, imagining the rhythmic slide of the wand. Resting her head against his shoulder, she clutched his forearm, steadying herself as he slipped his hand between her thighs.

A sensual moan reached Felise's ears and she smiled. Adara was obviously enjoying the ministrations of the two

remaining attendants. Merset parted Felise's folds and slid his middle finger across her clit. She pressed her lips together, determined not to embarrass their guest with cries of release.

"Don't hold back, Your Highness," Merset pleaded in a throaty whisper. "I need this badly."

Her resistance deprived Merset of his pleasure. She eased her legs apart, making room for his hand. Closing her eyes, she pictured herself as she'd been three days before, lying upon one of the padded massage tables. Merset had stimulated her breasts, teasing her nipples with firm suction and careful pinches. Lecith knelt at the foot of the table, her legs draped over his broad shoulders. He'd filled her bottom over and over with a slender wand, while he feasted on her creamy slit.

"Yes." Merset pulled her closer, rimming her aching core. "Remember the pleasure we shared, how you came for us again and again."

Sliding his finger between her folds, he rubbed her clit with his thumb. Heat cascaded through her, swirling deep in her abdomen. Each teasing stroke pushed her higher, wound the tension tighter. Her nails dug into his forearm, her eyes tightly closed. He caught her clit between his finger and thumb, rolling it slowly until she cried out, shaking in his arms as pleasure coursed through her.

Merset dragged every last shudder from her body before he turned her around. "Allow me to taste you now. Your cream is always so sweet and it gives us both such pleasure."

Breathless and unsteady, Felise motioned beyond him. "I'm neglecting my guest. She's already in the pool."

"Perhaps she would enjoy watching me pleasure you."

"Somehow I doubt it." Felise chuckled. "Lecith is still dry. She didn't even let him in the shower with her."

Felise crossed to the pool and sank chin deep into the gently churning water. Elita kept her gaze averted until Felise's naked body was submerged.

"Foreplay is part of your bathing routine every day?"

The tension in Elita's tone made Felise smile. "Orgasms are healthy and harmless. Why does this upset you?"

The Mystic Keeper's wide blue gaze locked with hers. "Because Tye is ... We are not having attendants at our house!"

Felise didn't argue. It wasn't her place to interfere. She relaxed in the contoured bathing tub and surrendered to the water's soothing warmth. Adara joined them a short time later, her cheeks flushed, eyes bright with passion's afterglow.

"Tye said the festivities will last three days." The attendants returned to their station against the wall and Elita relaxed.

"Our brother is king," Felise said. "The people of Zylott would be disappointed if his bonding ceremony weren't elaborate."

"Do either of you have mates?"

Felise shook her head, uncertainty unwinding within her.

"Sef has been hinting that Felise needs to prepare herself for an important announcement," Adara volunteered with a mischievous smile.

"You won't be allowed to choose your mate?"

"If the match Sef arranges is completely intolerable, I'm allowed to refuse. Being royalty changes the dynamics of personal relationships. It's impossible to separate our individual needs from what is best for Zylott."

"I understand what you're saying. I'm just not sure I agree." Elita splashed water onto her face, smoothing her hair back from her brow. "Do you know who your brother is considering?"

"No, but you might be able to help me figure it out."

"Me?"

Felise managed a smile. "Since Nyx took a Keeper mate and Tye bonded with you, Sef is convinced Adara and I should follow suit. Each bonding strengthens the alliance forming between our people."

"What is the ruling body called in the Keeper dimension?" Adara asked.

"The Steering Committee," Elita replied. "Master Jarek and Master Tilden are the only two males on the Committee not already bonded."

"Tell me about them."

"Jarek is younger. He's the Shadow Master. I don't know either man well. Tilden's bonded mate died many years ago. He has a daughter about your age."

Felise sighed. Age wasn't always a consideration in these matters. If he was young enough to father more children ...

"Which order does Tilden lead?"

Elita fidgeted. "He is technically part of the Order of Shadow."

"Technically? Is he subordinate to Jarek?"

"No." Elita's reluctance amplified Felise's unease. "Tilden is the Death Master. He trains and supervises a highly specialized unit of informants and—assassins."

Felise averted her face, hiding her shock. Jarek sounded better with each word Elita spoke.

* * * *

"They still don't realize you're an imposter?"

Jarek met Tilden's gaze in the mirror and grinned. "I intend to tell Lord Nyx in the next day or two. I'm amazed how much we think alike. He had Tye infiltrate the Keeper Academy within days of my first appearance as Ambassador Tork."

"All the more reason to be leery if you ask me." The Death Master laughed. "Anyone as sneaky as you bears watching."

"You know Nyx better than anyone in our dimension; do you have reason to mistrust him?"

"He has many secrets, but I trust him with my life."

Jarek nodded, turning to face his friend. "How do I look?" He adjusted the elaborate collar attached to his formal tunic of purple, green, and gold.

"Like a preening leensta bird." Tilden scoffed. "Does Ambassador Tork always dress like that?"

Most Shadow Keepers couldn't manifest illusions. Jarek had inherited the ability from his Light Keeper mother. He could drastically change his appearance for short periods of time. By keeping his illusions subtle, he was able to extend their duration dramatically. He reinforced his disguise with an extravagant wardrobe and flamboyant mannerisms. No one in

the Kingdom of Zylott had guessed Ambassador Tork was really Jarek Severn, Master of the Order of Shadow.

"Tork is from Mimossa." Jarek adjusted the fall of lace over his hand. "Have you ever been to the Mimossan dimension? This ensemble would be considered sedate."

Tilden paused, his dark gaze sweeping Jarek's gaudy outfit with obvious distaste. After a derisive snort, the black-clad Death Keeper headed for the door. "I'll wait for an introduction and do my best not to laugh."

Jarek turned back to the mirror as Tilden closed the door behind him. The outfit was outrageous. One side of his skintight hose was vivid purple, the other gold. The multi-colored tunic barely reached his hips, leaving the bulge between his thighs displayed for all to see.

Cupping his hands at his sides, he created *iede*, the physical manifestation of his mystic energy. He tossed the sparkling flecks into the air and his thick, brown hair transformed into a riot of burnished curls. He'd tried to change the color of his eyes when he first assumed his role as Tork. The *iede* flecks burned like fire, but had no effect on his dark gaze.

If all went as expected, Ambassador Tork would soon retire. Jarek was waiting to hear from King Sef. Once the Zylott ruler accepted Jarek's proposal to bond with Princess Felise, there would no longer be a need for his disguise.

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Chapter Two

Smoothing the billowy skirt of her iridescent gown, Felise waited for the herald's call before entering the ballroom.

"Her Royal Highness, Princess Felise Kinson." A musical fanfare followed the announcement and Felise stepped onto the landing. Managing her skirts with one hand, she descended the stone steps into the cavernous room. A swirling sea of color surrounded her. Laughter mingled with overlapping conversations, creating an unintelligible din.

"Her Royal Highness, Princess Adara Kinson." The fanfare sounded again and Felise glanced back toward the stairs. A subtle gold pattern decorated Adara's forest-green gown. The vibrant color accented the red highlights in her blonde hair and perfectly matched her eyes. Strapless and deeply scalloped, the design bared her shoulders and a good portion of her full breasts. Felise would never have chosen such a daring style, but Adara thrived on attention.

The crowd parted allowing Adara to pass. She joined Felise at one end of the hall. A platform had been erected in the center of the room. Neat rows of chairs surrounded the stage. Lavish banners emblazoned with the Kinson standard draped from the exposed beams high overhead. Countless flower garlands scented the air with sweet perfume. After the bonding ceremony, the platform would be dismantled so the revelers could dance.

"Who is that man with Nyx?" Adara motioned across the crowded room.

It took a moment for Felise to locate their brother. He had abandoned his customary black robe for the embroidered tunic and thigh hugging trousers so many of the courtiers favored. Struck for a moment by their brother's transformation, it took Felise another minute to focus on the man at his side.

He was slightly taller than Nyx, and his brightly colored tunic showcased a strong, masculine torso. Though sharp angles and unrelenting lines made up his striking features, his cloud of golden curls completely ruined the effect.

Felise laughed. "I can't decide if he's devastatingly handsome or ridiculous."

Adara moved closer, lowering her voice as much as she could in the noisy room. "Look at his ... hose. Have you ever seen anything quite so..."

"You're one to talk." Felise gave her sister a playful nudge. "If you bend over, you're liable to spill right out of that bodice."

"It wasn't a criticism." Adara grinned. "I find the bright colors distracting me from an otherwise spectacular view."

"I think we're about to get a closer look. Nyx is leading him this way."

As they neared, Felise studied the stranger's hair. Was he wearing a wig? His thick lashes and dark brows made it seem likely. Wide and assessing, his dark eyes shone with obvious interest, while lips so red they had to be tinted curved in a beaming smile.

"I've been asked to make the introductions," Nyx said stiffly. "Ambassador Tork of Mimossa, may I present my sisters, Princess Felise and Princess Adara."

"I'm utterly enchanted." The ambassador took Adara's hand and kissed her knuckles. When he reached for Felise's hand, she buried it in the fullness of her skirt. Inclining her head to acknowledge the introduction, she continued assessing his costume.

"Where is Mimossa and what brings you to the Kingdom of Zylott?"

Felise wanted to kick Adara. The ambassador made her decidedly uncomfortable and Adara was encouraging his interest.

"Mimossa is the dimension of my birth, though I've not been there since I was a child. I travel extensively, gathering information and learning new skills. I've been studying with your brother for the past several lunar cycles."

His deep, faintly accented voice matched his appearance no better than his wildly curling hair. Felise focused on his eyes, intrigued by the shrewd gleam she found there. "What has Nyx taught you?"

"He needs no lessons from me." Nyx dismissed the issue with a careless wave of his hand. "The ambassador is being modest. He is a proficient sorcerer and may well be the best shape-changer I've ever encountered."

Before Felise could reply, the herald instructed everyone to take their seats. Felise and Adara followed Nyx to the row of chairs reserved for family.

"Would you care to join us?" Adara asked. "There is plenty of room."

Felise gritted her teeth. Dori had insisted on a traditional Fahroni bonding. The last thing Felise needed was a complete stranger seated next to her, gasping and squirming. She wanted to enjoy the ceremony without distraction or awkwardness.

"I would be honored." He smiled at Adara, but his gaze returned to Felise. His hand hovered at the small of her back, heat penetrating her gown. Awareness pulsed between them. She licked her lips and concentrated on their destination.

They settled into seats, Tork on her right. Felise drew her skirts tight against her legs, attempting to minimize her contact with the ambassador. She'd never met a man before who affected her senses with his proximity. He hadn't touched her, hadn't said anything untoward, yet tension gripped her belly and her pulse raced. Worse, the sensations weren't at all unpleasant. It made no sense. The man looked like a buffoon.

"I take it from the enclosure they're to be joined in the Fahroni tradition?"

His well-modulated voice brought to mind an image far different from his appearance. She pictured sleek dark hair that matched his eyes and offset his angular features. Not wanting to ruin her fantasy, she kept her gaze fixed on the stage. "You've attended Fahroni joinings before?"

"I've participated in similar ceremonies."

"Participated?" She glanced at him, focusing on his eyes.

"In some dimensions the guests prepare the bride and groom for the joining. In others the guests are encouraged to express their support by—"

"The Fahroni ceremony is not interactive."

"Pity."

His teasing smile sent heat curling through her abdomen. Felise quickly looked away. Surely she wasn't attracted to this flamboyant, strutting ... Her thoughts trailed away as the lights dimmed. The lilting strains of the bonding procession signaled the beginning of the ceremony.

Two dark-haired girls, Dori's younger sisters, ascended to the stage from opposite sides and opened the filmy curtains enclosing the bed. They worked together, their movements fluid and graceful. Pulling back the richly quilted comforter, they sprinkled flower petals across the sheets and lit the lamps suspended to each side of the bed.

The girls departed and a robed cleric moved to the foot of the bed. A subtle shift in the music signaled King Sef's entrance. He took his place on the stage, his face flushed, eyes shining. Felise smiled, tears gathering in her eyes. He and Dori had waited eight long years for this day.

Escorted by her brother, Dori crossed the hall and stood before the stage. Her sheer gown clearly displayed her full breasts, gently rounded belly, and the generous flare of her hips.

"Is this woman acceptable to you, Sef Kinson, High King of Zylott?" The cleric's voice rang out over the assembly.

"This woman pleases me more than I ever dreamed possible." The crowd chuckled at his unscripted response.

"Dori, daughter of Antielt and Sefarya, do you enter into this bonding of your own free will?"

"I enter with joy and celebration."

"Come forth."

As she crossed to the stairs and joined the men at the foot of the bed, a slender woman ascended from the other side. She wore a robe similar to the other cleric's, her hair covered by a long scarf.

"Have you selected the bonding symbol to represent your joining?" the cleric asked.

"We have," Sef and Dori replied together.

They shed their garments without hesitation, their gazes locked, filled with excitement and joy. Felise blinked back tears. Love radiated from the stage. The depth of their devotion warmed her, yet she envied their happiness.

The female cleric drew an intricate glyph on Sef's skin directly above his heart. She then turned and created the same pattern on Dori. When the female cleric stepped aside, Sef let out a happy cry and sank to his knees before his bride. He wrapped his arms around her hips and kissed her gently rounded belly.

"Is she with child?" Tork whispered.

Felise could only nod. Emotion clogged her throat.

Sef scooped Dori into his arms and placed her on the bed. The clerics closed the curtains, reducing the happy couple to silhouettes against the filmy enclosure. A hushed silence settled over the room. Felise watched the shadows touch, heard their soft cries and whispered endearments. Sef didn't take Dori immediately as was customary. He brought her to

orgasm after orgasm until the entire room squirmed in their seats.

"That's for making me wait eight years!"

Dori's laugh was echoed by the crowd and Sef finally moved between her legs. Felise pressed her thighs together, stubbornly ignoring the empty ache. She'd never actually taken a man into her body, but the attendants' wands made it all too easy to imagine.

Sef thrust harder, faster. Felise's body burned, throbbed with intense demand. She dragged her gaze away from the straining silhouettes, glancing down at her hands. Tork shifted in his chair, drawing her attention toward him. The angle of her gaze led her naturally to his crotch and Felise stifled a groan. His erect cock formed a long thick ridge in his ridiculous hose. Her fingers itched to wrap around that impressive shaft and explore. The bathing attendants weren't allowed to undress. She'd never even seen a naked man.

"If you'd like to do more than look, I'd be happy to oblige."

Tork's whispered words were light and playful, but a hot blush spread across Felise's skin. Why was she embarrassed? He was the one wearing pants tight enough to outline every bulge!

Dori's sharp cry interrupted Felise's discomfort. Sef let out a triumphant whoop and the crowd shot to their feet applauding wildly. Felise used the raucous moment to slip past Tork and dash from the room. Her skin tingled. Her heart pounded and she couldn't catch her breath.

A wide, railed gallery spanned the back of the palace. She rushed across the veranda and descended into the formal

garden. Torches had been lit in anticipation of the guests. For the moment Felise had the area to herself. She covered her face with her hands, dragging cool air into her burning lungs.

Hands came down on her shoulders. She cried out and spun around. Her heel tangled in her skirt and Tork caught her upper arms, steadying her.

"I apologize." He released her and stepped back. "My comment was inappropriate."

His hair was less obvious in the torchlight, while his eyes shone like obsidian. Felise studied his features through her lashes. He intrigued her. Despite his laughable apparel, he attracted her. "I was staring, but your comment *was* rude."

"And I apologized."

She swallowed. "I accept your apology." Moving farther into the shadows, she abandoned the graveled path. She needed Lecith's clever fingers, or better yet, Merset's talented mouth.

"This is why these ceremonies often become interactive." He followed at a careful distance, his voice deep and caressing. "It's difficult to watch others ... enjoying passion without desiring the same."

A vivid image formed within Felise's mind. She pictured her hand wrapped around Tork's cock, stroking, squeezing, as he rocked his lean hips. Curiosity and desire combined, making her body clench. Her attendants were only allowed to give her pleasure. Would Tork let her touch him? "I..." She paused, leaning against a wide tree trunk.

"You need release." He advanced slowly, his hands clasped behind his back. "Has anyone ever brought you to climax?"

She closed her eyes. Would he be willing to stop with touching? She longed to be filled, to know the ultimate intimacy of taking a man into her body. Sharing pleasure was accepted and encouraged, but she would only experience a true joining once she found her mate. "A princess must remain a virgin until..."

"I understand." He stroked her cheek, tracing her lower lip with his thumb. "Let me touch you. I won't do more than touch."

A violent shiver raced down her spine. "I want to touch you, too."

He smiled. His white teeth contrasted with the shadows as he placed his hand against the tree beside her shoulder. "You can do whatever you want with me. I'm not a princess."

Soothed by his playfulness, her anxiety melted, leaving her warm and tingling. She glanced beyond him, back toward the palace. Music and laughter drifted on the night wind. The banquet room would be opened and the dance floor cleared. It was unlikely anyone would venture outside for some time. She took Tork by the hand and led him to the far corner of the garden. Tall hedgerows surrounded a stone bench, offering the semblance of privacy.

Tork sat and pulled her onto his lap, lifting her feet to the bench beside them. His warm lips brushed across hers, unhurried, caressing. "Kiss me," he whispered against her mouth. "Show me what you like."

A hot dart of lust shot straight to her pussy. She'd never been the aggressor before. Her attendants pleased her as she passively accepted their ministrations. The thought of

guiding him sent power sizzling through her blood. Taking his face between her hands, she angled her head and sealed her mouth over his. He parted his lips in silent invitation. She lingered, licking and exploring before delving deep, stroking her tongue against his and capturing his throaty moan.

He tasted of spiced wine and desire. The combination thrilled her. His tongue curled around hers, his arms pulled her close. On and on they kissed. Felise combed her hands through his curly hair, luxuriating in the softness as it sifted through her fingers.

A cool draft sneaked under her skirts followed by his warm fingers against her calf. She grabbed his wrist, stopping his ascent. "I want to touch you."

"I'll let you touch me as soon as—"

"I'll be too embarrassed after."

His roguish smile flashed again. "Do you always get embarrassed after you come?"

"No." Intoxicated by the darkness and the sexually charged atmosphere, she returned his smile. "Sometimes I get sleepy."

"I see." He traced the square neckline of her gown with his index finger. "A princess is allowed to indulge her curiosity, so long as her maidenhead isn't disturbed."

"Exactly." She scooted off his lap and reached for the laces at the front of his hose. "I'm extremely curious about this."

"You've never touched a cock before?"

She paused, her hand pressed over his erection. "I've only received pleasure. I've never given it." That wasn't exactly

true. Her Drahbin attendants experienced her pleasure, but this was new and exciting.

He spread his legs and moved his hands to the bench on either side of his hips. Her heart leapt in her breast. He offered his body for her pleasure. Kneeling on the leaf-strewn ground in front of him, she loosened the laces and freed his cock. "Oh stars, are they all this big?"

He laughed, his cock bobbing as his abdomen contracted. "I don't make a habit of examining other men, and by your own admission you have nothing to compare me to."

She wrapped her fingers around his shaft, amazed at the heat and the softness of his skin. His flared head fascinated her. Stroking her thumb across the top, she smiled as he groaned. How would this ever fit inside a woman? The wands the attendants used were scarcely larger than a finger.

A drop of moisture seeped out. She caught it with her thumb and spread it over his tip. Her thumb slid smoothly over his slick flesh. Wet. Her body got wet when she was excited and Merset reveled in the taste. Curious, she bent toward him, tentatively circling his cock head with her tongue.

"Oh, sweetheart, you better not do that." His voice grated, hoarse and strained.

"You don't like it?"

"I like it too much." When she continued to stare up at him curiously, he added, "I don't want to come in your mouth."

She wasn't sure she'd mind, but she didn't argue.

"Just use your mouth to get me wet, then stroke me with your hand."

His thick cock slid against her tongue as she sucked him inside. She'd meant to do as he instructed, but he felt wonderful. His salty taste excited her, made her pussy clench rhythmically. She let him slip nearly out, then sucked him deep again.

His head rolled back on his shoulders and his hands framed her face. "You're killing me. Stars, that's good!"

She steadied herself against his thighs, moving her mouth up and down, swirling her tongue. Her breasts swelled against her bodice; her nipples hardened. She wanted his hands on her, no, his mouth! Taking him deeper, she ended each stroke with a flick of her tongue. He matched her rhythm, thrusting into her mouth.

Suddenly he pulled out and twisted to the side. He stroked himself fast and hard. Streams of pale liquid jetted from his cock, splashing on the ground beside her. As he panted harshly, his movements slowed and finally stopped.

"You've never done this before?" He sounded doubtful.

"Does it matter?" Anxiety heightened her restlessness as he righted his clothing. He was sated. Surely he didn't intend to leave her wanting. "You seemed to enjoy it."

He spread his legs, helped her to her feet, and pulled her between his thighs. "I enjoyed it very much. Now it's your turn to be devoured."

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Chapter Three

Jarek stared up into Felise's flushed face, breathless and torn. He longed to shed his disguise and tell her the truth. As soon as her brother granted him permission, Jarek would start courting Felise. With the Setti threat escalating, it was imperative the Mystic Keepers and the Kingdom of Zylott join forces. Their treaties and governmental declarations were to be reinforced by the union of prominent parties.

Several such alliances had already formed. Lord Nyx had bonded with Minuette, an elite Veil Keeper; and his brother Tye had recently joined with Elita, Princess of the Order of Light. The Kinson men were snatching up Keeper females, and the Steering Committee wanted to balance the equation.

Tilden refused to consider such a match, so Jarek came to Zylott in disguise to scout out the possibilities.

"Are you going to do more than stare?"

He smiled at her lightly mocking tone. A similar comment had led to this exchange. "Infinitely more." He unlaced the front of her gown. Felise's subtle beauty appealed to him far more than Adara's smoldering sensuality. From the first moment he'd seen the sisters, Jarek had gravitated toward Felise. Her hair might be the color of flame, but innocence surrounded her, adding to her mystique.

With the laces loosened, he eased the bodice from her shoulders and down her arms. The garment beneath scooped low over her breasts, her nipples creating distinct peaks in the thin material. "You're so beautiful, little firebird." He

circled her nipple with his index finger. Her eyelids lowered and her lips parted. Did she enjoy light teasing caresses or would she welcome a more commanding touch?

"Firebird?" She whispered the endearment. "I like that."

He watched her expression and her body's reaction as he explored her soft flesh. His lovers called him Master not because of his political station, but because of his command over their pleasure. If Felise required a gentle hand, she would never be content in his care. He could be patient and creative, but his mate's passion would have to burn as brightly as his.

Unable to free her breasts from the undergarment, Jarek captured her nipple between his lips, suckling through the thin material. She grasped his shoulders, low mewling sounds escaping her throat. The harder he drew upon her nipple, the more she squirmed. Oh, she liked it firm.

Her fingers tangled in his hair. "Please. I can wait no longer."

Desire wound around him like a snake, tensing his muscles, constricting his chest. Despite his recent release, his cock hardened, ready for conquest, eager to feel her pussy stretched around him.

He buried his face between her breasts, shaking with the need to take her. This was neither the time nor the place. She didn't even know his name. He would not claim her maidenhead on a cold stone bench. When they joined for the first time, it would mean more than mutual release. She would accept who and what he was.

Slipping to his knees, he drew her skirts up along her legs, prolonging the motion, building the tension. Her sheer stockings ended at mid-thigh. He paused to savor her smooth skin, dipping his thumbs between, easing her thighs apart.

Cream had already soaked her panties. He rubbed her mound through the damp material. Her thighs flexed and shifted, and her hands clutched his arms. Pulling the insubstantial scrap of material aside, Jarek leaned in and inhaled her fragrance. Hairless and plump, her mound begged for attention. He stroked her with his tongue, relishing her silky skin without disturbing the dusky folds peeking out at him.

"Stop teasing me," she cried. "I need to come so badly it hurts."

He recoiled from the demand in her voice. His dominant nature surged. She would learn to revel in anticipation, to soar as intensity built. But the lesson must wait for another night, and a more appropriate setting—a set of fur-lined restraints.

Lifting her leg to his shoulder, he cupped her bottom with one hand and parted her folds with the other. After tracing her crease twice, he settled over her clit, circling and rubbing with a distinct rhythm.

Her nails bit into his biceps as she rocked her hips. She'd received pleasure before. Other men had touched his little firebird, perhaps even tasted her. Jealousy flared at the thought, hot and consuming. He wanted to devour her so completely she would think of no one else. Lifting her hips, he fitted his mouth over her pussy, licking and sucking her

essence. He couldn't get enough. He wanted more, more than she would allow, more than he had a right to demand.

Pushing his tongue into her cunt, he felt her shudder. There! He wanted to be there, deep inside her. She lifted and canted her hips, taking him deeper. He thrust in as far as he could, fucking her with his tongue. Her cries thrilled him; the ripples of her inner muscles told him she was close.

He didn't want it to end. If this was all he could have, he wanted to make it last. Her hands moved to his hair, holding him against her as release shook her body. A fresh rush of cream coated his tongue. He savored the salty-sweet taste, the proof of her surrender.

Her knee buckled and he caught her in his arms. Easing her leg from his shoulder, he cradled her against his chest. Her bodice still gaped, revealing her hardened nipples. Stars, she was glorious.

"What must you think of me."

She pulled her bodice together, but he covered her hands with his. "I think you're incredible. There is no shame in pleasure. Is that not the Fahroni way?"

Glancing into his eyes, she paused to lick her lips. "I'm only half Fahroni. My father was a Mystic Keeper. I'm not usually so wanton."

Stroking her cheek, he placed a soft kiss on her lips. "I rather enjoyed your wantonness."

"I'm not ashamed of the pleasure we shared. I've just never allowed—"

"You said you'd known release before. You must have allowed at least one other."

She stood and finished lacing her gown. "What do you know about the Drahbin?"

Jarek stood as well. They should return to the assembly before they were missed; still he hesitated. He would much rather take her some place private and finish what they'd begun. *Not until King Sef agrees to let you claim her! Back on track, Severn.* "The conflict between the Drahbin and the Fahroni goes back as far as recorded history. The tide changed from time to time, but the Fahroni controlled the Drahbin for the most part."

She nodded. "Many centuries ago, during one of the rare periods when the Drahbin were in power, the Fahroni made a pact with the Setti."

"Please go on." He knew nothing of Setti involvement in the conflict. She returned to the bench, so Jarek joined her there.

"Full-blooded Setti are unable to leave their dimension. It is only through breeding with other species that they are able to overcome this weakness. At the time of the pact, Fahroni and Drahbin physiology were nearly identical."

Tension gripped Jarek's gut. Her tale had just begun and already he dreaded what would follow. Anything involving the Setti was bound to be horrific. "What sort of pact did the Fahroni make?"

"They captured as many Drahbin as they could and delivered them to the Setti to use as breeding stock." She paused. Jarek didn't rush her. He took her hand in his and waited for her to go on. "The Setti provided the Fahroni with another advantage. By infusing them with Setti essence, they

triggered powers within Fahroni males that hadn't existed before."

"That's why so many are leery of the sorcerers. Anyone with unusual abilities has been—empowered by the Setti."

Again she nodded. "The abilities are a permanent part of Fahroni genetics now, but the prejudice remains."

"What became of the captive Drahbin?"

"Unfortunately for the Setti, the majority of the Drahbin didn't survive long enough to produce offspring. The original pact backfired in several ways. The Setti realized by empowering the Fahroni, they made them strong enough to survive the transformation, while the Drahbin were all but useless to them."

"So the Setti captured empowered Fahroni despite their supposed alliance?"

Pushing to her feet, she paced before the bench. "Nothing so simple. The Setti demanded better breeding stock. In exchange they promised a means of vanquishing the Drahbin once and for all. The Fahroni leaders turned over thousands of their own people knowing what the Setti intended. As a reward, the Setti transformed the Drahbin, making them easy to control."

"How were the Drahbin changed?"

"The Setti stripped them of the ability to feel sensual pleasure, then heightened their empathic sensitivity. They created a race of slaves utterly dependent on their masters for anything resembling pleasure."

"I've never heard of such a thing."

Felise shuddered. "It was a form of slavery that's hard to comprehend. The Setti taught the Fahroni leaders how to use emotions to manipulate and control the Drahbin. What makes it even more deplorable is the Drahbin can only produce children with other Drahbin."

"How is that accomplished if no Drahbin is capable of feeling desire?"

"They must find someone willing to act as an emotional surrogate."

What did all this have to do with her sexual experience? Or had she completely lost track of the original topic? "I was told slavery was abolished with the formation of your father's kingdom. Are the Drahbin still considered subordinate?"

"No. But they are still imprisoned by the transformation. The only way they can experience pleasure is through their empathic link."

Fighting back a smile, Jarek realized where the story led. "So the Fahroni selflessly allow the Drahbin to bring them to orgasm so the Drahbin can experience sexual pleasure?"

She gasped. Her eyes widened, then narrowed. "You make it sound tawdry. The Drahbin are treated with respect and dignity. They are highly sought after as consorts and companions. My mother hired Drahbin bathing attendants for Adara and me upon our maturation. It is *only* with our bathing attendants that I've..."

He stood and pulled her into his arms. "I meant no disrespect." Pressing a gentle kiss against her lips, he eased her frown. "There must be more of your father in you than

your mother. It doesn't sound like your mother would have been embarrassed by what we just shared."

Smiling, she lowered her lashes. "I suppose you're right."

"We should return."

"I know."

Still they lingered. Jarek stroked her back and breathed in her scent, longing—just longing.

"There you are!" They sprang apart at Adara's anxious tone. She stood at the break in the hedgerow, hands on her hips. "Everyone is looking for you. Why did you run out like that?" Her gaze moved from her sister to Jarek and back again.

Felise cleared her throat before she spoke. "I felt stifled by the heat. Ambassador Tork was concerned and followed to make sure I was all right."

One corner of Adara's mouth quirked in a knowing smile. "Do you feel better now?"

"Much."

"Sef would like to speak with you."

* * * *

Concealed in Light Keeper illusion, Odele watched the Zylott princesses walk toward the palace.

Is he the one?

She couldn't determine Cef's exact location, though she could hear his voice clearly within her mind. *No. I don't know what game that one is playing, but he is not my slave.*

Why do you delay? Let's go to the hall and find him.

We must be careful if we enter the hall. This illusion renders me invisible, not intangible.

His chuckle made her glower. *You must be careful. I am intangible.*

She picked her way across the garden, her annoyance simmering.

Is it true what you told Hakon? This Keeper you control is unaware of his enslavement?

Unlike Gibrath, I've found it more useful to keep my slaves happily infused. My Keeper slave is unaware of the addiction because I never allow him to feel his need for my Setti essence. His arrogance prevents him from questioning the source of his power. They reached a massive door, which had been propped open to catch the evening breeze. Odele stopped in the opening, her gaze searching the sea of people.

How do you control him if he is never desperate for your essence?

Each infusion strengthens my authority. I activate our mental link and he obeys my compulsions. It's as simple as that.

And all the while he remains unaware of your control?

His skepticism grated on her nerves. *At times he resists the compulsions, but he has never failed to obey and I remove the memory of everything he does for me. He is oblivious, I assure you.*

We shall see.

* * * *

Felise strode down the elegant corridor, her anxiety mounting with each step she took. What was so important Sef commanded her presence during his bonding festival? In his presence chambers no less. Couldn't he have told her in the ballroom?

The guards flanking the doorway snapped to attention as she approached. They each opened one side of the entrance, leaving her framed by the threshold.

"Ah, Adara found you. I was about to dispatch my guards." He had dressed in a fitted tunic that reached mid-thigh. His auburn hair appeared tousled and she didn't trust the gleam in his green eyes.

"Couldn't this wait until—"

"I'll come right to the point." He used an imperial tone that brooked no refusal. This was her king addressing her, not her brother. "You know I've been negotiating with the Mystic Keepers. I honestly feel a marriage between you and one of their leaders will strengthen the alliance."

"Nyx and Tye are not enough?"

"Their bondings gave Zylott a vested interest in the Keepers. We need the Keepers to have a vested interest in Zylott."

Felise knew about his plan, so she didn't pretend to be surprised. "Why now? What makes the situation so urgent it must interrupt your bonding celebration?"

"He is here."

"Who?"

"The Keeper I have chosen for you."

She paused, tension knotting her stomach.

"Dori reminded me of an ancient Fahroni custom."

Heat spread up Felise's neck. "I think everyone here is aware of that."

He grinned. "Have you heard of the *Ishaunti Tiri*?"

She shook her head.

"When a bonding is proposed but one of the parties is reluctant, the other party can instigate an *Ishaunti Tiri*. The couple is locked in a room alone together. The instigating party has until sunrise on the third day to convince the reluctant party to accept them as bonded mate. Nothing can be forced upon the reluctant party, but a reasonable level of cooperation is expected."

"I presume I'm the reluctant party in this case." His ambiguous description didn't obscure his meaning. "The Mystic Keeper has three days to seduce me." Anticipation tinged with fear tingled down her spine. Who had Sef chosen? When would she meet him?

"An *Ishaunti Tiri* tests attraction and basic compatibility. If you spend three days alone with someone, no distractions, no interruptions, it's amazing how much you can learn. At dawn on the third day, you'll announce whether or not you accept Master Jarek as your bonded mate."

Jarek, Master of the Order of Shadow. According to Elita's description, he was preferable to the Death Master. Still Felise's heart sank. She would have three days to make a decision that would affect the rest of her life. Not just her life, for Jarek's proposal was part of the ongoing negotiations. If she spurned him, the ramifications could ripple beyond her own happiness. "Why are we talking about this now?"

"I want the *Ishaunti Tiri* to begin tonight. It will run the duration of these festivities. If you find the Shadow Master acceptable, we will conclude my bonding celebration with your joining ritual."

Tonight! Sef intended to hand her over to a complete stranger intent on seducing her. What was wrong with a friendly introduction, followed by a leisurely courtship? *Nothing can be forced upon the reluctant party, but a reasonable level of cooperation is expected.* His words echoed through her mind, mocking her. He could expect whatever he liked. She would not be bullied into this preposterous custom!

"I must return to my guests. Your chamber is being prepared. Tye went to find Master Jarek. You will be provided with—"

"There is no reason for this." She took a step toward him. "I'm not opposed to bonding with one of the Mystic Keepers. I understand the importance of the alliance, but why the haste? If I had time to—"

"Jarek has asked permission to bond with you. It is my intention to grant him permission. This will give him the opportunity to convince you he can make you happy. Dignitaries from every province in Zylott are here. I want your joining witnessed by as many as possible."

"I am *not* having a traditional joining!"

He laughed. "That's not what I meant."

Burying her fists in the pleats of her skirt, she forced her jaw to relax. "What do you know of this man?"

"He is Master of the Order of Shadow, accomplished and powerful. His ancestors are all elite. He is respected and well

liked. He has achieved much despite the fact that he is two years my junior."

Accomplished, powerful, elite ancestors, were these the characteristics Sef thought she cared about? Was he kind? Did he have a sense of humor? Would he treat her with tenderness?

"Dori described him as brutally handsome just before she suggested the *Ishaunti Tiri*." Sef shrugged and straightened his tunic. "The rest you must determine for yourself. Ultimately the choice is yours."

He kissed her on the cheek and left her stunned and silent in his presence chamber. She heaved a frustrated sigh and released the stranglehold on her temper. This was ridiculous! After a reasonable courtship, she might agree to join with Master Jarek, but she was not spending the next three days locked in a room with a "brutally handsome" stranger.

Their bonding would be no less real if "dignitaries from every province in Zylott" weren't present to witness the ceremony. Sef was being unreasonable.

She turned toward the doorway and found Merset standing there. He offered a gentle smile and moved into the room. "King Sef instructed me to escort you to your chamber. He sensed your resistance to his plan."

"Sef is going to be sorely disappointed. I'm not participating in the festivities he has planned."

"He truly intends to subject you to an *Ishaunti Tiri*?" He didn't quite conceal the amusement in his tone.

"You know of the custom?"

He chuckled. "It is not that unusual. Before the arrival of your father, all Fahreni bondings began with an *Ishaunti Tiri* and ended with a traditional joining."

"I'm not doing this."

"Why? Have you met this Keeper Master? Is there something objectionable about him?"

She glanced at the empty corridor behind Merset. She could manage the attendant, but Sef would likely send guards if Merset failed to produce her in a timely manner. "I'm sorry."

Before he could question the apology, she manifested *iede* and cast a Shadow net over Merset. One thick strand formed a gag. The Keeper abilities she'd inherited from her father were minimal at best. The net wouldn't hold him for long.

She dashed into the corridor, mentally scrambling for a plan.

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Chapter Four

"Ambassador Tork, have you seen Master Jarek?"

Jarek forced a cough, concealing his laughter. This was the second palace guard to ask him if he'd seen himself. "I believe I saw him in the gardens."

"Thank you, sir." The guard trotted off in the direction Jarek indicated.

Weaving his way through the crowd, Jarek headed for the wide stone steps leading out of the ballroom. Why were the guards looking for him? He needed to find a secluded spot and shed his disguise. He'd intended to slip away while the stage was disassembled, but his encounter with Felise postponed his plans.

His body stirred at the memory of their kisses, her hot mouth, the evocative taste of her—

He rounded a corner and collided with the source of his discomfort. She gasped and glanced around, eyes wide, face flushed. "Are you alone?"

"Yes." What an odd question.

"Have they found Master Jarek?"

No, firebird, but you have. He pressed his lips together, suppressing his smile. "You are the third person to ask me about the Shadow Master. Has he committed some crime?"

"Do you happen to know where he is?"

"I think he returned to the Keeper dimension." Perhaps he better remain in disguise until he figured out what the hell

was going on. "Master Tilden can send for him if he's needed. What is so urgent?"

She caught her lower lip between her teeth. Jarek wanted to kiss the corners of her mouth, nibble on that delectable lip, stroke it with his tongue and...

"What did you tell the others?"

"Simply that I wasn't certain of his location." Her agitation intrigued him.

"Does Master Tilden realize the Shadow Master has departed?"

"I don't believe so." He narrowed his gaze. "What are you plotting?"

She grasped his sleeve and led him down the corridor away from the ballroom. "I need your help and there's no time to explain right now. Are you willing to help me?"

"If you're in danger, we should alert the palace guards." The palace guards were looking for him. Jarek had a sneaking suspicion he was the cause of her crisis.

"I will answer your questions once we've escaped."

"Escape from whom?"

"My brother."

"King Sef? Why would you need to escape your brother?"

She moved in close. Her scent surrounded him, her gaze beseeched. "Can you shape-change into the likeness of Master Jarek?"

He turned his face away, hiding his amusement. That's what he'd been trying to do when she interrupted him. Had Sef ruled on his request? Was that why she was so determined to *escape*? Suspicion dispersed his amusement.

"The palace guards are searching for Master Jarek. Will I be arrested if I take on his likeness?"

"No harm will come to you. I promise. Can you do it?"

He studied her tense features, irritation taking root in his belly. Was she opposed to their joining? Just when he'd embraced the idea, was she going to turn him away? If he didn't assist her, she would find someone who would. He'd seen glimpses of her stubborn nature over the past few weeks.

Extending his arms to his sides, Jarek sent a mystic pulse along his body. His hair returned to its natural dark brown. His tunic lengthened and simplified, the garish hues melding into rich blue, elegantly trimmed in gold. The bi-colored hose transformed into black trousers. "Will this suffice?"

She released her lip and walked around him in a slow, assessing circle. "This is Jarek's likeness?" He couldn't decipher the emotions thickening her tone.

"He's a rather drab sort, but I saw him earlier. I assure you this is his likeness."

Her slender hand trembled as she caught a strand of his hair and tested its texture. Wide and luminous, her gaze moved over his face. The corners of her mouth curved and blood rushed to his errant cock. Stars, just looking at her aroused him! No, it was the way she was looking at him.

She took his hand. "We must hurry."

"Where are we going?"

"To my private chamber."

He dug in his heels. "Why are you taking Master Jarek to your private chamber?"

"I will explain everything, but we must first convince Sef he's won."

He didn't like the sound of that. She led him down one corridor after another, into the very heart of the lavish palace. Guards flanked her doorway. She squared her shoulders and assumed a haughty air Jarek had never witnessed before.

"You need to find Lord Tye and inform him I've located Master Jarek."

The guard inclined his head. "Yes, Your Highness."

She turned to the other guard as the first strode off down the hallway. "You are free to go."

"It is my duty to see that you are not disturbed. If you wish me removed, you will have to speak with King Sef." His tone reflected the proper respect, while his determined expression reinforced his words.

The guard opened the door and Jarek followed Felise into her sitting room. Moments after the guard closed the door, Jarek detected the grating of a key rotating in a lock. He met Felise's gaze and asked, "Now what?"

* * * *

Odele shuddered as Cef sank into her being. She knew he was right. Only by combining their powers would she be able to find her slave in this throng. There were simply too many beings in too small a space. She couldn't pinpoint the familiar rhythm of her slave's energy. Still, she didn't trust Cef, certainly didn't want him inside her.

His rumbling laughter filled her mind. *I had no idea your resentment ran so deep. Remind me to stay on your good side.*

I want you out of me and into my slave as soon as possible. Focus! We must find him. She concentrated on the rhythm they sought, scanning, searching.

Wait! The wraith's voice sounded inside her head. *Go back. His mystic signal is somewhat distorted, but I believe that was him.*

Odele located the resonance Cef indicated and picked her way along the perimeter of the ballroom. Twisting and weaving, she carefully avoided contact with the inebriated guests. Sexual arousal pulsed around them, intoxicating and intense. No wonder she couldn't isolate her slave's signal. The entire palace radiated carnal frenzy. Couples touched and kissed, uninhibited, emboldened by the festive atmosphere.

Look, there is Gibrath's daughter. Cef turned Odele's head to the right. *Do we even need your slave? Why don't I take over one of her admirers and lure her into the gardens.*

Adara Kinson stood in a shadowed alcove with three young men. They tripped over each other attempting to capture her attention. Her gaze shone and a rose flush colored her cheeks. *We must spirit her away without her sending out a telepathic warning. My slave will allow us to do so. None of those boys can command the sort of obedience we require. Besides, if the Terran fails, my slave will impregnate her.*

Unacceptable! It must be the Terran. I will have no claim to the throne if—

The Terran is my first choice too. Master Tilden will be our last resort.

Cef didn't argue, but she sensed his dissatisfaction. Their individual efforts had failed. They had no choice but to join forces. The Setti realm must be rid of Hakon's incompetence.

Odele heaved an audible sigh as she exited the ballroom, maintaining the Light Keeper illusion that rendered her invisible. Without the emotional cacophony emanating from the guests, she finally locked onto Tilden's signal. *You're right, his rhythm is distorted. He's participating in some sort of meld.*

Using his signal like a homing beacon, Odele crossed a small courtyard and entered a less elaborate section of the palace. Servant quarters? What was the Death Master doing with servants?

She paused before a locked door. Even if she manipulated the lock, how would she open the door without revealing her presence?

Reinforce your illusion and I'll teleport us through the door.

Sending her silent assent to the entity within her, she poured mystic energy into the illusion. Cef's power surged. Her nerve endings buzzed with unfamiliar intensity. The door wavered, becoming transparent. She stepped through the portal and released her pent-up breath. Tilden stood at the foot of a rumpled bed, facing a muscular man with a bald scalp. Both men were naked, as was the woman on the bed behind them.

"If she is your bonded mate—"

"I can only take her when I receive sexual stimulation through my empathic link. I thought you understood that." The bald man interrupted Tilden's objection, frustration and impatience flashing in his dark eyes.

"I've shared women before, but she is your bonded mate." Tilden raked his fingers through his tousled black hair.

"We want a child, Master Tilden," the woman said. "Drahbin females can only conceive with Drahbin males, but our bodies are incapable of producing sexual sensations."

"You allowed her to suck your cock," the Drahbin male snapped. "Why is this different?"

"You hadn't told me she was your bonded mate or I never would have touched her. Mystic Keepers consider such bondings sacred."

"Lecith and I are not Mystic Keepers. We have embraced the only lifestyle available to us. I know Lecith gives pleasure to the princesses and he knows I sometimes pleasure the king. It is what we do. It is not who we are." She crawled to the edge of the bed, her large breasts swaying. "Help Lecith make love to me."

Odele's nipples tightened and her clit tingled. *Are you doing that?*

Not intentionally. I must admit I find this intriguing. My fascination must be affecting you physically.

Well, stop it!

Shall I meld with Tilden now? You could compel him to storm out.

Despite her annoyance, curiosity kept Odele rooted in place. She'd heard about the transformation, but never

witnessed the result. *He'll be easier to overpower if we strike while he's distracted.*

Cef chuckled in response.

"Did someone else participate in your joining ritual?"

Tilden's brows drew together over his fierce stare.

Lecith shook his head and turned away.

The woman scooted off the bed, approaching Tilden with a sultry smile. Her lush curves beckoned as her gaze swept over his naked body. "Our ways are not your ways. We understand that. We feel tenderness and affection, yet sexual desire is blocked by the transformation. I know you want me. Even now your cock rises again. Allow Lecith to access that desire so he can use his body to express his love and give me a child."

Tilden hesitated a moment longer, his gaze lowered to her tempting breasts. "If you are both in agreement, who am I to argue?" He palmed one of her breasts, his gaze shifting to her face. "What do you feel when I touch you?"

"I feel the warmth of your hand and I sense your appreciation of my softness. The tingle of excitement making my nipple hard isn't present when I touch myself or if Lecith touches me."

"Why did they do this to you?"

"Control." Lecith stepped up behind his mate, his eyes narrowed, resentful. "What better way to bend someone to your will than to render them impotent without you." He crossed her arms at the small of her back and arched her toward the Death Master. "Suck her nipples. Make her moan. I want to watch her face as your lust heats her blood."

Tilden lowered his head and captured her nipple between his teeth. He laved the tip, while maintaining pressure with his teeth. The woman tossed her head against Lecith's shoulder. Tilden moved to her other breast, drawing her deeply into his mouth. His fingers teased the first nipple, tugging and rolling, keeping it hard.

Odele squirmed. She wasn't empathic, but she could easily imagine the suction of Tilden's mouth and Lecith's firm hold on her arms. Heat unfurled between her thighs, desire throbbed.

Have you ever been pleased by two men?

Obviously Cef could sense her arousal, probably hear her thoughts. She ignored him and concentrated on the lovers.

Tilden raised his head, his gaze locked with Lecith's. "Lick her pussy."

Lecith grinned, stepping back to display his erect cock. "You like to watch."

"I like all sorts of things."

Lifting his mate into his arms, Lecith laid her sideways across the bed. He pushed her legs up and back, bending her knees. She parted her thighs, offering her creamy flesh to both men.

Tilden sat beside her on the bed. He cupped her breast with one hand and parted her folds with the other. Lecith knelt on the floor, draping her legs over his shoulders. He traced her slit, carefully sucked her clit, and rimmed her opening. She writhed and moaned, pressing her pussy against his skillful mouth.

Odele drank in the erotic tableau. Her heart raced. Prickly sensations tormented her skin, made her restless and anxious.

"Have you ever taken a cock up your ass?" Tilden's dark eyes gleamed, obviously excited by the thought.

Odele sagged against the wall. She'd never wanted to be another person so much in her life. To feel two thick cocks filling her, stretching her ... She'd watched the breeders fuck every way imaginable. But they only allowed one male to mount each female until she conceived or they determined the pair was incompatible.

I can render the female unconscious and we can have some fun. The Drahbin are simple to control. I'll enter the male and you can compel Tilden to give you exactly what you want.

Bittersweet temptation rolled through Odele, bathing her body in a scalding wave. They didn't have time to play! They had to capture the princess.

"We can only reach orgasm with an emotional surrogate," the female reminded Tilden. "We often do it that way."

Taking the quick exchange as his cue, Lecith traded places with his mate. He lay on his back and she straddled his hips, lowering herself onto his erect cock. Odele watched his thick shaft disappear inside her waiting body, shaking with need.

Lecith motioned toward the table beside the bed. Tilden picked up the small pot and smeared his cock with the pale green ointment. He dipped two fingers in the pot, then set the container aside.

Unbearable tension built within Odele. She slipped her hand between her thighs and cupped her mound. Her uniform pants were formfitting. She couldn't touch herself without unfastening them.

Do you trust me? Mockery rang through Cef's tone.

No! I need to be fucked! What can you do?

I'm empathic, you fool. Far more so than these helpless puppets. Would you like to feel exactly what the female is feeling? I can give you that and more.

Before she could reply, sensations bombarded her being. Searing lust stabbed down her spine, lodging firmly in her core. Shaken, it took Odele a moment to decipher the stimuli. She felt Lecith's hands on her breasts and, by the gods, she felt his cock stretching her inner walls.

How are you doing this? Won't they sense you in the meld?

Shut up and feel. Feel their lust. Feast upon their frenzy.

Tilden parted the woman's ass cheeks. Odele felt his fingers upon her own. He circled the woman's anus then worked his fingers inside. The woman made a strangled sound as he slid his fingers in and out. Odele fought to keep her eyes open, unwilling to deprive herself of the visual stimulation.

Perhaps playing host to the wraith wasn't horrible after all. In and out, in and out, Tilden's fingers and Lecith's cock impaled the woman with alternating strokes. She writhed between them, her fingers gripping her mate's smooth scalp. Without breaking rhythm, Tilden replaced his fingers with his cock. Even well lubricated as he was, he stretched her to the point of pain.

Odele bit back a scream as orgasm ripped through her. Pulses of tingling heat constricted her inner walls.

"How ... did you ... do that?" Tilden panted harshly. "I thought you couldn't come until I did?"

"I never have before."

The confusion was forgotten as the men increased their speed, pounding into her willing body. Lecith gripped her hips, arching off the bed as he emptied his seed against her womb. Tilden buried himself to the hilt and shook with release, his head thrown back, eyes squeezed shut.

Now! Take control of Tilden before he recovers his senses.

Shaking and befuddled from the most explosive orgasm of her life, Odele forced herself into action.

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Chapter Five

Felise's heart sank as she heard the guard secure the lock. "Shit," she muttered under her breath and crossed to the windows. Her chambers were on the third floor. She would have to change into pants and a tunic—

"Are there no secret passageways?"

She glanced at Tork and her breath lodged in her throat. Brutally handsome indeed. Dori's description of the Shadow Master fit his appearance perfectly. Dragging her gaze away from Tork, Felise reminded herself it was only an illusion.

"Are you sure you want to escape?" His lips quirked in a teasing smile. "You haven't stopped blushing since I changed shape."

"There's no telling how long our ruse will last. All they have to do is contact the real Jarek and I'm..." Her voice trailed away and she moved closer to Tork. "Nyx said you're an accomplished sorcerer. Is shape-changing your only ability?"

"Am I able to teleport, perhaps?" He chuckled. "Where would you like to go?"

"Anywhere but here. I can't be in the palace when they locate Master Jarek."

"You promise to explain all this once we're safely away?"

"Yes."

He proffered his hand. "Grasp my wrist and don't let go."

The fabric of space parted and Tork pulled her inside. Just before the seam closed behind them, he tossed a crystal onto the bed. Light faded to gloom, color bled to gray. Maintaining

her hold on his wrist, she wrapped her other arm around his thick bicep, trembling. Shapes loomed in the darkness, never revealing their details. He propelled them along, yet their bodies didn't move. The momentum was dizzying.

A chill raced down her spine. What was she doing? She'd been so desperate to escape, she hadn't thought beyond the moment. All she knew about Tork was his title and that his abilities impressed Nyx.

He stepped out of the shadowy dominion into a grassy clearing bathed in silver moonlight. They faced a simple cottage constructed of exposed timbers, the roof steep with multiple gables. She'd only seen video files of such structures. It belonged to another time—or another dimension.

"Where are we?" A gentle breeze, filled with unfamiliar scents, caressed her flushed face. The scurry and scratch of night creatures drew her attention to the surrounding trees.

"This is my home, or at least one of them." His deep voice blended with the night. "No one will find you here."

She gulped, her footsteps faltering. "You teleported us across the galaxy?"

He turned and gathered her hands in his. "You have nothing to fear, firebird. I will protect you with my life."

Heat curled through her belly, a disconcerting combination of excitement and fear. Why did she feel so out of sorts? He'd only done what she'd asked him to do.

"Shall we go inside," he motioned toward the cottage, "or are you afraid to be alone with me?"

You're being ridiculous. He's done nothing to earn your mistrust. "Anywhere more public would defeat my purpose for leaving."

"A purpose I'm anxious to understand." He led her to the cottage, opening the door with a wave of his hand. A more intricate gesture activated the lights. Mellow illumination emanated all around them, yet she couldn't identify the source. "What was going on back at the palace? Why were the guards searching for Master Jarek?"

Her gaze swept the interior of the cottage as she explained. "Master Jarek asked to bond with me and my brother accepted his proposal."

"Shouldn't a bonding proposal be yours to accept or reject?"

"Ultimately the choice is mine, but Dori made a suggestion I found objectionable."

"Why don't we sit. You seem agitated."

"I *am* agitated." She heard her waspish tone and shook her head. "I'm sorry. Their scheme caught me off guard. I hate being manipulated."

He took her hand and guided her to the wide, firmly cushioned sofa. "Were you aware of the proposal being negotiated on your behalf?"

Why didn't he shape-change back to his natural appearance? Would it be rude if she made the suggestion? Jarek's face disrupted her thinking, made her restless. "I knew Sef was negotiating with the Mystic Keepers. I'm not opposed to an eventual bonding."

"Then why are we here? What made you decide to flee?"

"Dori reminded Sef of a Fahroni custom I'd never heard of before. He wanted to lock me in a room with Master Jarek until the sun rose on the third day."

His dark brows drew together. "For what purpose?"

"So Jarek could seduce me."

Tork laughed. He extended his arm along the back of the sofa and angled his body toward hers. "This is why you ran away? You were afraid of being seduced?"

"No." She averted her face. It sounded so foolish when he said it. "You know perfectly well I'm not afraid of passion, but I've never met Master Jarek. I..." He turned her face back around and her words trailed away. His black gaze bore into hers, gleaming with possessiveness and longing.

"I would have refused, firebird." He paused for effect. "I don't need to hold you captive to prove my worth and I have no use for a resentful mate."

She swallowed with difficulty, her hands clasped in her lap. He couldn't mean what he seemed to mean. He inferred—no, his statement went far beyond inference. "Were you pretending to be Tork or was ... I don't understand." His features hadn't changed. Only his hair and clothing transformed when he took on Jarek's *likeness*.

He smiled. "Yes, you do. You've known all along Tork was a fraud. I saw it in your eyes."

"Does Nyx know you're a spy?" She pushed to her feet, putting distance between them. She wasn't sure why she was angry, but she couldn't suppress her anxiety. This wasn't a preview of the Shadow Master; this man was Jarek. "Why were you spying on us?"

"I came to Zylott for the same reason your brother, Tye, posed as a Mystic Keeper. It will take time for our people to trust each other." He crossed his long legs, resting one ankle on the opposite knee. "Unions like ours will help build that trust."

Putting her hands on her hips, she arched her brow, ignoring the wild flutter of her heart. "Unions like ours? I haven't agreed to bond with you."

"You said you weren't opposed to the bonding, just the manipulation."

She turned and strode to the massive windows staring out into the night. Rugged mountain peaks created jagged silhouettes against the moonlit horizon. Were they still on Zylott or was this the Keeper dimension? She felt like such a fool. She'd played right into his hands. No, that wasn't fair. She'd asked him to rescue her—from himself!

His warm palms cupped her shoulders and she met his gaze in the windowpane. "It's rather funny if you let yourself enjoy the irony."

"You left some sort of message, didn't you?"

"The crystal I tossed on your bed. Any Keeper can activate it."

She nodded. His hands felt nice. The casual contact stirred images of their encounter in the garden. Knowing he meant to court her, that they would likely become bonded mates, should have lessened her guilt over her brazen behavior. It had the opposite effect.

"Are you thinking about the garden?"

She nodded without turning around.

"The joining ritual was evocative, stimulating. Your body responded naturally."

"But..."

"Would it be less upsetting if there had been a Tork?"

Smiling, she turned to face him. "No. I'm glad it was you." She touched his chest, enjoying the softness of his tunic, the heat of his firm flesh. "Even dressed in that ridiculous costume I found myself drawn to you."

"But that's my natural appearance. You cut me to the quick." They laughed together, then desire wound around them, pushing amusement aside. His gaze focused on her mouth, passion glistening in his eyes. "Will you want a traditional Fahroni ceremony?"

She shook her head and glanced away. "I'm only half Fahroni."

"Let me make love to you." Gently cupping her chin, he drew her gaze back to his. "I've watched you for weeks, learned all I can about you, dreamed of the time we would finally join."

She pushed against his chest and twisted out of his embrace. "Sef would have given you three days. You expect me to yield after less than an hour?"

"You're right. I'm rushing things." He clasped his hands behind his back.

"You may have been watching me for weeks," she paused for a smile, "but I have yet to make your acquaintance."

He bent into an elaborate bow, then straightened and met her gaze. "Jarek Severn, Master of the Order of Shadow. It's an honor to finally meet you."

Felise allowed him to take her hand. He pressed a kiss to her knuckles, his lips lingering against her skin. Memories of their encounter in the garden flared to life within her mind. He'd kissed her so tenderly, adoring her body with his hands and his mouth.

"I thought you didn't want to be ravished. You better think about something else."

"You can sense my thoughts?"

He chuckled. "I don't need to. Desire is burning in your eyes."

Pulling her hand out of his light grasp, she meandered across the room. She'd never known pleasure like they shared in the garden. Perhaps it was the stimulation of the joining ceremony, but Felise suspected it was more. Her senses were attuned to Jarek. Just the brush of his fingertips sent tingles up her arm. If she made love with him...

You just met him!

Even her bathing attendants had coaxed and teased for weeks before she'd allowed their intimate touch. Why did she respond so readily with Jarek? What made the attraction so powerful?

"Let's sit and talk like ordinary people." He gestured toward the sofa. "I think we both could use the distraction."

Nodding, she followed him back to the sofa and sat at his side. "I've heard rumors that the Fahroni sorcerers might form an alliance with the Veil Keepers."

"The Setti influence within the Sacred Order of the Veil staggered the Steering Committee. High Priestess Sacha was respected and well liked. None of us had any idea she was

controlled by a Setti hybrid." He paused, his gaze cleared, and his expression relaxed. "The Committee is cautiously optimistic that a partnership with the Fahroni sorcerers will refocus and rejuvenate the order."

"Nyx has said much the same. New ideas and fresh perspectives are welcomed by his men."

"How long has Nyx worked with the Guardians?"

"I'm not sure. He's very secretive about the whole thing. I know he has access to Nexus Chambers that allow him to pass between dimensions, but I've never seen one. He speaks of a being named Xenos. I gather he's the Guardian who first contacted Nyx. Other than that, I know very little about the mysterious Guardians."

"I know a bit more, but not much. As their name implies, the Guardians watch over countless civilizations, assisting as they see fit. It's my understanding that they do everything in their power not to involve themselves directly. They select champions within each civilization and offer their support through these Chosen ones."

"Then Nyx is one of the Chosen."

"Yes."

"If the Guardians are so powerful, why haven't they been able to stop the Setti?"

"The Guardians are highly evolved, but they are not gods. And the war with the Setti has barely begun."

* * * *

Odele poured telepathic compulsion into the Death Master's brain. *Withdraw, depart, get away from them!* A

surge of resistance sprang up within his mind. How was this possible? Tilden had never resisted her before.

He pulled out of the female's body and pushed his hair out of his eyes. "May the gods bless you with a child." Without a backward glance he exited the chamber, manifesting clothing as he moved.

She must have imagined his resistance. He obeyed her mental commands. His long strides took him into the courtyard away from prying eyes. "Show yourself, you Setti spawn! I will play your games no longer."

I thought he was oblivious.

She ignored Cef's jeer. Tilden had never given any indication he was aware of her influence. *I've been gentle with you, Tilden.* She sent her thoughts directly to his brain. *You don't want to experience my wrath.*

"I know what you are now. You're one of the vile beings who attacked my daughter!"

His daughter was one of Cyd's victims?

Cef chuckled. *I thought you knew.*

You smug son of a—

I am the son of a Guardian. Would you like my assistance or not?

She hadn't expected to need it. She'd wanted to prove her powers to the wraith, to form an alliance of equals. Damn and double damn!

Forcing aside her frustration, she concentrated on her quarry. *Open your mind!*

"Fuck you! I'll die before I surrender to you again." He turned in a slow circle, searching the darkness for some sign of her.

Open.

Obey.

Accept!

She strengthened each compulsion until the Death Master groaned. He clasped his head between his hands and snarled, "Get out! Get out of my mind!"

She jolted him with a blast of energy, knocking him to his knees. Cef left her, soaring along the telepathic link into the Death Master. Tilden screamed, thrashing on the ground, clawing at his hair. She looked around as Cef battled for control. If he didn't shut Tilden up quickly, someone was sure to hear.

Suddenly Tilden went limp. Even his breathing ceased. Oh gods, had Cef killed him? She released her protective illusion and knelt at the Death Master's side. He bolted upright. She jerked back with a little yelp.

"He is one stubborn Keeper."

"Cef?" He grinned, turquoise light flaring within Tilden's gaze. "You scared me half to death! I thought you'd killed him."

"I cannot exist within a corpse, but I admit there's not much left of his mind. If only he hadn't resisted."

"Let's get Adara and get out of here. I've had about as much of Zylott as I can stomach." She led the way to the ballroom. No instructions were necessary. Cef knew what to do.

Trembling with sexual excess and exertion, Odele sank onto the stone bench and released a heavy sigh. This secluded corner of the gardens would provide the privacy she required to spirit the princess away. Odele strengthened her telepathic link with Cef, allowing her to see what he saw.

"Your Highness." The throng of young men parted as Tilden approached. Odele smiled. He effortlessly commanded respect. It was one of the reasons she'd selected him as her slave and maintained him all these years. "Your sister is waiting for you in the gardens. She said it was a matter of some urgency."

"I'll escort you, Princess Adara," one young swain promptly volunteered.

"I will escort Princess Adara. Be off."

No one argued as Adara took Tilden's hand.

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Chapter Six

They spoke of their families, social customs, and misconceptions, trying not to dwell on their mutual enemy. The horrors the Setti released upon the Kingdom of Zylott were even worse than the damage they'd done in the Mystic Keeper dimension.

Jarek answered her myriad of questions and she shared what she knew. As time passed, he found it harder and harder to concentrate on anything but Felise. He wanted to take down her hair and spread it around her shoulders, after he'd stripped the iridescent gown from her lissome body.

"This cottage is becoming a sanctuary for renegade lovers," he said after a pause in the conversation.

"Really? Who else has sought refuge here?"

"My sister Rammi and her lover stayed here while they worked to clear his name."

She tilted her head, her green eyes sparkling. "Clear his name? Of what was he accused?"

"A vicious murder."

"Are there any other kind?"

He smiled. "I suppose not. Murder by definition is vicious."

"I take it he was innocent. Was the culprit ever caught?"

"In a manner of speaking. His accomplice turned on him and ... I didn't mean to be morbid. Let's talk of something else."

She glanced away, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. "We've been talking for hours."

The longing in her tone sent desire coursing through his blood. His first instinct was to pounce, to overwhelm her inhibitions. She'd retreated when he pushed before. He had to let her come to him. "Why was your brother in such a hurry to see us joined?" He kept his tone light and casual, ignoring the persistent throbbing in his groin.

"Dignitaries from all over Zylott are attending his bonding celebration. He figured it was the perfect opportunity to strengthen the alliance."

"I see some logic in that."

"As do I."

He licked his lips, fighting back a smile. Her gaze caressed his face, her eyes wide and luminous. Desire smoldered in those eyes. Why were they sitting here talking about politics instead of thrashing around in his bed?

Patience, Severn. She's almost ready to surrender.

"Are they happy?"

Jarek quirked one dark eyebrow. "Who?"

"Your sister and her renegade lover?"

"They're bonded now and seem very happy." Stars, how he wanted to touch her, *needed* to touch her. "I never thought I'd see the day when Rammi would soften toward anyone. She's a hotheaded Death Keeper. I'm thrilled she's found happiness."

"Perhaps the cottage will bring us luck."

Oh, yes, sweetheart. I hear your silent plea. He scooted closer, keeping his movements slow and steady. "I'm certainly willing to find out."

"We will make it official tomorrow before the entire assembly."

"Of course."

"Then," she looked into his eyes and smiled, "can we please stop talking?"

He grinned. "I thought you'd never ask."

Cupping her chin in his palm, Jarek explored her mouth. Petal soft and pliant, her lips opened for him. He was in no hurry. They had all night. Nibbling and licking, he waited for her soft mewling sounds before he deepened the kiss. His little firebird liked to kiss. He'd learned that much in the garden. Her tongue dueled with his, bold, seeking.

He slipped his arms beneath her and lifted her against his chest. This first time was going to be perfect and a sofa wouldn't suffice. "Shall I take you to the Shadow Palace? I know this cottage is provincial at best."

"You rescued me from a palace." Her fingers combed through his hair making Jarek want to purr. "This cottage is charming and secluded. I need nothing more."

She had no idea what she "needed," but he intended to find out. He would explore every inch of her body, find all her pleasure triggers, then fill her over and over until they were both too exhausted to move.

The master suite wasn't large, but the blue and cream décor gave it an air of elegance.

"It's lovely."

He smiled. She hadn't spared the room so much as a glance. Her wide gaze fixed on his face, anticipation shining in her eyes. "Not half as lovely as you."

Setting her down beside the bed, he went to work on her hair. Only once had he seen it loosened and the sight took his breath away. Blending shades of crimson, copper, and bronze, she had the most spectacular hair he'd ever seen.

He pulled the last pin free and she ran her fingers through the long strands. Grinning, he shook his head. "The dress ruins the effect."

She closed her eyes as he loosened the laces securing the front of her gown. His fingers brushed her breasts repeatedly and her nipples gathered beneath her shift. She lifted her arms free of the fitted sleeves and wiggled out of the dress. It pooled around her ankles while she pulled the shift off over her head.

Jarek groaned. Her flame colored hair contrasted sharply with her smooth ivory skin as it cascaded around her shoulders and down her back. Dusky rose nipples crowned her firm, round breasts. A scrap of lace still covered her mound and sheer stockings encased her legs.

Speechless and shaken, Jarek could only stare. His chest burned, but his lungs refused to obey. His heart, on the other hand, beat so fast stars danced before his eyes. Dragging his gaze away from her body, he finally managed to breathe. She was undeniably beautiful, but he'd seen beautiful women before. What was it about this woman that addled his brain?

His entire being longed to join with her, fill her, complete her. Was it possible she felt the same?

Disintegrating his clothing in a puff of sparkling *iede*, he turned back to Felise. "I'm almost afraid to touch you, afraid you're not real."

A hint of a smile curved her lips. She took his hand and guided it to her breast. "I'm real and I ache for you."

Stroking her nipple with his thumb, he wrapped his other arm around her waist, claiming her mouth in a passionate kiss. He wanted to go slowly, to savor each tingle, each sigh, but his body demanded more. Delving into her mouth, his tongue caressed and tasted. She responded without hesitation, her hands sliding from his shoulders into his hair.

He grabbed her bottom and lifted. She wrapped her legs around his waist. Her core pressed against his belly. Stars, she was hot! Even through the thin barrier of her panties, her heat seared his skin. His cock bucked in anticipation, more than ready to fill her.

An exposed beam dissected the room, running parallel with the edge of the bed. Tossing Shadow *iede* into the air, he manifested two sturdy loops secured to the beam. Would she enjoy being mastered? He'd seen hints of her stubbornness. He could never be truly satisfied with a mate who wouldn't submit. It was better to find out now before they joined.

He guided her legs from around his waist and helped her stand beside the bed. She started to lie down, but he shook his head. "Raise your arms and slip your hands through the loops."

Curiosity clouded her gaze, but she obeyed. A verbal command tightened the loops around her slender wrists, dragging her to the balls of her feet.

She licked her lips and met his gaze. "I don't enjoy pain."

"How do you know?" He put his hands on her waist, steadying her.

"Merset used a strap on me. He said it would heighten the pleasure. I felt only pain."

"Then I won't use a strap on you." She nodded and relaxed against his hands. "The stockings are nice, but these have to go." With no further warning, he ripped off her panties. She gasped and twisted, her breasts swaying with the sudden movement. He touched her smooth mound, his gaze following his fingers. "Do all women in Zylott shave their pussy hair?"

"Mystic Keepers allow it to grow? That's so uncivilized." She moved her legs farther apart allowing him to play. "We don't actually shave such a delicate area. We have a paste that prevents the hair from growing. It's used on our legs as well."

Bending to one knee, he ran his palm from her mound to her ankle and back. "So you do. Now tell me everything your bathers have done to you. Leave nothing out."

"Why? I explained—"

He pinched her nipple just hard enough to sting. "I said I wouldn't use a strap on you. That doesn't mean I won't punish disobedience."

She narrowed her eyes, her lips pressed in a mutinous line.

Flipping up the comforter, he revealed wide ankle cuffs secured to the bottom rail of the bed frame.

"I told you in the garden. They touched me and gave me release, sharing my pleasure through their empathic link."

"Did they put their mouths on you?"

She swallowed, her gaze darting to the ankle restraints. "Yes."

"Where?"

"Wherever it gave me the most pleasure," she snapped. "Why are you angry? You've touched other women. I didn't even know you when—"

"I'm not angry. I'm curious."

"Then why are you punishing me?"

He shifted to his knees, rubbing her hip and thigh with long, gentle strokes. "The restraints are not punishment, my love. Do you want me to release you?"

Felise hesitated. Jarek fascinated her, aroused her in a way she'd never dreamed possible. Part of his appeal was the aggressiveness simmering just below the surface. Fierce, possessive, demanding, she'd never found those characteristics attractive, until she looked into Jarek's eyes.

"It's a choice, firebird. Choose to trust me and I'll give you pleasure like you've never imagined, or ask me to release the restraints."

"If I ask you to release the restraints, will you still make love to me?"

He shook his head. "This is part of who I am. My bonded mate will have to enjoy surrendering control or we will make each other miserable. It's better that I not touch you, if you can't accept this part of me."

She released a shuddering breath. "Promise you won't hurt me."

"You either trust me or you don't."

Her gaze locked with his. Time spun on without them. She longed for the soul deep connection only bonded mates

enjoyed and Jarek appealed to her, attracted her. Could she surrender herself completely?

She had to make a choice.

Aligning her ankle with the cuff, Felise stepped back. His breath hissed out in a relieved sigh and she hid her smile. He might need to control the situation, but she was far from powerless. As he fastened the buckle, his fingers caressed her calf, his lips teased her thigh. Guiding her other leg to the second cuff, he secured that ankle as well.

"Did they put their fingers inside you?"

Curious? *Yeah right!* He could blame it on curiosity, but Jarek was jealous of her attendants.

You either trust him or you don't. "They were forbidden to enter my body, but they used smooth, slender wands to arouse me."

"Where did they put these wands?"

She bit back a laugh and a smartass remark. Now was not the time to provoke her—Master. She shivered. If she couldn't accept the title, there was no hope for their bonding.

"Are you refusing to answer?"

"No. They teased my passage with them, but they couldn't go in very far. If they tore my maidenhead, even inadvertently, they would have been whipped."

He licked his middle finger and parted her folds, slowly sinking into her pussy until he encountered her hymen. Possessive pleasure ignited in his gaze. With his finger still inside her, he said, "No one has ever touched you like this before."

The heat of his gaze seared her skin and sent tingles skittering along her nerve endings. He meant to fill her, possess her, devour her, and she was ready to be claimed. She melted, drenching his finger with her cream. "Only you..." She started to form the word only to let it slip away.

He leaned in, inhaling her scent. "Say it, firebird. Accept me." He circled her clit with his tongue.

"Master," she whispered, frightened of her body's ready acceptance of his domination.

With a twist of his wrist, he added a second finger. She gasped, her thighs flexing as her passage stretched for him, welcomed him. His tongue swirled and flicked over and against her clit, building the tension, speeding her toward orgasm.

"Oh!" She tossed her head. Her hair slid against her sensitive nipples, and her inner muscles gripped him rhythmically.

He raised his face, disapproval clear in his expression. "This is new to you and I didn't warn you, so I won't punish you this time."

"P-punish me? What did I do wrong?"

"You will ask permission before you come from this moment on." He withdrew his fingers from her tingling pussy and Felise whimpered. "Did I hurt you? Answer honestly."

"No, Master."

"Good. It is my intention to treasure you, to worship your body as only your Master can."

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Chapter Seven

Odele folded her arms over her narrow chest and settled onto her primary legs. She stood in the corridor outside Hakon's throne room. The Supreme Midox would only communicate with the Setti. Other species were beneath contempt. She preferred her Keeper form, finding her Setti shape awkward and cumbersome.

"Shall I wait in the hall?" Cef still inhabited the body of the Death Master. "I know how Hakon reacts to Keepers."

Hakon wouldn't know the Keeper Cef occupied was involved in Gibrath's death. Still, it was best not to provoke him. *Yes. Give her to me. I'll present our prize.*

Adara murmured something unintelligible behind her gag. Her wrists and ankles were bound and terror shone in her wide green eyes. Cef handed the girl to Odele and the princess went wild.

Stop struggling, you fool, or I'll drop you on your pampered ass! Adara's eyes widened and Odele tightened her grip. So, the princess could understand Setti speech. *Can you send thoughts or just receive them?*

Who are you? What do you want with me?

Odele set Adara on her feet and unfastened her ankle restraints. *It will serve you better if you walk at my side, but do not speak!*

The princess glanced at Tilden, confusion and hope combining in her expression. Cef's turquoise light emanated

from the Death Master's eyes. Adara quickly turned her face away.

A tall, burly guard opened the door and motioned them inside. His large eyes, the only feature on his long, narrow face, focused on Adara with obvious interest. Odele waved her hand and knocked him backward, her response to his leering stare.

Come. Odele wrapped her claw around Adara's bound wrists and dragged her into the throne room. Hakon sprawled on his throne, as was his wont, his secondary legs draped over the throne's padded armrests. His unblinking eyes followed their progress across the narrow room.

This is Gibrath's daughter?

Yes, Supreme Midox. Adara tugged against her hold.

Why does she offend me with this form?

Her Setti abilities are still latent. Odele paused, sending a punishing pulse into her disruptive captive. Adara yelped, then stilled. *We've not had time to infuse her.*

How long will that take? I find her repulsive.

I'm not sure. We will begin immediately.

* * * *

Jarek fastened the last buckle and paused to admire his display. Felise lay before him, a willing captive to his pleasure. Her hips rested at the edge of the bed, her legs suspended and spread wide. Extended above her head and secured in padded cuffs, her arms were restrained as well.

He'd arranged her glorious hair across the bed, unwilling to distract from the sleek contours of her body. Her breasts

appeared smaller in this position, but her nipples formed tight, rosy peaks.

She watched him with curiosity, desire, and a hint of fear. This was all new to her. He would soon soothe her, prove her trust well placed. Reaching for her mind, he established a telepathic link. He needed to sense what pleased her, what excited her, what drove her to the brink.

Trailing his fingertips across her belly, he circled her navel. "I can't decide where to begin. I want all of you all at once." Her lips parted as if she would speak, then she closed her mouth and glanced away. "Go ahead. You may speak unless I order your silence."

"I would love to feel your mouth on mine, Master. I hunger for your kiss."

Her willingness to accept her role thrilled him more than anything he could remember. She was giving him what he needed and he would do no less. Moving to her side, he touched her face, calmed her with gentle caresses, and tender kisses.

Can you hear me, firebird?

Yes. Can you hear me?

He separated their mouths. "I've established a link between us. It will become permanent when I join my body with yours."

"We'll be able to hear each other's thoughts—all of them?"

He chuckled, cupping one of her breasts. "The link doesn't work that way. We must reach for each other. It doesn't happen automatically."

"And if I don't want you in my mind?"

"Then I am unable to enter."

He didn't tell her emotions passed more readily across the link. She'd figure it out soon enough. He would teach her how to erect a mental shield, just not tonight.

Her pebble-hard nipples beckoned. He caught one between his teeth, while rolling the other with his fingers. She panted, her breasts quivering with each ragged breath. Suckling firmly on one tender tip, he trailed his fingers along her abdomen. The silken skin covering her mound fascinated him. She was so incredibly soft.

Crawling onto the bed, Jarek knelt above her and looked into her eyes. Longing, hunger, and demand burned within her gaze. His cock bucked and his heart leapt. Had he truly found his mate? "I want you to do what you did in the garden, but this time I'm not going to pull out. You can do this. I know you can."

She smiled, surprising him again. "I didn't want you to pull out the first time. I'm not afraid."

He framed her face with his hands and sank slowly into her mouth. Warm and welcoming, she closed her lips around him. Jarek leaned forward, arching over her naked body. He straddled her face and slipped his hands under her ass. Cream gathered on her folds as he thrust into her mouth. He lowered his head between her thighs and traced her slit with his tongue.

She moaned, the vibration of her voice teasing his rampant cock. Her tongue swirled, her lips sucked, and Jarek was lost. He thrust into her mouth, tension gripping his abdomen like a vice. His balls tingled, drawing tight as he

pushed deep. She sucked and swallowed, milking him greedily. Jarek gritted his teeth, eyes squeezed tight as pleasure burst within him.

Thank you, firebird. You pleased me very well.

He shifted, lifting his hips so only the tip of his cock remained in her mouth. Holding her ass with both hands, he lowered his face between her legs, ready to feast on her succulent pussy. He licked her folds and circled her clit, stabbing deep with his tongue again and again.

Master, may I come? Her plea erupted in his mind. His cock was still in her mouth.

"Not yet." He pushed two fingers deep, holding still as the spasms of pleasure receded. She whimpered, sucking hard on the head of his cock. He grinned. *Greedy little firebird.*

Felise murmured her protest as he pulled out of her mouth. Her core ached as she had never ached, and the evocative taste of his release lingered on her tongue. Why was he tormenting her? Her senses felt raw, over-stimulated. She desperately needed to come.

He took a pillow from the bed and dropped it to the floor, kneeling between her legs. The restraints supported her in the brazen position, open, offered, accessible.

"Did your attendants put the wands up your ass?"

Why did he have to be so crude? Even as she formed the thought, excitement curled through her. "Yes."

"Did you enjoy it?"

"Yes." Heat flooded her face and spread over her breasts at the admission.

Jarek chuckled. "Don't be embarrassed. I'm glad. I enjoy that sort of play." His middle finger pushed into her pussy, gathering her cream. He worked the slick liquid down to her puckered anus, pausing to look into her eyes. Holding her open with one hand, he tongued her clit and pushed his long middle finger deep into her ass.

Felise twisted as far as her bonds would allow. He slid his finger in her tight rear passage, deliberately drawing out each stroke. His tongue caressed her swollen clit, circling and flicking until her body jerked with each pass.

"Please! Don't deny me again. I don't think—"

"Come for me now." His finger shoved deep. His lips closed around her clit and Felise went off like a solar flare. Scalding waves of release washed over her, drenching her in amazing sensation. He continued to caress her until the final tremor passed.

Tears escaped the corners of her eyes and she caught her lower lip between her teeth.

"Why are you crying?" His voice coaxed.

"If that was foreplay, you're going to kill me. I..." He silenced her with a lingering kiss. His mouth remained on hers as he positioned his cock at her entrance. Felise tried not to tense.

"You're wet and ready to take me. You don't need to be afraid."

He pushed in. Her body opened, surrendered to his penetration. Deeper. With steady pressure he filled her, stretched her. Felise grasped the cords connected to her wrist cuffs and waited for the searing pain. He pulled back and

thrust hard. One stinging pinch and he was embedded to the hilt.

She laughed. "That's it? All this time I've been terrified."

"You must learn to trust me." He moved, pulling nearly out before thrusting back in. Thick, hot, he filled her again and again. She arched, reveling in the fullness. Her spirit soared right along with her body. It felt so *right*!

Harder, faster, he strained her bonds with each forceful drive. She wanted to touch him, to feel his flexing muscles. She caressed him with her eyes instead.

Do you feel it, firebird? The completeness?

I feel it, Master. It's wonderful!

His mouth covered hers, his tongue thrusting in time with his cock. She tightened her inner muscles, caressed him, welcomed him home. They came together in a burst of sensation, moaning as the ripples went on and on.

He collapsed on top of her, still filling her, a contented smile on his face.

* * * *

The Terran hybrid raised his head, his blue eyes blazing hatred at Odele. He was chained to the wall in his training room. That's where he'd spent most of his time since his capture nearly a mooncycle before. His blue-black hair flowed sleek and shiny to his waist. His naked body was nothing short of perfection.

"I've brought you a present." She'd returned to her Keeper form.

"I have no interest in anything that comes from you."

"Be that as it may, my gift will be very interested in you."

Cef strode in, dragging the struggling princess. Adara's hair was a tangle of curls framing her terrified face. Her gaze darted from Odele to the Terran and back.

Why have you brought me here? Why won't you tell me anything? Who is Gibrath? Her gag kept her from speaking. It certainly didn't keep her from communicating.

"What game are you playing now?" The Terran's gaze narrowed, his lips pressed into a grim line.

"It's really very simple. We want you to breed with this female. Either you fuck her by morning or when we return, you will watch Cef begin her conversion. Have you ever seen an unwilling woman infused with Setti essence? It's exhilarating to watch, but often agonizing to endure. Many don't survive."

"I won't touch her. You're wasting your time."

"Now don't be so hasty. She's really quite lovely." Odele turned to Cef and smiled. "Why don't you show him what we're offering?"

Cef's turquoise light flared within Tilden's eyes and he grasped the front of Adara's gown, tugging it to the waist, revealing her full breasts.

"Stop it! I will not rape her."

"Who said anything about rape?" Odele looked into Adara's tear-bright eyes. "Let this man fuck you or Cef will infuse you. Do you understand what that means?"

Adara nodded.

"Free her hands, Cef."

His brow furrowed in silent question, but he released Adara's restraints.

"Which is it to be?"

Adara pulled the gag down and licked her lips. "I'll die before I cooperate with you."

The Terran smiled, nodding his head in approval.

"Unfortunately, that's not one of the options."

"Cef, get her undressed."

Adara shrieked, kicked, and clawed as Cef tore her gown from her writhing body. When she was naked, he shoved her toward the Terran.

"The release for his cuffs is on that wall. Mounting a man in chains takes practice." She laughed. "If you're still a virgin in the morning, Cef will enjoy infusing you."

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Chapter Eight

A stab of pain jarred Jarek from sleep and he sprang up in bed, pressing his head between his hands.

Sorry about that, Master Jarek, but nothing more subtle got you to respond.

He recognized Minuette's voice and noticed the comm crystals littering the bed. *What's going on?*

Is Felise still with you?

Yes. I left a message explaining—

*We got it. That's how we knew where to start our search. Adara is missing and so is Master Tilden. We suspect—
We'll be right there.*

It was still dark, but he had no idea what time it was. After their third bout of lovemaking, Felise had fallen asleep in his arms. He shook her shoulder. "Wake up, Felise. We have to return to Zylott."

She stretched, blinking her eyes repeatedly. "Is something wrong?" She sounded sleepy and content. He hated to disturb her peaceful lethargy.

"Adara is missing and so is Tilden."

Pushing her hair out of her eyes, she sat and looked around. Sleep's shadow gradually left her face. "Is it possible they're together?"

"I don't know the details. Minuette wouldn't have intruded without good reason."

Jarek sent a cleansing pulse along their bodies and manifested clothing as Felise donned her rumpled ball gown.

They returned to Zylott and rushed to the king's antechamber where everyone had gathered, attempting to puzzle through the events of the night before.

"What have you learned?" Jarek asked as he pulled out a chair for Felise.

"The last confirmed report has Tilden and Adara leaving the ballroom together," King Sef told him.

"Where were they reported to have gone?" Felise asked.

A beam of blue light flashed across the room. "Nyx, I need to speak with you. Would it be better if I not take on shape?"

Jarek looked at the sorcerer. Was he often visited by specters?

"I will prepare them," Nyx said. "Xenos is a Guardian. His race has transcended the need for corporeal bodies. When he first contacted me, he chose an image from my memory thinking it would comfort me."

Tye shuddered. "Xenos looks just like Father."

Apparently satisfied with the explanation, Xenos appeared as a shimmering blue column of light. The column formed arms and legs, then a detailed image formed within the outline.

The king gasped and Felise grabbed Jarek's forearm, her face pale. "Does he look that much like your father?" She only nodded.

"Thank you for coming, sir. How did you learn of the disappearances?"

Xenos glided toward Nyx as he spoke, visible, but not solid. "Now I'm confused. I came to ask your assistance. I too am investigating a disappearance."

Nyx's brows drew together in a frown. "Who are you missing?"

"My son failed to return from his last mission. After backtracking his movements, I've been unable to account for his whereabouts for nearly three of your weeks. I received several transmissions during that time, but I have reason to believe they are false."

"I didn't realize you have a son."

"I have many."

"You said you needed Nyx's assistance." Jarek brought the conversation back on track.

"Correct. Rhys was last seen in the company of a woman I believe to be a Setti hybrid. What transpired here?"

"We're not sure," Nyx admitted. "Adara, my youngest sister, and Tilden are missing. They were last seen together, but neither is responding to any form of communication."

"Where were they last seen?"

"Walking toward the gardens behind the palace." Nyx motioned in the general direction.

Xenos nodded. "Let's see what we can discern."

They filed out of the antechamber and headed for the gardens. Jarek slipped his hand around Felise's, entwining their fingers. Anxiety radiated off her in waves. *This is not your fault.* He sent the thought along the private link he'd formed the night before.

*If anything has happened to her, I'll never forgive myself.
How could you have changed the situation?
If I hadn't run away like a frightened child—*

You would have spent the evening in my company, not Adara's. After I refused your brother, I would have whisked you away to enjoy the festivities.

The grass around the bench had been trampled. Jarek and Felise exchanged guilty looks, but didn't see the benefit of explaining certain patterns left in the grass. Xenos sensed Adara's fear, her desperate desire to escape her captors. He was unable to determine anything more substantial, so they started back toward the palace.

"Wait!" the Guardian said suddenly. He pointed toward a spot on the hedgerow, illuminating a scrap of green fabric. Nyx took the piece of material and closed his fist around it. Long moments passed as he scanned.

He came out of the trance with a gasp. "The Setti wraith has control of Tilden. There was also a female. She seemed..."

Nyx's reluctance escalated Jarek's anxiety. What could be so dreadful the sorcerer was loath to speak of it?

"Odele is a Mystic Keeper hybrid." Xenos waved his hand and the translucent image of a dark-haired woman appeared in front of him. "Is this the woman you sensed?"

"Yes."

"Then our purposes converge." Xenos disintegrated the image with another wave of his hand. "She is the hybrid I believe captured Rhys, and I've been authorized to use force to retrieve him."

"I thought the Setti couldn't mate with Mystic Keepers." Minuette looked from Nyx to Xenos.

"Keeper hybrids are extremely rare. To my knowledge, Odele is the only one still alive."

"Not for long if she's harmed Adara," King Sef vowed.

Minuette laid her hand on Nyx's arm, her features tense with confusion. "You said the Setti wraith took control of Tilden. I thought they captured the Setti wraith."

"The one in our custody has a twin," Xenos told her. He shook his head, his image fluctuating. "We have fought this war too long on the defensive. It's time we attack."

* * * *

Odele stood at the observation window concealed in Light Keeper illusion. She didn't want the Terran to know he was being observed. Adara had released his restraints, now she huddled in the corner, legs drawn up against her chest, doing her best to hide her nudity.

The Terran had no qualms about his nakedness. He'd been naked since his capture. Perhaps he'd grown used to it.

"What's your name?" The gentleness in his tone shocked Odele. Perhaps there was hope for a mating after all.

The princess looked up at him, her gaze carefully fixed on his face. "Adara. And you are?"

"Rhys."

Odele scowled. All the handlers assigned to him couldn't get him to speak his name. It appeared her strategy had been flawed from the start.

"Do you know why they brought me here?"

His gaze narrowed. "I think the bitch made that pretty clear."

"No. It's more complicated than they've led you to believe. That woman presented me to a creature before she brought me here." She swallowed several times, her hand pressed over her mouth. "I'd heard the Setti were monstrous, but I've never seen anything so grotesque. Its skin was transparent. I could see its beating hearts. And she shape-changed into a creature almost as hideous. She is one of them."

"Actually her father was one of them. Her mother was a Mystic Keeper."

"That's impossible. The Setti can't breed with Mystic Keepers, only their hybrids can."

He arched his brow at that. "You seem to know a lot about the Setti. From what dimension did they capture you?"

"The Kingdom of Zylott. Some call it dimension 290-3."

"Do you know Lord Nyx?"

After a long pause, she admitted, "He's my brother."

"Then you have nothing to fear. Nyx will come for you and he has powerful friends."

He sounded so confident Odele wanted to shake him. Nyx wasn't all-powerful and neither were his "friends."

"What about you, Rhys? Will someone come for you?"

"Not while that bitch is watching!" He looked right at Odele, then softened his tone. "And probably not tonight."

* * * *

In a matter of minutes, they narrowed the team to four: Xenos, Nyx, Jarek, and Felise. Nyx refused to consider Minuette because of her pregnancy, Sef was king, and Tye

would take over Fortress Drahbin should anything happen to Nyx.

"A small, well executed plan will be easier to control." Felise drummed her fingers on the tabletop as those not participating in the rescue returned to the festivities.

"And you have such a plan?" Jarek stared at her, his tone argumentative.

Nyx ignored Jarek's surliness. "We must focus on the objective or we will accomplish nothing. We need to keep the strike fast and clean, perhaps utilizing a diversion."

"What do you have in mind?"

Felise wanted to laugh. Jarek had sounded far less adversarial the second time.

"Xenos and I will search for the captives, while you and Felise create the diversion."

"Do the Setti know who you are?" Felise asked Jarek.

"I don't know why they would. I've had no interaction with the Setti."

Nyx snorted. "I'm amazed by the accuracy of their information. Setti hybrids are everywhere."

"Well, they have no reason to know Ambassador Tork."

"You have an idea?" the sorcerer asked, his lips parting in a smile.

* * * *

Bound, gagged, and all but naked, Felise trailed behind Ambassador Tork. His outfit was even more outlandish than the one he'd worn the night before. Golden curls bounced

against his broad shoulders, making Felise smile. He looked ridiculous. Why did anyone buy this disguise?

You're a captive about to be sold as a sex slave. Try to look terrified.

Jarek's reprimand sounded within her mind. She dropped her gaze to the cold stone floor and hunched her shoulders.

Better!

Can't they hear us? The Setti are all telepathic.

This link is private. I'll teach you to access other telepathic strands, but be ready to throw a shit fit as soon as one of these creatures touches you.

That shouldn't take much acting. The Setti repulsed her.

Jarek had found a secluded spot to exit the Shadow realm and they'd easily found the slave market. Like a sports arena or a coliseum, the massive structure dominated everything around it.

Jarek led her through rows of lurid displays and countless cages. Species from all over the galaxy were for sale. Why was this allowed? Did no one have the power to stop the Setti?

"You looking to buy or sell?" Despite his elongated neck and tiny lipless mouth, the hybrid appeared mostly humanoid.

"Maybe neither, maybe both." Jarek tossed his head, sending his golden curls flying. "One of your scouts was at the festival where I bagged this little beauty. I'd love to own the matched set. But if her sister isn't for sale, I might be persuaded to part with this one for the right price."

The hybrid activated a device on his wrist and pointed it toward Jarek. "State your name and dimension of origin."

"I am Sallimun Idan Tork from the planet of Mimossa."

Felise held her breath. What was the hybrid doing? No database in any dimension could identify everyone. A transmitter? Then who was receiving the transmission?

"Bring her. You've been granted an audience."

"An audience with whom?"

"The owner of the other sister."

Felise wanted to shout for joy and she wanted to scream. Adara had been in this hellhole less than a day. Still, that was an eternity in a place like this. Jarek tugged on the chain attached to the collar around her throat. She stumbled. He turned and glared. "You'll be on your knees soon enough. Try and keep up."

The hybrid chortled and stepped beneath a scanner that activated the door to his right. "She's in there."

Jarek didn't ask who she was, but his gaze assessed the room as he entered. He could fight with Shadow Keeper magic, and he'd tucked a pulse pistol into the back of his pants for her. She only had to reach beneath his tunic and grab the weapon if things turned ugly.

"I remember you now." A throaty female voice drew their attention to the woman lying on an odd shaped lounge. Armless, the rolled back propped her in a semi-reclined position, while the divided sections supported her widely spread legs. As Felise's eyes adjusted to the dimness, she realized someone knelt on the floor between the woman's legs. "This is what you were doing to her the last time I saw you."

"I was unaware of your presence or I would have made the display more enjoyable."

"Oh, I enjoyed the display quite well. I was just disappointed when you stopped." She shoved the man away from her crotch and tossed down her skirt. Swinging her legs to the floor, she stood and approached them, a definite swagger marking her stride. "Will you fuck her for me now? I'd love to watch her writhe beneath you."

"Let me tell you a secret." He brushed his knuckles against Felise's cheek. "I've already had her and she's not nearly as passionate as I had hoped. I sat between her and her sister while their brother claimed his bonded mate. It was one of the most erotic exhibitions I've ever seen. I pictured myself with both of them. I can't get that image out of my mind."

She crossed her arms over her breasts and circled them, her expression openly assessing. "How did you know where to find Adara? We were careful to cover our tracks."

"Not careful enough. There was a small piece of her gown in the garden. You're damn lucky I found it before her brothers did. They think Adara's run off with Master Tilden. They won't be fooled for long."

Her eyes narrowed in speculation. She paused for a moment, her gaze moving over Felise. "I can't let you have Adara. I have plans for her, but perhaps we can help each other."

"If you won't give me what I want, why should I help you?"

Slick and sly, he kept a step ahead of her. Felise would have grabbed the hybrid bitch and shook her teeth loose by now. How was Jarek remaining so calm?

"Have you ever shared a woman with another man?"

Jarek wrinkled his nose. "It doesn't appeal to me. I want the sisters together. That's why I came here."

"Fine! If you allow me to use this one to motivate the other, you can have them both for one night. You'll just have to wear protection."

"You're breeding her?"

Felise clenched her fists so tightly her nails drew blood. No! Not Adara. Please let her be safe and unharmed.

"I'm trying. Neither one of them are being particularly cooperative."

"And how will this one help?"

"The male wants to play hero. He wants to protect the female. Adara will want to protect her sister and this one is expendable."

"Not until I've fucked them both!" Jarek crossed his arms over his chest. He didn't spare Felise so much as a glance.

"Be specific. What will you do?"

"I'll bring my breeders in here and explain the situation. Neither one of them will bend to save themselves, but they will sacrifice themselves to save their loved ones. Most peculiar."

"So you'll threaten this one to make her sister cooperate?"

"We'll start with threats. If they refuse to cooperate, I'll let my guards rape that one in progressively more violent ways until Adara convinces the Terran to relent."

Felise had heard enough. They were here to cause a diversion, not get her raped or worse. She tugged against the chain and tried to reach the pistol.

Patience, firebird. We don't have to go find them if she brings them to us. Keep struggling, just don't use the gun.

"She doesn't seem happy with my plan."

"I'm not sure I am either. Will there be enough left of her for me to enjoy after your guards finish with her?"

"I doubt Adara will let it go very far. Besides, this is my only offer."

"Then, let's get started."

Curses and shuffling feet preceded the captives' entrance. A muscular Setti wrestled with the male. Felise tried not to gawk, but he was naked, his blue-black hair whipping around his chest as he struggled with his handler. The handler smacked him on the side of the head and used his momentary daze to force him to his knees. He secured the captive's restrained wrists to his crossed ankles, effectively immobilizing him.

Is this Xenos' son? How can we be sure?

The captive looked right at her and blue light ignited in his gaze. The same blue light that flashed through the room right before Xenos appeared. Had he heard her or guessed her thoughts from the confusion on her face.

Before she could decide, Adara was dragged into the room. Naked, she put up just as much of a fight, thrashing and twisting, shouting obscenities. Her handler took it all in stride.

That's Tilden, or at least that's his body. I think the wraith controls him now.

"Felise. No! Why is she here?" Cef forced Adara to her knees and secured her in the same position as Rhys.

"That's up to you, little princess," Odele began. "You said you'd die before you'd cooperate with me. Well, how about your sister? Will you watch Cef rape her every way a woman can be raped? How many violations will it take for you to be reasonable?"

Blue light flashed through the room with blinding intensity. By the time Felise's eyes cleared, Rhys stood over the broken body of his handler. Xenos surrounded Tilden in a cloud of glittering light. Nyx reinforced the containment, feeding energy to the Guardian.

"Kill him!" Rhys ordered. "You must destroy the body before the wraith escapes."

Jarek hesitated with his hands at his sides. Felise grabbed the pulse pistol and fired at the middle of Tilden's chest. The Death Master crumpled to the floor. Turquoise light flared in his eyes and Felise fired a blast directly at his head.

She turned and found Jarek and Nyx wrestling Odele to the floor. They secured her arms behind her back, then pulled her upright again. Rhys flew across the room and tangled his fingers in her hair. "You vicious, perverted bitch!"

"Don't kill her yet," Xenos cautioned. "We need her to get to Hakon."

The Guardian took on shape, but still radiated blue light.

"It's good to see you, Father. What the hell took you so long?"

Stepping over Tilden's body, Felise knelt behind Adara. Her hands trembled so badly she could barely release the

restraints. As soon as she was free, Adara turned and collapsed into Felise's arms. Felise was afraid to ask if Adara was all right. Whatever she had suffered was over now. They would get through it together.

"He never touched me," Adara whispered. "I still can't believe no one touched me."

"Why was she so bent on breeding us?" Rhys asked.

"Adara is Gibrath's daughter and you are my son. Could there be a more powerful hybrid than your child?" Xenos told him. "Besides, through your progeny, Cef would have had a distant claim to the throne."

"Why is that?" Felise understood the rest, but what connected the wraith to the captives?

"My daughter was forced by the Setti to give birth to three hybrids. Cef was the last. Now she can rest in peace." Xenos glided toward Odele. "We have one task left undone."

Odele laughed. "You'll never get near Hakon."

Xenos transformed into light and sank into Odele's body. Rhys smiled, understanding his father's intentions. "We can't get near Hakon, but you can."

Odele fought, twisting and yelling as Xenos took over. "No! I will not transform." Despite her protest, her body elongated, her face narrowed, and her secondary legs extended. With a final shove, Xenos rendered her unconscious and took complete control. "I'll flash out as soon as I've killed Hakon, and his guards will take care of Odele. You should leave now."

Jarek pulled his shirt off over his head and handed it to Adara. Rhys seemed less concerned with his nudity, but Nyx

offered him a cloak. "Meet us in the Nexus Chamber. We've still some things to sort out."

"I'll be there directly," Xenos assured him. "Don't tarry here." He left the room, locking the door behind him.

Jarek stood over Tilden's body, grief shining in his eyes.

"Should we take him back with us?" Nyx asked.

"No." Jarek shook his head. "All that was Tilden died back on Zylott. This is an empty husk, tainted by a Setti wraith."

"You must incinerate him." Rhys' tone was hushed and respectful. "Wraiths are incredibly hard to kill."

Jarek nodded, but Nyx hesitated. "Are you sure?"

"My friend is dead. Nothing can change that. Do what must be done."

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Chapter Nine

"So this is a Nexus Chamber," Felise said with a smile. They'd been waiting for nearly an hour for Xenos to arrive. "I expected something more grandiose."

Rhys smiled. He'd pulled his long black hair away from his face, revealing the masculine beauty of his features. His sapphire eyes occasionally sparked with incandescent light. He was half Guardian and half Terran, a term Felise hadn't heard before.

"I've heard a lot about you, Lord Rhys," Nyx said. "I wish we had met under better circumstances."

"As do I, and let's dispense with the lord business. Titles are all but obsolete in my dimension."

"Where is your dimension?" Felise asked.

"The Keepers have been there. The planet is called Earth. Most travelers refer to it as dimension 939-3."

"What is taking so long?" Adara rubbed her arms, her gaze darting repeatedly to Rhys.

"Let's find out." Rhys turned to one section of the wall and made an intricate gesture with his hands. The reflective surface rippled and an image formed.

Felise moved closer. Rhys had opened a window into the Setti realm. The room was long and narrow, with an elaborate throne at the far end. A full-blooded Setti sat upon the throne. Its muscular, primary legs braced wide apart, while its secondary legs draped the arms of the throne. Gray-green

skin covered its entire body, but across its torso the membrane was transparent, displaying its internal organs.

"The Setti communicate telepathically." Rhys' deep voice drew her attention away from her revulsion. "I'll transmit their conversation if I can."

Until Odele converts Gibrath's daughter, we have nothing more to discuss. Send her away! As the words erupted in her mind, Felise realized the creature had no mouth.

A guard knelt before the throne, its narrow head lowered nearly to the floor. *She is most insistent, sire. I've already tried to dissuade her.*

Admit her. He made an impatient gesture with one of his gnarled claws. *Then prepare my training room. I've had enough of Odele's demands!*

The guard scurried backward, exiting the room without turning around.

"That creature is the Setti king?" Adara asked.

"The title they use is Supreme Midox, but it is essentially the same." Rhys glanced at Adara, blue light flashing in his eyes. "Is this where Odele took you before she brought you to me?"

Adara nodded, her expression tense. Felise slipped her arm around Adara's shoulders and gave her a little squeeze.

Odele entered a moment later, once again in her Setti form. Her thicker skin and sleeker build revealed her mixed heritage. Felise studied her face, detecting no hint of Xenos.

State your business! Hakon scooted to the edge of his throne. *My patience is wearing thin.*

By decree of the Council of Elders, the Guardians have deemed you unworthy of life! Blue streams of energy burst from both Odele's palms, catching Hakon in the chest. The Setti ruler shrieked. Writhing uncontrollably, Hakon jerked from his throne, tumbled off the dais, and landed on the floor. His twin hearts ceased beating. Life faded from his eyes. With a final burst of blue light, Xenos reduced the corpse to ash.

The Guardian flashed into the Nexus Chamber, looking rather harrowed. "I'm getting too old for this."

Hakon's guards descended on Odele, rending her limb from limb in a repulsive display of brutality. Rhys closed the portal and faced his father. "Do you need energy? That had to be taxing."

"I'm fine. I just need a moment to stabilize."

"What happens now?" Felise asked. The images of the slave market wouldn't leave her mind. "Won't another take Hakon's place?"

"The Setti's one weakness is the fact that they cannot exist anywhere but in their dimension. I'm going to propose to the elders that we seal the Setti realm. I believe I have enough evidence of their atrocities to win the vote this time."

"You've made the proposal before?" The discovery shocked Felise. "Why did the Guardians allow the devastation to continue?"

"When my daughter was captured by the Setti and forced to bear the wraiths, I petitioned the elders to seal the dimension, but they refused. The Guardians like to offer guidance, not impose our will on others. That's why we use the Chosen ones. I contacted Nyx and he helped me uncover

the full extent of their depravity. It no longer looks like a personal vendetta."

"What about the slaves? We can't just leave them there?"

Xenos nodded. "They will be returned to their home dimensions before we seal the Setti realm."

"You can do this? The Guardians have that much power?" It sounded a bit fantastic.

Rhys grinned. "You obviously know little about the Guardians."

"Rhys is my eyes and ears. He is my number one recruiter. He spotted Nyx and convinced me to give him a chance." Paternal pride rang in each word.

Felise looked at Rhys with growing admiration, then confusion knitted her brow. "How did they capture you?"

His handsome face flushed and his gaze darted in the other direction. "That Setti bitch was persuasive in a way I wasn't expecting. I thought she was a Flame Keeper. I realized my mistake too late."

He strolled over to Adara and raised her hand to his lips. "I was impressed by your courage. We're always looking for dynamic members to join the Chosen team."

"I'll keep that in mind."

"I suspect we'll meet again."

She flashed a flirtatious smile.

"Take care of each other," Xenos said to the group at large. "The Setti crisis is ended, but there are threats all over the galaxy that—"

"My mate and I are soon to have our first child," Nyx interrupted with a grin. "I am more than ready for peace and quiet."

Xenos inclined his head. "If you need me, you know how to contact me. I believe you've a festival to attend."

* * * *

Felise and Jarek faced each other on the ceremonial platform, surrounded by the rowdy assembly. The crowd had been disappointed when they learned it was not to be a traditional joining. The same robed cleric guided them through their vows. At the end of the cleric's pronouncement, Jarek pulled Felise into his arms and gave her a long, lingering kiss.

The crowd applauded and cried out for more than a kiss, but Jarek waved them away. Felise tuned out the laughter and catcalls, focused entirely on her heart's Master. Jarek swept her into his arms and carried her from the ballroom. "Can we make love in the palace or do you want to run away again?"

"I want to be where you are." She stroked the side of his face. "That's all that matters to me."

He paused in the corridor and kissed her with all of the tenderness in his heart. "I know this was all rather sudden, but we've the rest of our lives to explore."

She smiled into his eyes and kissed his lips. "I look forward to every day."

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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. Join Aubrey's News group at: groups.yahoo.com/group/Anything-but-Ordinary

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