



Indigo Rain
Phoenix Intelligence Agency
Taige Crenshaw
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Chapter One

Kalina Erutan stood still, imagining herself as part of the landscape. She felt a sense of fading, and then knew it was a reality, she'd been *displaced*.

This case has tested all my skills and I'm so ready for it to be over.

The fugitives she'd been hunting thought they were good – she was better. A fierce smile curved her lips as she heard their quiet footsteps padding toward her. With the intel she'd received, she'd been able to arrive before them.

They passed, barely a hairsbreadth between them. None of them looked at her, even though she stood next to them.

Seventy-seven days of freedom has made them sloppy. Rule number one in combat- Never let your guard down.

Waiting until the last one drew abreast of her, Kalina moved. Stepping behind one of the men, she quickly laid her finger on the pulse in his neck.

"Sleep," she whispered almost soundlessly.

The man slumped and she caught him, pulling him back with her out of sight. The others continued on. Smiling, Kalina laid the man on the ground and bound him with her power. She stood, then silently stalked the rest. One by one she picked them off, laying them down and binding them along the way for the containment teams. Walking slowly, in precise steps, she snuck up behind another man. He stiffened and turned.

Kalina *faded* and watched as he looked around. *Must be careful not to alert them.*

The man shrugged, turned and continued on his way. Following, Kalina watched as the group stood in the clearing. They were talking and she stopped to listen to their conversation.

“Armageddon is upon us,” the man farthest away shouted. The rest cheered.

With a sigh, Kalina shook her head. It was nothing new. People were always trying to end the world or take it over. At least it kept her working. She didn’t need to hear any more. It’d come time to end this.

Stepping forward, she made herself *unseen* and skirted between them, moving into the center. Dropping her *concealment*, Kalina watched the shock at her appearance ripple through the gathering. Counting, she noted there were six escapees.

Already having calculated the way she would take them out, Kalina wasted no time. Flicking out her baton, she aimed for the one on her right, connecting, hitting across the face before she spun and kicked out, taking the one on her left with a back kick. Keeping her leg out, she turned her head and glared at the others. They were still watching her. Then their gaze moved to the now prone men. The remaining men and one woman glanced at each other, then back at her.

As one, they rushed her. Shaking her baton, she thought of her whip and power filled her. Her baton changed to her whip and extended into the air, an extension of her arm. Wrapping the end of the whip around her wrist, she kicked up her other leg and used her power to roll herself into the air above their reach.

She looked down and found them staring up at her. A surge of energy washed over her while the change overtook them.

The woman shifted into a golden falcon. One man changed to a grey-colored wolf and the other into a gold leopard. But it was the last man who caught her attention. He remained in human form, just watching her with a smug grin on his face. Adrenaline overcame the coldness that normally engulfed her when she went on a hunt.

Kalina ignored the intensity of their gazes, all except the man. He hadn't shifted and that, in itself, was telling.

Is he arrogant enough to think he can take me in human form? Or does he believe whatever he is gives him the power of surprise. Foolish man, he has already shown his hand, breaking rule two of combat- Never show your adversary your advantage.

She focused on him, he would be the most dangerous.

Since her orders were to bring them back alive, Kalina knew she could only incapacitate, regardless of her desires. She still couldn't figure out why they had sent her, an AA – Assassin Agent – trained to kill what she went after, rather than an EA – Enforcer Agent. The explanation they'd given had been weak, yet she'd gone because she'd been bored. The boredom had led her to seventy-seven

days of tracking hell. For that alone, she wanted to eliminate each and every one of them. But even though she broke orders when it suited her purpose, this time she would see them through to the letter. It was more a test for herself than caring what anyone else thought.

Uncoiling the whip from around her wrist, she held onto it with one hand, then focused on the golden falcon. She beckoned it to come forward, fingers crooking in a “come here” movement. The bird raised its head and shrieked before flying straight at her. Taking out her blow pipe, she blew a dart and caught the powerful bird between the eyes. The falcon plummeted to the earth and shifted back to human form after colliding with the hard ground.

Spinning back toward the others with a burst of power, Kalina changed her blow pipe to her gun, the cool metal resting in her hand like a comfortable friend, the tranquilizing bullets lending a different balance to the weapon. She sighted down the barrel at the earth shifters as they sprang into the air. She felt the push of power as they flew at her, easily recognizing the man who hadn't shifted amplified their power. Kalina shook her head. He sent them as bait, to test her. She didn't care. She would do her job, then get the fuck out of this hell hole.

In quick succession she pulled the trigger, taking each of them between the eyes. They collapsed, shifting back to human form. Stilling the whip, Kalina stared down at the man below her. He hadn't moved. He stood with his hands

on his hips, legs braced apart. His eyes were lit with lust. Kalina stifled a sigh. It was a typical reaction, one she dealt with a lot.

“Come on down and let me have you, my little Amazonian princess,” he yelled. The stranger’s voice rolled over her like decadent cream.

Kalina arched an eyebrow. She knew there was no way for him to know what she was, or how close to the truth he’d come. Silently, she glared at him and flipped him the bird with her middle finger, making sure he saw the gesture. The man blinked before anger filled his face.

Third rule of combat broken- Never get emotional.

The man bent his knees and shot straight into the sky. He caught the end of the whip dangling below her and began climbing hand over hand. Kalina was surprised he had the balls. Amping her power, she lit the whip with fire, waiting for his scream. The man simply smiled menacingly and kept coming.

Narrowing her eyes, Kalina thought of only two beings who could withstand her fire. Neither of them resided in this realm. The man was almost upon her when she got a look at his eyes through the orange flames. They were burning. Not a reflection of her fire, but from deep within him.

Swearing viciously, Kalina dampened her power and, spinning in the air, flipped to the ground, taking her whip with her. Turning back, she glowered at the man. He stared back, his crimson wings widespread, laughing as his body lit in a red and orange wash of flames. There was a massive shift of power, then from the flames he rose, a majestic and deadly bird. Kalina growled at the sight.

He raised his head, singing his song of death, one she had prayed never to hear again, the tune whispering on the wind.

“Hhhhttttaaeedd...”

Rage blasted through Kalina, crushing every coherent thought.

It must die.

With a fierce burst of power, she flew into the air, meeting him. He flew at her, his claws spread in a deadly arch. Spinning out of the way, she lashed out with her fist, hitting him in the side of the head. It tumbled through the sky across the clearing, hitting a tree. The tree burst into flames. The bird glanced at her, then rose into the air, wings spread. It opened its mouth, breathing fire in her direction. Raising her arms out from her sides, Kalina let it come, let the flames engulf her. Controlling them, she let the fire trail along her body, funneling them to her mouth. Opening her lips, she sucked in the heat and fear flashed in the bird's eyes. She spit it out and the power hit the ground as ice, shattering on impact.

The bird flew at her again, its wings making flames burst among the trees. Raising her sword, Kalina flew up to meet him. She slashed at it and missed, but managed to punch him, hitting mid-body. She infused it with all her strength and felt the give of crumbling muscle and bone on impact.

The bird shrieked and tumbled backward before catching itself before coming back at her in a fierce rush. She waited until he was almost upon her, the anticipation coursing through her. Then seamlessly, Kalina spun out of the way,

materialized her stunner, flicked it higher and pressed it against the bird's temple. Closing her finger on the trigger, she zapped him. The bird wavered, then turned, eyes burning bright and tumbled to the ground.

Kalina spun sideways, then flipped, hitting the ground and straddling the prone bird. It shifted and she focused on the eyes of the man.

"Give me one fucking reason not to kill you, Firebird."

The man watched her, his smile a vicious twist of his lips. "The PIA gives you all a short leash. So take me the fuck back to lockup."

She had a deadly smile of her own. "Wrong type of agent, asshole."

Lashing out, she hit him with two fingers in the middle of his forehead. His eyes rolled back in his head, his head flopping to the side.

Fury bubbling, Kalina slowly stepped away. She wanted to finish it, kill him. Taking another step back, she took a deep breath, trying to control her instinctual need to eliminate Firebird. She glanced around at the area littered with bodies. She had accomplished her mission with minimal damage.

Staring at the trees blackened by fire, Kalina raised her arms and murmured words as old as time. The trees filled out, whole and healthy again.

At the sound of movement, she turned quickly, materializing her dagger. The man had awoken and attempted to get up. Reacting instinctively, she threw the dagger, watching as it hit home, embedding in his chest. He fell back, blood spilling out of his mouth.

Striding over to him, Kalina bent to retrieve her weapon, pulling it free of the corpse. "You should have stayed asleep."

How did he come out of my compulsion spell? It shouldn't have happened.

A gold glint on his wrist caught her attention. She raised the man's sleeve to get a better look at the object. Instinctively Kalina shielded her eyes from the bright light. After a few seconds they adjusted and she lowered her hand, examining the bracelet. Seemingly too delicate for the man's arm, the trinket was made of yellow gold with intricate hieroglyphics etched on the surface in white gold. In its middle sat a flawless topaz stone. Light seemed to fill it. Reaching out, Kalina touched it, jumping back as it heated.

The bracelet shimmered for a moment before disappearing. Swearing softly, Kalina reached out with her senses, searching for the object. Feeling nothing, she swore again. She stood slowly and looked around the clearing again. Something was off, she felt it.

"Why would you all be in the middle of the Amazon?"

Glancing around one last time, Kalina strode back through the foliage. She pulled her com unit off her belt. "PIA Lia confirmed subjects acquired. Request prisoner containment and medical crews, my coordinates. "

"PIA Lia, acknowledged. Report immediately to headquarters," a voice on the com unit replied.

Kalina was surprised. She usually had a week off before reporting.

"Acknowledged. PIA Lia out."

Breaking the connection, she returned the com unit to her belt. She strode behind the foliage, flicked her wrist and brought up her shades. Hearing a soft clink, she looked down, shocked to see the man's bracelet on her wrist. A sense of dread filled her. She hadn't detected the bracelet's presence. Somehow the piece of jewelry had gotten past her shields.

She tugged to remove it, but the thing didn't budge. After a few moments, she realized she couldn't pull it free, even though it appeared to just snap on with a simple closure. Narrowing her eyes, she infused her stare with enough power to break even the strongest metals. The bracelet hummed, then the topaz flared. She felt it suck in her power, yet returning it to her at the same time.

Hearing a noise behind her, Kalina stopped and glanced over her shoulder. The air looked as if it glowed accompanied with a popping sound. The speed of everything around her seemed to increase as she spied the teams she had requested beginning to arrive. Stepping deeper into the foliage, Kalina put her shades on, then *shimmered*.

Returning to form moments later, Kalina regarded the inconspicuous-looking building that was headquarters. The Phoenix Intelligence Agency looked like any of the other corporate buildings that lined the Wall Street area in New York City. No one knew it housed a secret agency sanctioned by the supernatural government. It was only known to a select few of the human race. Not even the President of the United States knew of them. He wasn't in the "need to know" category.

Striding across the sidewalk, Kalina unshielded herself in the throngs of people bustling in the area. No one gave her a second look as they rushed off to their offices. Reaching the glass fronted doors of the building, she noted the sign that read, "Phoenix Attorneys at Law." Her lips quirked as they always did. It was a partial truth. They upheld the law when it suited them. At other times, agents like her handled the dirty work.

Stepping inside, she took in the marble floors and huge reception area. Without acknowledging the receptionist, she strode across the lobby. No one could get past the reception desk without prior approval. Not only was the area warded, the reception desk was manned by various oracle shifter witches. They could evaluate your business at the agency and, if you were human, make you leave without being aware you had entered. If you were a supernatural, they could get rid of you without needing security. They were truly that powerful.

Reaching the elevator, Kalina stepped inside as soon as the doors opened, then pressed "Z." She waved her hand over the panel of buttons, making the elevator bypass all the floors between her and her destination. She ignored the grumbles floating through the walls. Anyone wanting to ride the elevator would just have to wait. She rarely rode with others.

The doors opened and she strode out into the quiet area, the near silence making her itch. She preferred the lower floors where it looked and felt like any other bustling law enforcement agency, where the various supernatural and not-

so-natural beings spewed their hate at you. It was easier to breathe when surrounded by hostility.

Which was why she would never accept the promotion they kept trying to give her. She wasn't cut out for the politics and stuffiness behind the job. Phoenix Intelligence Agency wasn't merely a covert law enforcement agency. It was the agency for the supernatural government, and the place the humans, who knew of them, called when they came upon a criminal, be it human or super, they couldn't handle. They were the ones who were willing to do the dirty work when others balked at getting their hands messy. The defense of all the realms and dimensions was their responsibility.

The Phoenix Intelligence Agency had the most technologically advanced systems. They had many different divisions and areas, were ruthlessly organized and efficient with only the elite as part of the agency. And once you joined, you had to stay on top your game. They often gave surprise evaluations, both physically and psychologically. If you failed, you were stripped of all knowledge of the agency location, what it entailed and any secrets you knew. It was one of the things all agents feared.

Kalina kept her face blank while fear bubbled inside her. She had barely passed the last time she'd been evaluated. They had called her the same way they had today. Since she hadn't had an eval in a while, she should have expected it, but then again, no one ever did.

The itch intensified when one of the suits passed her. They always looked as if their tight collars were choking the life out of them. He returned her gaze, his eyes taking in her outfit, and she resisted shifting as she continued down the hall. Although she balked at wearing a suit, she wished she had thought to at least put on a shirt. *Too late now.* She refused to give them the satisfaction. Her “don’t care” reputation was at stake. They would just have to see her in what she liked to call her “hunting clothes.”

The skintight, deep rich red leather vest she wore was so dark, it almost appeared black. The vest stopped halfway to her navel. From below her breasts to where the vest ended was a metal plate compartment where she stashed extra supplies she couldn’t create with her power. Her matching pants rode low on her hips and curved in the middle, covering midway down her stomach and lower. The bottom half of the tattoo over her navel and the top part of her stomach were bare.

Her mouth went dry at the thought of testing. She knew they would start with a psych eval first, the hardest part for her by far. The Oracle Psychiatric Investigators—OPI—could see anything, everything. It freaked her out when they exchanged their silent looks, which always seemed full of pity. Her hands clenched into fists. They didn’t know crap. There were some things even they couldn’t uncover from her mind.

Kalina knew these surprise evals were for the best. They protected the agent, and the public they had sworn to protect. But she hated it anyway. As part

of the Phoenix Assassination Unit, she didn't doubt her judgment. To do so could cost her life.

Tiredness seeped into her, almost making her stagger. She barely managed to stay on her feet, but Kalina kept walking. She hadn't expended enough power to be this weak. Something had to be wrong. The feeling passed almost immediately, but Kalina frowned, thinking she might have to make a trip down to medical. The thought of being prodded and probed made her heart beat harder. She hated doctors.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw the guard in the shadows. He acknowledged her with a nod before fading, disappearing before her eyes. Kalina kept her face empty of the shock she felt. She hadn't seen a Shadower this close to the agency leaders before. Their presence was unheard of. Shadowers were power-hungry, and could strip any being of its power. They usually tried to take over the world. For him to be this close to the director, they had to trust him.

Shoving open the door at the end of the hall, Kalina strode through the waiting area with only an abrupt nod to Cairo, the receptionist at the outer desk in front of the director's office. She moved purposefully to the closed doors, but they opened before she could saunter in as planned. Without slowing her pace, she walked in and went right up to the desk. Standing relaxed, she silently watched her boss, waited for him to acknowledge her. It didn't take long.

“Why did you kill the Firebird, Kalina?” Christos Shalamr’s gaze remained steady, studying her while she responded to his question.

The bluntness of his inquiry threw Kalina for a moment. Although Christos rarely minced words, he was usually smoother in his inquiries. She tried to figure out the trick in his question.

Relying on the intuition that had saved her often in sticky situations, Kalina shrugged and answered with the truth. “Instinct. He woke up with death on his mind. It was either him or me.”

Christos looked at her, seeming to search for something, then nodded abruptly. He sat back and steeped his lean fingers under his chin.

“Do you know why you were called to my office?” His tone was cool, unemotional.

Matching him, Kalina spoke. “For testing.”

Christos’ eyebrow arched. A smile curved his firm lips. “Do you want to be tested?”

Kalina thought for a second about lying before discarding the idea. “No.”

Christos’ lips twitched. “You’re honest. I like that about you. Have a seat.”

Reluctantly, Kalina did as requested.

“Relax. This will be painless, I promise.”

Kalina watched him with narrowed eyes and pursed her lips. “For you, maybe.”

Christos shook his head. “You’re not going to testing.”

The tension filling her dissipated. She was so relieved she almost missed what else he had to say.

“You’re going out on another case. You and your partner-”

She interrupted him. “I don’t work with a partner.”

“For this you will.”

Steel imbued his tone. Uncaring, Kalina stood and her chair flew across the room.

“Fuck you. I quit.” She spun on her heel, heading for the door.

“Fine. Report to the wipers.”

Kalina stopped, stiffening. The wipers would take all her knowledge of the agency. Closing her eyes, she clenched her fists and gritted her teeth. As a threat, it was a powerful one. The agency had become her home, and she could not return to her past. Swallowing, she turned, staring at him. He appeared unruffled by the idea of losing her.

In a seemingly boneless motion, Christos stood, then strolled around the desk. Kalina watched him guardedly. His movements looked like those of a shifter, but she knew better. He hadn’t called his power, although he had every right to. Christos stopped in front of her and cupped her face gently.

“Kalina, why must everything be so difficult with you?” His voice was silky, smooth.

Jerking away, Kalina put some distance between them. She couldn’t handle his touch. It was too tender, reminding her too much of what she had lost.

Christos sighed and leaned against the closed door. "It's okay to care. He w—"

She cut him off. "Leave it alone."

Her harsh voice cut through the room. Closing her eyes, she fought to hold back the pain. Ruthlessly, she squashed it down. Opening her eyes, she looked at him, calm once again.

Christos' soft look of understanding almost undid her. "I'm here if you need to talk."

Kalina reached out and touched his arm, a bare whisper of skin on skin. "I know, but I can't."

Christos nodded, his face blank as he returned to business. "Sit."

She went back to her seat as he returned to his. He sat down and briefed her. Absently, she listened as he told her which research teams were assigned to the case. Watching Christos' handsome face, she wished things could be different. With a shake of her head she brought her attention back to him.

"Report at oh-eight-hundred to conference room thirteen."

Kalina rose, clenching and unclenching her fist. "Who is my partner, and who are we looking for?"

Christos looked at her, a closed expression on his face. "You will be advised in the morning."

Kalina had an uneasy feeling in her stomach, but said nothing. From the look on his face, she knew he would say no more. He came around the desk and

motioned her to the door. She turned, his hand settling on her waist as he escorted her.

He reached for the door, then stopped, bringing his arms to rest on her shoulders instead, his intense gaze on her face.

“Shielas, I love you and I want what’s best for you. Remember that.”

Christos leaned in and kissed her on the cheek.

Kalina felt tears well in her eyes as he spoke in her language. Her voice was thick as she replied. “Brother, I know you do, even though I don’t always show it.”

She kissed him lightly on the cheek. Christos smiled and she saw a flash of fang. Christos was an ancient Silan Guardian from a fierce vampire warrior society, and the most feared of his kind. Although he rarely played the political games expected of him as the leader of the agency, he ruled it all with an iron fist. He showed no weakness, kept to himself and called only a few friends. Christos had no blood relatives that she knew of. Him calling her sister was due to their personal history. It was a private thing between them, and he showed none of his feelings for her in public.

He leaned over and opened the door, his usual detached look once again on his face. Kalina nodded and strode out. Walking back past the reception area, she *shimmered* and was gone.

Watching her go, Christos hoped it would all work out as it should. Closing his door, he looked back into the empty room. "This should have been done long ago."

"You know the reasons it was not," a husky voice answered from behind the desk.

Christos watched as the woman detach from the shadows by the wall. "It was a stupid reason then and now. This had better not be one of your plots. If anything happens to Kalina, you will answer to me."

The woman looked at him, her golden gaze flashing. "I don't take threats or orders, Christos."

Christos streaked to her, hand closing around her throat.

He felt her pulse flutter wildly against his fingers as he stared into her eyes. "You need someone to order you around." His voice had gone soft, deadly.

The woman looked at him, hunger in her gaze before her eyes went cool. "Better men than you have tried and failed."

"Give me a chance and see," Christos purred against the side of her face, nuzzling her cheek.

She shuddered, then disappeared. He turned to see her standing across the room. He could have easily bridged the distance, but let her have the space.

She raised a hand that shook. "You have to stop this. Yo—" She cut herself off, looking stricken. Christos felt bitterness well inside him. It was useless. She would not see past it.

Turning his back on her, he bit out one word. "Go."

He felt her gaze on him. Steeling himself, he glanced over his shoulder, regret shone on her face. He smiled a mirthless grin. Too bad it wasn't for the right reasons.

"Go, now. Remember, if anything happens to Kalina, you will answer to me." The threat rang clear in the room.

The woman nodded in acknowledgement as she stepped into the shadows by the door and disappeared. Christos stared back at the door Kalina had left through and prayed he had made the right decision, for all their sakes.

Going to his desk, he sat, waved his hand and the wall closest to it opened. The panel slid back soundlessly, revealing the computer that ran from floor to ceiling. No one knew of his own system he used for his special projects. Pulling back his long hair, he pinned it up and out of his way.

Waving his hand on the desktop, he brought up his keyboard. He would not use the voice function for this. He would let his fingers do the walking. Silently, he got to work, typing quickly. Before the end of the day, he would have enough information to give Kalina all the headway she would need.

* * *

Striding down the hall, Kalina raised her hand and pulled back the sleeve of her rust-colored jacket.

Why won't the bracelet come off? I've tried everything. Thank god Christos hadn't noticed it yesterday and asked about it. I don't know what I could have said.

Covering it again with her sleeve, Kalina looked at the closed conference room door. She knew she was early. She had planned it that way.

I need a seat with no one at my back. Opening the door, she stepped inside, then stopped, realizing she was not alone.

With a turn to her right, she locked gazes with a pair of light indigo eyes. She stared at the man they belonged to, quickly registering his tanned skin and masterful features—a broad forehead, sharp cheekbones offset by an aristocratic nose and firm lips leading to a rounded chin. Even from across the room, she saw he stood much taller than she, which, given her height of six-foot-one, was rare. Where people usually thought of her hair as black, she knew it actually had auburn highlights. Next to his inky black hair people wouldn't make that mistake. He had it contained in a braid that rested on his broad shoulder and flowed down his ice blue shirt. His lean body relaxed casually against the wall. She knew his pose was intentionally deceptive. He had taken in everything in the room.

Kalina returned his gaze. His eyes were such a pale blue—violet color that they seemed almost translucent. Her heart raced, although it wasn't his eyes that caught her. No, it was the look of cool calculation in his stare. Struggling to breathe, she heard someone come up behind her. With a slight turn, she saw who came toward her while still keeping an eye on him, Kalina flicked her hand, materializing her baton.

Seeing Christos' closed face, she said coldly, "I'm not working with him."

“Why not? I’ve never even met you.” His smooth, sweet baritone tickled her senses.

Kalina gave the man resting on the wall her whole attention. “Because you’re a fucking Firebird.”

Chapter Two

“You’re a fucking Amazonian Warrior. I should be the one who doesn’t want to work with you.” He shrugged. “And I don’t have a problem with it.”

Kalina stiffened at the insult. Narrowing her eyes, she saw his lips quirk in response. Tightening her grip on her baton, she thought of throwing it. Marking the place where she wanted to plant it, Kalina stilled herself, trying to calm down. The man, seeing her intent, smirked and her hand moved before her brain registered the motion. She flung the baton with all her power. The man never changed expression as his hand flashed out and caught it with apparent ease. He looked at the baton, then back at her.

“Kalina!” Christos hissed.

Refusing to look at him, she kept her gaze on the man.

“Leave us.” He ordered without looking at Christos.

With surprise, she heard Christos back out and leave without a word. She’d never known the director to defer to anyone. She stood silently as he flowed in the boneless motion only shifters possessed. He came to stand right in front of her, and Kalina refused to look away from his calm gaze.

“Do you know who I am?” His voice was almost a purr.

Kalina stiffened, saying nothing. She knew who he was, although she had gone out of her way to not get anywhere near him. The man's hand shot out, gripping her chin before she could move.

He remained focused on her, a slight smile on his face. "Say my name, Kalina."

Refusing, she watched as his indigo eyes lit with flames. "Ah, a stubborn one. I like stubborn women."

Jerking away, Kalina glared at him in contempt. "No one said Ryne Garon thought with his cock."

The man chuckled. "So, you do know my name." He leaned into her. "I don't think with my cock. If I did, I would have you across the table with my dick buried deep inside of you by now. So deep your nails would make me bloody." He shrugged his shoulders. "Then again, I just might do that."

Kalina stilled the shudder of lust that filled her.

I won't let myself be taken in by him. It didn't matter if he turns me on just by being near him.

Shame filled her for even wanting him despite him being a Firebird. Pulling in her emotions, she blanked her face, watching him. Ryne watched her, expectation on his face.

"They say since I left Phoenix Assassination Unit, you're considered the best."

“I would have been the best even if you had stayed.” She could have kicked herself for her wayward tongue.

Ryne laughed, a sensuous sound that pulled at her. “I see what they said about you not being humble was also true.”

Ryne circled her, and it took all of Kalina’s power to not follow his movement. She didn’t allow anyone at her back. Ever. Only the sense that she’d already made a fool of herself kept her motionless. She was an Assassination Agent and would act like one. She was an Amazonian Warrior and would not show any weakness. Her people were feared, respected and revered for a reason. They predated the first inhabitants of Earth, Adam and Eve.

Standing still, she waited to see what he would do. Ryne might not work for the Assassination Unit anymore, but he was still a legend. She had heard what he could do. If it wasn’t for what he was, she would have made it her business to meet him. Although it was galling to admit, he was also one of her bosses. She had to show him respect. He had left the Assassination Unit to become the head of the Tracker Unit. Even there, he was whispered about as a legend.

“I’ve wanted to meet you for a long time, Kalina – the woman who has everyone talking of her prowess in battle.” He went silent then, and she couldn’t tell where he was.

His arms wrapped around her from behind. Instinct took over and Kalina flowed backward until they hit the wall. Spinning in his hold, she raised her

dagger and held it to his throat. Although she knew it would get her a reprimand, she nicked him, a tiny droplet of blood welling where metal met skin.

“Stay away from my back,” Kalina growled.

Ryne stared down at her, his eyes fathomless. “I heard you had a thing about no one at your back.” His voice went soft. “I expected better of you.”

Kalina watched him, wary. He had gone soft. The Ryne Garon she had heard of would never have let himself be taken so easily.

“I’m the one holding the knife.”

He smiled, his expression cold. His hand came up and flowed over hers in a movement too fast for the eyes. Between one heartbeat and the next, he held her dagger before he punched out with one hand, hitting her mid-chest. Kalina flew across the table and into the wall, back cracking the drywall. He streaked past her, his hand stopping her head from slamming against the surface. Ryne crowded her, molding his muscular body to hers. Turning her face away, Kalina felt fury bubbling, but held it back.

“You broke rule number four, Kalina. Never underestimate your opponent,” Ryne purred against the side of her face.

Kalina shuddered in response. He was right. He’d written them, after all. Turning to face him, she locked gazes with his indigo one and saw the flames flashing there.

“You broke your own rule.”

Shifting, she twirled her hand and punched out with all her might. He skidded back, tumbling across the table to the other side. He landed on his feet.

Ryne stared at her, assessing her, before nodding. "You will do, Kalina. Before we start, you will tell me why you hate Firebirds."

"You killed my brother and sister." She fought to let nothing of what she felt reflect in her voice.

Ryne watched her, his hand causally in his pocket. "I didn't know your siblings, so it wasn't me. Remember the Assassin Golden Rule. Place blame with whom it belongs." He was silent for a moment before he continued. "There were two more of you. Amazing. I would have liked to have met your siblings, Kalina Erutan."

Kalina looked at him, suspicious. "Why?"

Ryne's turned devilish. "One of you would have been enough, but triplets – you must have been formidable together."

His mentioning they were triplets, which she hadn't told him, didn't register with Kalina right away. She was too absorbed in the pain of her loss and the knowledge that he was right. They had been a formidable trio. Now there was no one she trusted to fight beside her and at her back.

I should be dead beside them, Kalina's mind screamed. Shutting it down, she refused to explore the thought, the memories.

Ryne's expression went somber. "If you are unable to put aside your feelings about my kind, then we can assign someone else."

He was giving her an out, but she couldn't take it. Pride would not let her. Raising her chin, she returned his gaze, saying nothing. He acknowledged her with a graceful motion of his hand, beckoning her to take a seat. Watching him, Kalina walked to the chair at the farthest end of the room, where no one would be behind her back. Ryne walked over and sat next to her, angling his chair so no one could get behind him either.

His smile was grim. "I do not like anyone at my back."

Kalina nodded, looking up as Christos opened the door and stepped inside.

Standing, Kalina began her apologies. "I'm sorry for my insubordination. I—"

Christos cut her off. "*Shielas*, please. I'm sure it was a shock, and you and Ryne seem to have come to an understanding."

Surprised, Kalina stared open-mouthed at Christos, wondering if he realized he had slipped and called her sister.

"It wasn't a mistake. I know of your relationship with Christos," Ryne interjected, drawing her attention.

Looking back at him, she raised her eyebrow in question. He shrugged, a graceful motion that made his shirt ripple over his broad shoulders. "Yes, I can read your mind."

Usually able to block anyone from her mind, Kalina frowned, not liking his invasion at all.

Ryne looked at her, then reached up slowly and touched her temple with a gentle brush of fingers. Kalina watched his indigo gaze while his eyes swirled with silver light before going still.

“Now I can’t, unless you want me to.”

Kalina nodded then turned her attention back to Christos. “Are you ready to tell me why I am paired with ‘The Ghost’?”

Ryne chuckled. “I am no longer that, but this is a sensitive matter, Kalina.”

She looked at him, then back at Christos. The uneasy feeling she’d had since yesterday filled her again. Christos observed her silently.

“Tell me, Christos.”

His expression was filled with regret, eating at her. “*The Book of Terra* has been taken.”

She stilled the shudder and pain that threatened.

He continued. “No one was injured.”

She saw the truth of his statement in his gaze.

“But you know what this means.”

Kalina nodded. “The men yesterday said Armageddon was coming. They were right.”

Ryne spoke next. “You don’t know the half of it. *The Book of Terra* tells of the location of Eve.”

Kalina glanced at him, confused. “Eve? As in Adam and Eve?”

He nodded.

“Why would that matter?”

Christos and Ryne exchanged a look, causing her bad feelings to increase.

Ryne turned to her. “What I am about to tell you is not known outside of this room, or within the Firebirds. Eve was the Firebird. “

“Eve was a Firebird? Hmm...that explains a few things in history, but what does it matter?”

Ryne sat forward, urgency evident in his body. “No, Kalina. You misunderstand. She was *the* Firebird. The first of our kind. She was the first phoenix to rise from the ashes and be born anew. She has been asleep for over seven million years. None of us has been alive that long. We don’t know what she’ll do if she’s disturbed. She went to sleep for a reason now lost to us. If she is awakened, she will be weak, defenseless, and if any being reaches her first and takes control of her, she’ll rain fire on the world, heralding Armageddon. “

Kalina watched them both, her mind racing. *The Book of Terra* being taken was bad enough, but with Eve being a Firebird and her heralding Armageddon, the situation went from bad to dire.

“There’s more. Tell me,” Kalina demanded, pushing back a curl of hair that had come loose. Ryne’s hand flashed out and caught her arm, pushing back her sleeve.

“Where did you get this?” Ryne’s voice was urgent, almost worried.

Kalina glanced at the bracelet, then back at him. “One of the men yesterday wore it.”

His hand tightened. "Describe him to me."

Kalina gave him the description, tugging it from her memory. "He was a Firebird. Tall, sun-kissed features, hawkish nose, firm lips and ice blue eyes. "

"Valenz!" Ryne hissed. He stared at the bracelet once more.

He and Christos looked at one another.

"If you both don't stop exchanging those looks and just tell me, I'll lose my temper." Her words held a definitive warning.

"You mean you haven't already?" Ryne feigned shock.

Kalina stifled a laugh. "Tell me."

He looked at the bracelet again, seeming to study it, then back into her eyes. "You wear the *Star of Eve*. We don't have to go looking for Eve. If she gets free, she'll come to claim this."

Kalina smiled at the thought. "I don't have a problem with facing her."

Ryne looked at her. "She is not a regular Firebird you can kill. Eve is tied to humanity itself. If she suffers, so will humanity. Unless we can break her tie to it, if we kill her, humankind dies with her."

She watched him in horror before calmness overcame her. "How can we break her bond to the human race and kill her?"

Ryne's smile was grim. "The answer is in *The Book of Terra*."

Kalina nodded, and turned her attention to Christos. "What intel do you have?"

Ryne watched as Kalina listened attentively to Christos. He usually knew more about anyone he worked with, yet she was a mystery. Even with his close friendship to Christos, all he would admit to him was she was like a sister to him. Ryne was glad he knew that, because it would have pained him to walk away from her. He sat back and studied her.

In all the stories I've heard of her, why has no one mentioned her beauty? When he had been waiting for the others to arrive, he'd never expected the door to open and his destiny to walk into his life.

Turning slightly, he breathed in her scent of cinnamon and caramel. Only his rigid control stopped him from zapping Christos from the room, barring the doors, then lying her down on the table and fucking her blind. For one so young to have the reputation she had in the Assassination Unit was impressive. From her file, which had been stripped of any photos as all the Assassination Unit ones were, he had seen himself in his prime days as an Agent. He knew the road she traveled. Taking all those suicide missions. Kalina had a death wish, and if she wasn't careful, Death would grant her request.

Ryne felt her energy pressing at him, tantalizing and teasing his own. His cock hardened even more and the primal urge he felt increased. Pulling in the coldness he had become known for in battle, he tempered the desire. He looked away and met Christos' gaze. He nodded his head in acknowledgment of his look of speculation and warning before he gave Christos a fierce grin that said

butt out. Christos raised an eyebrow, still talking with Kalina. Ryne found his gaze drawn to her once again.

With one look, his control was shot to hell. Kalina's rich, honey-toned skin glowed, while her amber gaze had a faint look that said she knew the effect she had on him. He figured she wouldn't acknowledge the instant chemistry they had. It wasn't only about him being a Firebird. She would show no weakness. An Amazonian Warrior never did. Kalina smiled, a twist of her lush mouth, and his watered with the need to bite her lip. She shifted, causing the burnt orange low-cut suit jacket she wore to hug her full breasts even more.

Kalina crossed her long legs, making the short matching skirt that stopped just around the tops of her thighs rise dangerously, revealing more to his gaze. Her long, black boots covered from above her knee down only drew more attention to the expanse of leg she showed. She raised a hand and, in an impatient gesture, pushed her braided, dark reddish-brown hair over her shoulder. From the length he had seen, he knew that as it came forward, it would reach to where he wanted to bury his cock.

Christos spoke, drawing his attention. "Ryne will fill you in on anything else you need to know."

Christos stood, throwing him a look, another warning, and Ryne smiled right back at him. Christos turned and left, closing the door behind him. Returning his attention to Kalina, Ryne saw she watched him, an answering flare of lust in her eyes. Leaning closer, he put his hand on her bare thigh.

Her pulse in her throat fluttered in reaction while her heart rate increased. Watching her under hooded eyes, he slid his hand up her leg, stopping at the hem of her skirt. He waited to see what she would do. Kalina smiled, a sensuous grin, then leaned into him.

His cock hardened. Her scent of cinnamon and caramel filled his senses. Kalina leaned close enough to almost kiss him. She dropped her focus, raking his body and Ryne felt her eyes like a physical touch. When she raised her attention again, they were burning with hunger.

“Why don’t we get this over with?” Kalina’s whispered words tickled his lips.

His cock throbbed in anticipation. Smoothing his hand farther up her leg, he felt the edge of her lace-topped panty hose then the garter. Ryne shuddered as his finger touched the silk. Kalina’s heart rate increased and she licked her lips. He leaned over to kiss her.

Chapter Three

The cold touch of steel between his legs stilled him.

Kalina smiled, a nasty grin. "Move it or lose it. I may have to work with you, but I still don't have to like it."

Cautiously, he lifted his hand off her thigh and sat back. Kalina leaned forward, keeping her dagger pressed against his still hard cock. He could have disarmed her, but chose to wait and see what she would do. Kalina stood slowly, her blade steady and sure against him. She leaned down until her lips almost touched his.

"You are a handsome man, Ryne Garon. Then again, I've been with handsome men. That won't get you into my bed. It takes a lot more than a pretty face." Kalina's voice was whisper soft, almost against his lips.

Then she was across the room, walking to the door. He hadn't seen her go. He enjoyed the movement of her ass in her skirt, a sensuous rhythm that had him mesmerized. It made his body feel...

Hot.

Achy.

Horny as hell.

Ryne stared as she reached the door and glanced back at him.

“Are you coming, or are you going to stay there watching my ass all day?”

She opened the door before striding out.

Biting back a laugh, he stood and followed her. Reaching the hall, he found her leaning against the wall, waiting for him.

Going right up to her, Ryne got in her face. “Don’t pull a weapon on me again unless you plan to use it,” he growled.

Kalina met his look. “When I pull a weapon, I always mean to use it.”

Looking down, Ryne saw a K carved in his pants. Glancing up, he saw her lips twitch. Not saying anything, he waved his hand over his slacks and changed his clothing to his hunting clothes. The leather touched his skin and he felt the blades he had hidden throughout his outfit. He saw her take in his clothing, his tighter, high-collared sleeveless shirt and skintight pants.

As she watched him her clothing changed. She was dressed similar to him, except she wore a vest with a metal plate that left her navel and stomach bare. Her slacks were low cut. Raising his hand, he ran his finger over her navel tattoo. Kalina shivered. He caught her hand before she pulled another knife. Taking the other one she’d flashed up to hit him with, he pulled her into his body, then faded. After bringing them to the first location they would search on their quest for the book—a clearing surrounded by marsh—Ryne let Kalina jerk away.

“I’m going to bloody you if you touch me again.” Her voice held a promise.

Smiling, he purred. "Only if it is in pleasure."

Kalina's amber gaze narrowed. "You're not as I expected."

"What did you expect?" He was curious.

"Someone cold, contained and professional."

Ryne smiled. *She has no idea how out of character I'm acting and loving every minute.*

He took a step closer. Then stilling, he grabbed her, materialized his dagger and threw it into the shadows of the marsh. A roar shook the clearing, then the shield dropped to reveal who had arrived to confront them. A coldness filled Ryne at their visitors. Moving away from Kalina, he saw she watched them too.

"Shadowers!" Kalina hissed.

Ryne corrected her. "No. Xiruis, the evil side of the Shadowers."

Kalina didn't ask any questions, although he saw them in her eyes. It was an easy mistake to make. Not many beings realized the Shadowers were actually protectors, while the Xiruis were their power-hungry counterpart.

The Xiruis moved in, flaring their power, trying to siphon energy from Ryne and Kalina. Summoning reserves of his own power, he turned their attack against them quickly followed by their roars of protest. The beings brought up their swords, and before Ryne could move forward, he heard a sound that gave him chills.

“Ailllellelell Detetetethhh Crulliie!” Kalina’s war cry rent the air as she flew straight up and across the clearing into the center of them.

The whole section closest to where she landed fell and he knew they were dead. She slashed, spun, kicked and twirled. She was deadly accurate, never missing as she cut a path through the hoard. Snapping back to attention, Ryne brought his own sword forward from the scabbard attached to his back.

Spinning, he took out the Shadows behind him. Battling them, he spun again, catching sight of Kalina as she whirled into the air, spiraling, slashing her sword, taking out more of them. Swinging back, he killed several. But seeing even more of them flooding the clearing, Ryne realized they had been tricked and led into an ambush.

That could mean only one thing – someone in the agency was a mole. No one but he, Kalina and Christos were to know where they were searching. Looking at the Bayou of New Orleans, he slashed at the Xiruis. Feeling his sword sink home, Ryne sent a telepathic message to Christos. Then spinning, he slashed his sword, taking out more of the enemy.

Do you need help? Christos’ voice sounded in his head.

Nah. I’ve got it. Ryne replied, taking out another.

Opening his lips, he spewed fire, incinerating a path through the Xiruis. Knowing they had a chance to get them all in one shot, Ryne ran for Kalina. She flipped into the air, coming down on the back of a Xiruis. She brandished her sword, then flipped off. She turned, hearing him coming. Her eyes widened and

he smiled. He knew what she saw. When he was an Assassination Agent, he had worked alone. Other agents and criminals called him “The Ghost”, because they never saw him coming. They didn’t know the truth.

Sweeping Kalina into his arms, he whipped her body around his. She kicked out with her legs, knocking back the Xiruis. He kept spinning her until she stood in front of him.

He whispered, “Hold on and don’t let go no matter what.”

He felt her hands clench around his waist a second before he went ghost. Raising his hands, he screamed as he felt his body separate. Through a film of indigo, he watched as the Xiruis screeched and tried to flee. Closing his fists, he caught them, slamming them down to the ground, pinning them. Ryne roared as the power swelled in him.

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Kalina held onto him, trying to understand what she saw. She had watched him fighting fiercely and – although he had cut a path through the enemy – she knew they were outnumbered. For her, retreat was not an option.

When he had run up to her, he’d been translucent. Now, as she held onto him, she felt something besides his power filling the clearing. Out of the corner of her eye, she could almost make out something, but it shifted out of her view before she could focus. She tried to look, but when she did, something held her head immobile. After a few moments, the sounds of the Xiruis screaming faded and an eerie silence enveloped them.

Ryne stumbled. Kalina held him up or he would have fallen. Staring at his wan face, she realized he was incredibly weak.

“Christ, I remember why I don’t go ghost often. It hurts like hell.” His words were slurred.

Ryne’s eyes rolled back in his head and he pitched forward. Kalina grunted as his weight fell on her. Using her power, she held him up before gently lowering him to the ground.

“Ryne, don’t you die on me!” Kalina was frantic, worried.

I didn’t know you cared. His tired voice flittered in her mind.

Kalina felt the vise around her heart ease at the teasing in his tone. She slapped him on his chest. “Stop lying down on the job and get up.”

Oh sweetie, I wish I could. I need a place to rest to rebuild my strength.

“Where do you want me to take you?”

Home. His voice sounded even more strained, thin.

Frustration bubbling, Kalina glared at his still form. “I don’t know where you live.”

Pull the image from my mind and take me there.

Laying her hand on his chest, she did as he asked. She felt the sense of moving through places . Then, looking around, she saw she was in a beautifully decorated bedroom. It was plush, decadent and massive. Her eyes lit on the humongous bed covered with indigo and green pillows and bedding. The room

was an oasis. Looking down at Ryne, she sighed. Using her power, he floated him to the bed.

Kalina debated whether she should strip him, but before she could decide, an indigo film covered him, leaving he was bare. Gasping, she turned away, closed her eyes, bit her fist and shuddered. She had gotten a good look. The man was hard, lean and built everywhere.

If only I had the energy. His voice brushed wickedly in her mind.

Startled, she turned back and waved her hand, covering his luscious body.

Spoilsport. I'm sure you're wondering how I knew you looked. Your arousal increased. It's smoky and sweet.

Kalina frowned.

Ryne continued to speak in her mind. *You can go. I'll be okay. I just need to rest.* His voice faded.

She looked at him and knew he was asleep. Watching him, she wanted to go, but couldn't leave him defenseless. Looking around, she spotted a chair. Bringing it to her, Kalina sat and leaned back, watching over him. He had saved her life. There was no way she could have taken out all those Xiruis. It was humbling to be in anyone's debt.

Kalina slumped in the chair, but jerked from her sleep as she felt herself moving. She gasped as she floated through the air to the bed, then rested against him.

If you're going to be a guardian over me, no reason for you not to be comfortable.

Ryne's voice sounded tired but teasing.

Stiffening, she struggled to rise.

His voice growled in her mind. *Lay the fuck down, Kalina, before I bind you down, expending energy that would help me reenergize quicker. I'm too weak to attack you. God, woman, you're a pain in the ass.*

Poking him in the chest, Kalina growled in return. "I don't like orders."

Ah, hell. Do what the fuck you want.

She could almost imagine him throwing up his hands in frustration. He sounded so disgruntled, Kalina stifled a grin.

Settling against him, she warned, "I'm still armed."

Ryne snorted. *Like I want you.*

Reaching down, Kalina cupped his hard shaft. His heart rate sped up as his cock lengthened under her hand.

Taking her hand away, Kalina replied, "Yeah, you do, but it isn't happening until I say so."

Ryne laughed. *Now it's when instead of never. I'm making progress.*

Kalina stopped, startled to realize what she'd said. She looked at his face, then laid her head over his heart, listening to its steady rhythm, the beat lulling her to sleep.

* * *

Kalina woke hot and achy. Murmuring, she sank deeper into the covers only to stiffen at the hard body under hers. Opening her eyes, she was met with a bare tanned chest. Raising her head slowly, she prayed Ryne was still asleep. Heated indigo eyes met hers, and a sinful grin curved his lips. In that moment, Kalina realized where her hand had settled. Slowly, she tried to withdraw.

“You’re going the wrong direction. It’s little lower.” Ryne’s tone was teasing, but she heard his challenge.

Watching his eyes, Kalina stroked her hand firmly down his cock. It was hot, silken steel against her fingers. His eyes went opaque, then unfocused and his breath hissed out from between clenched teeth. Holding him, she felt him swell even more.

Ryne looked back at her, a dare in his gaze. “Be sure this is what you want. I don’t do casual sex.”

She stared at him, mouth agape. “You’re turning me down?”

He smiled a mirthless grin. “No, I’m demanding it all.”

“We’ve only known each other a day.”

Ryne placed his hand over her heart. “Your soul recognized mine from our first meeting. We know each other in here, where it counts.”

Kalina felt her heart thump in response. Ryne looked at her and gently removed her hand from his cock. He kissed her nose, then moved her off him and slid from the bed. She watched his firm ass as he walked away.

Narrowing her eyes, she waved her hand. He disappeared only to end up right where she wanted him. Rolling over, she brought him back under her, straddling him.

“I don’t like people walking away from me.” She put her finger over his lips when he opened his mouth to speak. “Shh... I only do casual. And I only do it because it’s all I could afford to let myself give.”

Ryne gently kissed her finger before pulling it off his lips. He held her hand and twined his fingers with hers.

“You have to make a choice. Accept what you feel and what I am, or walk away.”

“Why must it be all or nothing with you?” Frustration filled her.

“That’s all it can be. We can finish this case together, then walk away. Or we can see where this leads. Firebirds only mate for life. I’d rather not have you than have to live without you.”

Kalina’s heart stalled before speeding up. “Mate? This is only about sex. No one said anything about mating.”

Ryne’s look of understanding made tears well in her eyes, emotion clogging her throat. He reached up and stroked her cheek. “Ahh...Kalina, you can try to lie with your head, but in here, you know the truth.” He laid his hand over her heart.

She felt his heart speed up to match hers. Slowing down her heartbeat, she felt his slow also. Realization dawned, unveiling what she already knew with her soul.

“I don’t know if I can give you what you need.”

His smile was bittersweet. “Then let me go.”

Kalina’s heart clenched at the thought. Ryne watched her, a calm expression on his face, and she felt something fill her. It warmed her inside and flowed outward. Laying her hand over his heart, she felt it beating against her palm. Instinct drove her to speak in the tongue of her people.

“Ju Illioes brimye L usrne crilos yile polin spirieeh un illioes. Li eien crnu L eiem eney enxy fudy dkeoel sikdk fik ejleoe. Sjkil sksk djjh dudidkdnn zi sui juemmee.”

Ryne looked at her and repeated them. “My soul mate, I join with you body, soul and spirit. In your care, I place all of these for now and evermore. Life, blood and fire, we are bound.”

Kalina felt an expectation in the air, then something inside her shifted and settled.

“I’m not easy to live with,” Kalina warned, looking down at him.

Ryne smiled. “Nether am I.”

She laughed, leaned in and kissed him. Placing her mouth on his, she tasted him for the first time. His lips were soft under hers. Licking along the line of them, she delved inside, stroking her tongue against his, laying her body

against his hardness. Kalina gasped as his cock settled between her thighs, resting against her aching wetness.

Ryne purred, making her tongue vibrate and her pussy clench in reaction. Groaning, she sank her hands into his hair, feeling the bindings that held it give. Gripping the strands, she held him still, eating at his mouth. A fire filled her, making her skin burn. Sliding her hands deeper into his hair, she brought her body even closer to his. Swirling her tongue, she bit down gently and he jumped. Stroking it, she hummed, then mated her tongue with his slowly. A weird sensation filled her mouth. Murmuring, Kalina sucked on his harder.

Liquid heat burst across her tongue, scorching her. Kalina gasped in shock. A shudder started from within her soul, spreading outward until her whole body shook. Fire burst over her tongue, scorching down her throat, bursting under the force of her moan. The taste of heat coated her tongue, decadent, sexy and sizzling. Still gripping his hair, she closed her eyes and ravished his lips. Ryne's growl set off another flood of heat.

Opening her eyes, she stared at Ryne, drunk on his kiss. There were flames in his eyes, fire matching her own. Raising herself slightly, she engulfed his cock with her heat and sank back onto him with a slow, deliberate motion.

Ryne's neck bowed as he groaned. Clenching her pussy around his hard shaft, she sucked him in, feeling him scrape her walls. Her wetness made his way easier, but still he stretched her to overflowing. Dropping her head back, Kalina pushed down and down until all of him was inside her.

She moaned at the feel of it, of Ryne's hands cupping her ass, pulling and holding her against his hard cock.

Kalina! Ryne's voice in her head was urgent.

A fierce smile curled her lips at the sound. Looking him in the eyes, she rocked forward again. A groan ripped from inside him as her pussy undulated around his cock. The sound broke her control. Kalina rocked back and forward in a quick motion, riding him hard and fast. Ryne's fingers tightened on her ass, jerking her forward and back, urging her on.

Dropping her face to his, she kissed him. His lips sealed over hers and his arms locked around her, pinning her tight against him. At each up and down stroke of her body, she felt his muscular form rubbing against her, reveled in the friction. The rubbing created a heat that shot through her right to her clit. The feel of his body against hers and the scrape of his cock as it buried deep in her pussy became overwhelming.

Ryne murmured, bucking his hips, then undulated them in a motion that made the breath stall in her lungs. The movement touched all her hidden places, setting off a firestorm. He increased his motion, hands clamped fiercely on her ass, pushing her down on his cock, making her gasp.

"Ummmm. Yess...PPpllle—" She screamed soundlessly as his cock seemed to heat inside her.

Slamming her eyes closed, she gripped his sweat-soaked shoulders and felt her nails dig into his skin as her orgasm overtook her. Pleasure swelled,

knocking her over the edge with the ferocity of a five-alarm blaze. The air rushed out of her lungs. The sweet, sharp pain of it held her in its greedy clutches.

Arching her hips forward sharply, she felt all of him. The knot inside her burst under the pressure of her orgasm.

“Kalina!”

Opening her eyes at the urgency in his voice, she watched as his eyes flamed. The indigo in his gaze was swallowed by the fire lighting it from within. Ryne stiffened as his hips arched under the force of his orgasm. Shudders racked him, setting off more pleasure. She watched him watch her. Seeing the amber light of her gaze in his eyes, Kalina raised her legs around him higher. He sank deeper, making them both groan.

Rotating her hips, she heard him roar in pleasure. Dropping her head, she sealed her lips to his and ate the guttural sounds he made. He pumped his cock into her as her pussy clenched at him greedily. Holding him tight, she rolled her hips again. His cock continued to pulse, filling her up and up.

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Ryne watched the lust shimmering in her eyes, and the lines of pleasure etching her face while she took him. The combination of her look and her pussy gripping him made him gush with cum. Kalina changed movements, rolling her hips, sucking him deeper. She took him with a firm demand he found intoxicating. She used his shoulders to pull herself forward before slamming

back onto him in one hard motion. Fire lit his eyes, casting her in a luminous glow.

His vision wavered. Arching his back, Ryne felt his cock hit her womb. Kalina grunted and bore down, her pussy clenching around him. His cock pulsed and pulsed. She sped up, her slick walls creating delicious friction, pulling his shaft back and forth inside her pussy. Clamping his hands on her lush ass, Ryne held her still and ground against her. Kalina screamed, countering the motion. Her pleasure poured over him while his filled her gripping pussy.

Ryne held her tight as she milked him, demanding more while her release rode her.

After some time, she collapsed against him, her heart beating fast, and Ryne felt as if his own heart would pound out of his chest. Raising his hands, he stroked her hair, which fanned over them. Kalina murmured, rubbing her face against his chest. As their breath calmed, he looked at her. Her eyes were closed, a smile on her lips and a look of contentment on her face.

“You’re pleased you have devastated your mate.” Ryne was surprised at the emotion welling in his voice.

Kalina jumped, then her smile widened. She opened her eyes and looked at him. “Give me a minute to recover and we’ll do it again.”

Pumping his hips lazily, Ryne saw her eyes heat, then drop, slumberous. Rolling his hips, he kissed her, swallowing her gasp as his revived shaft filled her pussy.

Rolling them over until she was under him, Ryne whispered, "I'll do all the work this time."

"Ohhhh," Kalina murmured as he pumped into her.

Ryne grinned, and set out to drive her out of her mind. Rotating his hips, he planted his lips on hers and swallowed her moan.

* * *

Ryne stared at the landscape before them, hands clenched into fists. Their search kept leading to dead ends.

He shivered with desire at the gentle touch on his back. Reaching for her, he put his arm over her shoulders, bringing her close to his side. Kalina wrapped her arm around his waist, put her hand over his heart and settled next to him.

His heart slowed until it beat in time with hers. Looking down at her face, he saw the passion shimmering in her eyes, as well as the same frustration he felt. Lowering his head, he kissed her gently and she sank into his kiss with a naturalness he found to be the biggest turn-on.

She was his. His mate. It was humbling to have a soul mate after all these centuries.

Raising his head, he studied the area again. The days were passing by and still they had not found *The Book of Terra*. Touching Kalina's wrist, he felt the bracelet still decorating her. Fear choked him.

If Eve wakes and Kalina is still wearing the bracelet, Eve will destroy her. It was something he could not allow.

“Stop worrying so much,” Kalina growled.

Ryne looked down at her. “I must take care of you.”

She reached up to pinch and twist his nipple. Ryne jumped. “I can take care of myself.”

He gripped her hand over his heart and stared at her. “I know, but it’s in my nature to want to take charge.”

Kalina snorted. “Get over it before you piss me off.”

She pulled away and strolled across the clearing. He shook his head, watching her go before going after her.

A shimmer appeared between them. A man looked over his shoulder with a grin that chilled him to his core. Ryne’s heart stopped as the man turned back to Kalina. Light glinted off the man’s raised sword as he slashed down.

Chapter Four

Ryne took a step forward. Kalina turned and caught the sword in one hand, punching the man with the other and knocking him out easily. Ryne didn't look away from her as he continued his approach. He stifled a grin at the unfriendly look on her face. Ignoring her gaze that shot daggers, he touched her shoulder.

"Your prickly nature is so sexy," he teased.

Kalina's lips twitched. "You're turned on very easily."

Ryne grinned, taking the hand she had hit the man with and kissed the fingers. She shuddered. Watching her out of lowered eyes, he stepped closer.

"I've never reacted to anyone like this before. Only with you."

He watched as her eyes went soft. He enjoyed flustering her. Leaning into her, he spoke against the side of her face. "You should have screamed for my help so I could rescue you." He said it just to see her reaction.

Kalina jerked back. Her eyes narrowed, heated, then flashed. She pulled away, turned and stomped off. He heard her muttering about neutering him, fury in every line of her body.

Watching her while stifling a laugh, Ryne called after her, "Kalina!"

She turned swiftly and opened her mouth to speak. He cut her off before she could. "I would scream for help so you could rescue me. So it's only fair you do the same." He rocked back on his heels.

Kalina's mouth opened and closed, then her eyes crinkled devilishly as she chuckled. "I'll rescue you anytime, since I know how soft your sensibilities are."

Ryne chuckled. She turned and continued to walk away. He had to increase his pace to catch up with her.

"I'll show you soft later." He came abreast of her.

Reaching over, he stroked her ass. Kalina looked at him and grinned, wiggling her butt beneath his palm. Laughing, he put his arm around her waist.

Kalina looked at him. "Since I took him out, you can carry him back to headquarters."

"Who?" He was too distracted by thoughts of making love to her to follow the conversation.

Exasperation crossed Kalina's face then she sighed. "That is all you think with."

He grinned in agreement.

She stopped and gestured back to the man. "Go get our prisoner, so we can take him back to headquarters. "

Realization dawned. He looked back at the prone man on the other side of the clearing.

“He’s still alive?” Ryne started across the clearing with the intention of killing him for trying to kill Kalina.

“Oh no, if I can’t kill him, neither can you. We need to question him!”

“Then can I kill him?” He really hoped she’d say yes.

Kalina laughed. “That’s up to Christos.”

Ryne swore softly. He knew Christos wouldn’t let him unless the man did something to warrant death. Reaching him, he stared down at him and couldn’t believe what he saw.

He glanced back at Kalina, then returned his attention to the prisoner.

“What the hell did you do to him?”

Kalina shrugged. “Marked him and gave him sweet dreams.”

Looking back at the man, Ryne shook his head. A huge smile curved the man’s lips and a KE burn mark graced his chest where Kalina had struck him.

Ryne bent and picked up the prisoner, throwing the man over his shoulder.

Turning, he walked back to where she waited.

Reaching her, he leaned in and kissed her hard on the mouth. “You’re a frightening woman. Don’t you ever put that mark on me.”

Kalina pursed her lips. “Keep pissing me off with this protection shit and I might.”

Ryne laughed. “I’ll let you be the protector in the family.”

Kalina stiffened and shuddered. Her face contained a strange mixture of anguish and pleasure.

“What’s wrong?”

She looked at him. The pain in her gaze made him gasp, but it was gone in moments, happiness taking its place.

“I have a family now.” She reached up and touched his cheek. “You’re my family. Thank you.” She leaned up to kiss him gently.

His heart raced while his cock hardened painfully at the feel of her soft lips on his. Although it had only been a few days since they’d pledged to each other, whenever she reached out for him, he treasured it. She rarely showed affection. Kalina kept her distance, except in those rare moments like now. He stopped her, holding her as she stepped back. After a few moments, she relaxed into him.

Letting her go, he stared into her eyes and cupped her cheek. “Of course I’m your family.” He hesitated, then continued. “I know what happened with your siblings, but what happened to your parents?”

Her face closed, any hint of emotion gone. “They’re dead to me.”

From her tone, he knew there was more to tell, but he didn’t push her, knowing it would do no good. He saw the pain that still clouded her gaze. He kissed her forehead and put his hand on her waist. They walked across the clearing before he shimmered them to headquarters.

* * *

Ryne stood against the wall, watching the man sweat as Kalina questioned him. He stifled a laugh, but kept his somber expression in place. The man hadn’t

once looked at him, instead, focusing on her. He was used to being the most frightening thing in the room, but the man had more fear of her.

She reached over to take her cup. The man flinched and shuddered. Ryne bit his lips, still trying not to laugh. As far as he could see, Kalina hadn't done anything to instill such fear in the man, yet he was terrified.

The man raised a shaky hand, wiping his forehead. Ryne watched, surprised he would show so much of his terror. Shifters were good at hiding what they felt. She set down her cup and leaned back, staring at the man.

"Who are you working for, Matt?" Her voice was soft, but not yet deadly.

Matt looked at her and stayed silent, as he had for the entire interrogation. Kalina glanced at Ryne, frustration in her gaze. He kept his face blank. He understood the feeling. They had been at it for over six hours and the man hadn't said a word no matter what they did, or threatened. They had even brought in the head of the Seers and had only managed to get his name, nothing else. Kalina returned her attention to Matt.

"Boo!"

Matt flew up from the table and scampered to the back wall. Still, he said nothing, just watched Kalina with fearful eyes. She shook her head in disgust and stood. Matt cowered, then his expression changed to hate so fast it startled him. Matt ran at her in a blur, but Ryne didn't move from his position, knowing she wouldn't appreciate his interference. Matt reached her, and at the last moment, Kalina shifted out of the way. Using Matt's momentum, she punched

him in the side, causing him to grunt and fly into the wall, his back hitting it with such force the drywall cracked. Matt shook himself, then glared at Kalina, the hate still on his face.

She stood still, feet braced apart and her hands on her hips. "You've got to do better than that."

She threw back her head and laughed, scorn in her tone. Matt flew up and at her again. He stopped suddenly, then looked behind Kalina, panic etched in every line of his face.

"No, you can't. Get him out of here. Oh God, don't let him kill me." Matt shouted and cowered back against the wall.

Ryne shifted and looked behind Kalina. He felt the swing of power a second before the man detached from the shadows. At the sight of the Shadower, Ryne straightened. The Shadower, Lennox, glanced at him and nodded. Ryne returned his greeting and resumed his position against the wall.

Things were about to get interesting.

Kalina growled. "What are you doing here?"

*

The Shadower she had seen earlier in the week didn't spare her a glance. Instead, he looked at Ryne, nodded, then turned his attention to Matt.

"Speak." The Shadower's deep, bassy growl resonated throughout the room.

Matt stared at the Shadower, his eyes pinpricks of fear. "It doesn't matter, Ink Spawn, you're too late. Armageddon is upon us. They are stronger than you."

Matt laughed, an ugly sound, and before she could stop him, his hand flashed up to twist his head, the snap of his neck renting the air. Rushing forward, Kalina swore as he toppled over. Reaching him, she knelt and touched his pulse, not surprised when she found none. Matt's body bucked and twisted. Strong arms grabbed her and pulled her away moments before he sizzled before exploding.

The arms folded her into a massive chest as a loud boom made the room shake, then go silent.

Pushing away from the body holding her, Kalina glared up at the Shadower. He returned her look, his onyx face expressionless, silver gaze cool.

Kalina growled. "How dare you interfere in my interrogation?"

He raised an eyebrow. "I don't answer to you."

He turned, walking away and out the door, seeming to float on air.

"Who the fuck does he think he is? No one usurps my interview. Then he turns his back on me. Hell no." Kalina muttered and went after him. Ryne stepped into her path.

"Back off." Her voice was quiet, tone threatening.

Ryne nodded, laughter in his eyes. He shrugged and opened the door for her. Going out Kalina glared at him.

Absently, she saw Christos come from the observation room and go into the interrogation. Continuing down the hall and around the corner, she stopped, realizing that the Shadower had disappeared.

Turning to the wall closest to her, Kalina punched out, instinct guiding her actions. Before she connected with it, her hand was caught by an unseen force. The Shadower detached from the wall, holding her fist as she tried to shrug him off. Effortlessly he held her, a mocking smile curling his lips.

Returning his smile with one of her own, Kalina brought up her power. She pushed him off her, slamming him into the wall, reveling in the look of shock on his face.

“Don’t fucking touch me.” Her voice was low, menacing.

He nodded. “Don’t order me around.”

“I don’t like anyone’s interference.”

“Neither do I.”

Kalina glared at him, quiet for a moment. “What the hell is your name?”

He bowed his head regally. “Lennox S’chaech.”

“Well, Lennox, I’ve been attacked lately by a lot of Shadowers and I’m tired of it. Tell me what you know.”

He countered her statement. “You’ve been attacked by Xiruis.”

Kalina frowned, remembering Ryne had said the same thing. She hadn’t remembered to ask him what he meant. “What is a Xiruis?”

“The power mad side of a Shadower.”

Kalina scowled. She had never heard of such a thing. It seemed too far-fetched. From what she knew of Shadowers, they all wanted power, and were not to be trusted. Lennox being here, this close to the head of the Agency, went against everything she knew. They trusted him enough to let him this close.

They trust him so easily with their lives but I won't. Not until he proves himself trustworthy.

Returning her attention to Lennox, she saw the disappointment, followed by acceptance, in his eerie silver gaze. Kalina studied him, noticing he was a handsome man. His hair shone silver, like his eyes. The combination of his hair and eyes against his rich onyx skin increased his sex appeal. Add that to his strong, captivating features, it made him a devastating piece of maleness.

Lennox raised a silver eyebrow. "I don't know whether to be flattered by your look or afraid that Ryne will kick my ass."

Kalina grinned. "You don't have to worry about him. I'll kick your ass myself if I need to."

Lennox grinned. At his smile, Kalina felt her heart rate increase. He was truly a dangerous temptation to any woman. Lennox chuckled, a wicked sound, then his eyes flashed from silver to amber, then back again. She watched him cautiously, not knowing what that meant.

"It means I find you tempting also." He answered her question before she could ask.

Kalina's eyes narrowed. "You're reading my mind."

Lennox nodded, stifling another grin. Kalina sighed. She kept a shield on her thoughts at all times. No one could read her mind unless she chose to let them. For him to do what none of the Seers could do, she knew he was very powerful. Maybe even more powerful than Ryne.

“Yes, I am, but you’re almost as powerful as I.” Lennox winked.

Kalina snorted. “You wish.”

Lennox laughed. Kalina joined him. There was something surprisingly compelling about him.

She still didn’t trust him.

Lennox’s face blanked, then his hand flashed out and he grabbed her, jerking her against him. His hands wrapped around her, molding her to him from shoulder to knee.

“I told you about touching me.” Kalina pulled her blade, pressing the carefully honed edge against his throat.

Lennox didn’t flinch. “Hold on.”

Kalina’s eyes widened as she felt herself *fade*. The sense of displacement she usually felt when she faded didn’t come. Turning her head, she stared into the inky blackness. She started as she realized she was in the shadows. When she tried to jerk away, Lennox’s grip tightened.

“Careful. I don’t want to lose you in the shadows.” His voice sounded muffled, distant.

Looking up at him, Kalina blinked as she took in his face. It was drenched in emerald green. Glancing down, she saw that his whole body was the color of the purest of stones. She realized she was seeing his true shadow. Curious, she looked at herself. Her arm appeared silver with streaks of burnt orange.

Turning her attention back to him, she asked, "Why is my shadow two colors?"

Lennox spoke to her, focus elsewhere. "When you mated with Ryne, your shadows merged. All mated pairs do. You just don't see it."

She looked closely at him. "You're not mated, then."

Lennox's look was sad. "No."

"Take me back."

He shook his head. "Listen."

Kalina responded to the urgency in his tone, cocking her head, she listened. The sounds in the shadows swished by her ears making it hard for her to differentiate one from another. Focusing, she filtered out the distractions and listened intently, but it was still too muffled for her to hear. Focusing harder, she slowly made out the words. In shock, she stiffened in his arms.

An ugly laugh filled the air. A voice wound its way through the shadows. "They are too stupid to know what's going on."

The voice paused and she heard a crinkling sound and realized it was a phone. Then the voice came again. "Kalina thinks she is all powerful, but she'll be the first to feel her wrath. Yes. It is all going as planned."

Kalina turned her head to see the person, but was met with only inky blackness.

The voice came again, the hate dripping from each word. "Phoenix Intelligence Agency will be mine, and those who don't want to join the new regime will be eliminated."

The laugh came again quieting as seconds passed.

A strange sensation filled her, letting her know they'd left the shadows. She glanced around to see who occupied the hall. Looking up at Lennox, she watched him step back. Without a word, she turned and went to the elevator.

Punching the button to call it, she ignored Lennox who came to stand at her side. Fury licked at her every pore.

Curling her fist, she punched down with her power. Containing it, she made a circle around her and Lennox. Within moments the floor gave way below them, crumbling under her strength. Keeping it steady, she pushed it down as they tumbled through the floors below, leaving gaping holes in their wake.

She ignored the startled exclamations as they whisked past each floor. Reaching the one she wanted, she let the power dissipate and watched as the debris in the air cleared.

The men and women on the floor stared at her in shock, questions on their faces, mouths gaping. Ignoring them, Kalina strode across the room while those in her path jumped out of the way, the expression on her face clearly warning them of her mood.

Reaching a closed door, she read the name on the plaque and pain filled her. Anger, hot and fierce, blasted through her, knocking the pain to the far reaches of her mind. Lifting her hand, she punched the wood and the door buckled under the force, flying into the room, skittering halfway across the massive office.

Striding inside, Kalina heard from a distance the shocked whispers and the approach of running feet.

Glaring at the man sitting at the massive desk, Kalina felt her power swell. She lifted off the ground, feet dangling in air and watched him.

“Mother fucker, you betrayed me!” Kalina watched shock fill his face as she drew her hand back, built a fireball and threw it at him.

She never missed her mark.

Chapter Five

His hand flashed out, stilling the fireball before his face and stood from behind the desk.

“Kalina, what’s the matter with you?” His expression was one of bemusement.

The deceit on the face of Jared Williams, her boss and head of the Assassination Unit, made her skin crawl. He was one of the few people in the Agency she trusted. He had trained her, molded her and she had thought he was her friend. She almost believed his look of confusion as he came around the desk toward her. With a wave of her hand, she lashed out with her power. He slammed into the wall, sliding down the smooth surface.

“Kalina, what are you doing?” a voice she didn’t recognize asked from behind her.

“*Kruis Lunins,*” she said without turning. Power pressed around her as the ward she had called forth surrounded the room, blocking anyone from entering. The conversations behind her became muffled.

Jared stood and looked at her, his expression changing to hate within moments. His mocking laughter filled the room. “Ah, Kalina. You know the truth. I’m so glad not to have to hide it any longer. All of you are so stupid and weak. You never saw what was right before you.”

As Jared spoke, he threw his hand out toward her, his power hitting her in the chest before he pushed her into the wall. He lifted his hand, making her slide up it to the ceiling.

Jared spoke again. "Christos thinks he knows everything. He knows *nothing*. He thought he could put you here for me to train so you could take over my position. *Mine*." He glared through the doorway at the other agents just outside the wards. "This little agency could be so much more. Imagine, protecting those ungrateful weaklings of humanity when we are the gods of this world. When Eve is born, we will rule the way we are meant to, and this agency will be rubble." He turned back to her and closed his fist. "But you won't be alive to see me take my reign. What a pity. I had hoped to taste you at some point."

Kalina felt a phantom touch over her breast. Then it plunged into her chest, wrapping around her heart. A look of madness filled his gaze as he clenched his fist tighter and the pressure around her heart increased.

She smiled viciously. "That's your first mistake, Jared. Never underestimate your opponent."

Kalina reached out and let the power roar through her. With a thought, she opened her shields wide, sucking it all in, drawing it from him in greedy gulps. Fear crept over his face as he tried to pull back, shut it off. She held open his shields and drank it in.

He dropped to his knees as his power weakened. Sliding down the wall, Kalina watched him. Landing on her feet, she walked over to him, continuing to drink in his power, listening to his heart sputter.

Standing over him, she stared down at what used to be her mentor. "I am an Amazonian Warrior, Jared. We are descendants of the earth, wind and air. My power is limitless and you can *never* defeat me."

Jared's heart slowed even more as she continued to drink in his essence, sucking him dry. Raising her hand, she punched down to finish him off. But she halted just above his chest, looking into his blue eyes. Stumbling back, she broke off from him.

I can't do it. Even after all he has done I cannot kill him.

Turning away, she saw the shocked faces of the other agents beyond the wards. A sound made her turn and Jared's fist plowed into her face making her grunt. She shook her head, reached out and caught his fist on his next swing. Twisting his arm, she struck out with her other hand and let him go, once again sending him flying across the room into a wall. A crack rose from where he hit, spreading to the ceiling.

Jared growled and came off the floor in a rush. Twirling out of the way, she swung into a back kick. He fell into the desk, making it skid across the room and through the window. The sun poured into the room as he teetered on the ledge then spun, whirling back inside. Jared hissed and she saw his fangs. He

whirled again, and at the last moment, she grabbed his arm and turned, flinging him into another wall.

In seconds he bounced back up and twisted his neck from side to side. Kalina smiled, looking at him through a haze of indigo. Absently she heard the sound of rain. She didn't have the heart to kill him, but she could beat the hell out of him for a little while. It would take some time to knock him unconscious, since he was a vampire. Cracking her fingers, she circled him. He matched her movements. He reached out for her and she knocked him back, then decked him.

His head snapped back, his nose giving under her fist. Jared roared. Grabbing his wrist, Kalina punched him several times in quick succession. He fell to the ground. She straddled him, punching his face from side to side, enjoying the cracks of bone.

Hands grabbed her, pulling at her. Fighting them, she hit him again and again.

"Kalina, come on, stop! Kalina, come back.!" Ryne begged, his voice sounding far away.

Coming to her senses, she looked down at Jared's wrecked, bloody face. Stumbling back, she felt Ryne trembling as his arms encircled her. The coldness left her. With a glance at the broken window, she saw the indigo with streaks of red rain falling. Her emotions brought to life. Lightning flashed as thunder rumbled. Clouds swirled angrily.

The lightning flashed again and she felt it inside her. A sizzle sound came followed by the sound of a car alarm. Lightning flashed again, then a boom. She watched as a car flew past the window and disappeared into the clouds. Shrugging out of Ryne's hold, she went to the window and raised her hands to the sky.

The lightning flashed and came to her, swirling around her arms, coming home. She felt the power of it fill her up to near overflowing. Closing her eyes, Kalina contained it, sucking it deep down. After a moment, she felt the fierceness of the storm ease, the weather calming.

Opening her eyes, she looked up at the rain falling in a gentle mist of indigo. It drenched her face, soothing her raw nerves. Turning back to the room, she saw Ryne, Christos and Lennox watching her cautiously. Looking beyond them, she noticed the air wavering. Her wards were still in place. Waving her hand, she brought them down and Ryne stepped toward her.

"No, I can't, not right now." She held up a hand to keep him at bay. "I need time." Kalina steeled herself against the look of sorrow and pity on his face. She knew it was on her behalf, but she couldn't afford to break down. Not now. Not in front of everyone. Ryne nodded and said nothing.

She walked over to Lennox who stood the closest, and put out her hand. "Thank you."

Lennox looked at her, then took her hand. She slid her fingers up his muscular arm, circled them around his elbow. Surprise lit his eyes before he nodded and did the same.

“You honor me with your trust, Amazonian Warrior.”

Kalina smiled, squeezed his elbow before she withdrew her hand. “You humble me with yours.”

Looking at Christos, Kalina saw the anger shimmering in his gaze as he glared at the unconscious Jared. He stared at her next, a fierce wildness on his face.

“He’s the traitor, and there’s no way he worked alone.” She responded to his unspoken question.

Christos turned in a boneless motion, looking at the agents outside the room. Before he could speak, a voice rose from the back of the gathering.

“Yeah, I know. Look what I found trying to sneak out.” A languid feminine voice filled the quiet.

The agents parted. Kalina saw Allure Davis, one of the few other people in the agency she called friend, walking toward her with five men before her. She held her assault rifle steady and trained on them. As she got closer, Kalina saw the unholy hell look in her hazel eyes, an expressionless mask that said death on Allure’s honey-toned face. Her dark brown hair, usually contained in a braid, fell loose around her face. There was a bruise on her cheek and the corner of her full lip bled freely.

When they reached her, Kalina saw Allure's twin sister, Harmony, was at her side. Harmony's short-cropped hair quivered with power. The woman flicked her wrist, uncurling her whip. A man stumbled forward, dropping to his knees.

Focusing on the men, Kalina realized it was all the Assassination Unit team leaders. She had never worked with a team, but she knew who they were.

"As always, Allure, your help is appreciated." Christos' tone was formally cold, yet vicious.

Kalina's focus bounced between him and Allure. She knew he and the other woman had a history. Allure nodded, her gun never wavering.

"Harmony, thank you." Christos nodded in the twin's direction.

"If you would let a Seer be a part of this team, this wouldn't have happened, Christos." Harmony's silken tone chastised.

Kalina bit her lip. Harmony didn't care how much power Christos, or anyone else, had. The woman spoke her mind.

"Most of your team of Seers, including you, are empaths and human, Harmony." Christos gave her a look that spoke volumes.

Kalina understood what he was saying. He couldn't let them near what they did in the Assassination Unit. They went up against the ugliest of humanity and inhumanity. Death was their constant companion. For an empath Seer to be a part of the team, he or she would have to be very strong, and willing to go against their own nature of healing in order to kill.

Harmony glared at Christos. Kalina's breath caught. In that moment, she saw the same cold purpose in Harmony's eyes that she saw in Allure's. Christos ignored her, staring at the men. They tried to look defiant, but she tasted their fear in the air. She saw Allure's hand tremble and knew she tasted it too.

Allure's mouth opened and her fangs flashed, her hand shook. One of the men turned swiftly, trying to knock the gun out of her hand. Allure didn't lose her grip as he obviously planned. Her hand flashed out and gripped his throat, raising him off the ground.

Fury filled her gaze and her fangs flashed again. "I hate traitors." She threw him into a wall, then raised her gun at the other four who had turned toward her at the ready. "Try it."

They looked at her, then turned back around. Kalina was impressed. It had happened so fast they hadn't had time to interfere.

When Allure had been turned into a vamp eight years ago and first joined the team, they'd hated each other. They were two dominant females in a team made up of a lot of men. But after being paired together, they had learned to respect each other. Even as a newly turned vamp, Allure had her power under control. Well, everything except for the hunger. Kalina knew it was partially due to her military training. If she were the best in the unit, then Allure was the second.

Christos watched the men and he waved a hand. They all flew into the wall into a pile, out cold.

Allure shook her head, lowered her gun and put the strap over her head. She settled the gun against her back and quickly braided her hair. "I could have done that. Now we'll have to wait for them to wake so we can question them."

Christos stared at her. She stared back, flashing her fangs. He dove for her, but Allure didn't move a muscle, watching, waiting.

"Christos." Kalina called softly.

He stopped, stiffened and turned to her. She saw him pull his control around him like a cape. Allure had a way of getting under his skin like no other.

He nodded abruptly, then motioned to the guards. "Take them to the infirmary, then interrogation." Christos looked back at Kalina. "You're in charge of the unit." He raised his hand, cutting off her protest. "We'll have to recover from this, and you are the only one I trust for this job. You're also the only one your colleagues will follow."

Kalina shook her head, then stopped. The rousing cheer that filled the room made emotion fill her. Looking at the faces of the team members who were left, she was surprised to see they were applauding and agreeing.

Christos spoke again. "Do what you must to rebuild the team and make it stronger."

Humbled by the faith he and the team members put in her, Kalina's focus shifted from man to man as they quieted, waiting for her to speak.

“I appoint Allure Davis as team leader for Alpha Team One.” She saw the nods of approval, then looked around. “Lennox S’chaech will be leader of Alpha Team Two.” She watched shock fill his face before he nodded.

Looking at the agents, she searched for any problems with her choices. They looked back at her, acceptance evident. Kalina knew it was a front. Lennox would have to prove himself to the team before they accepted him, but she knew by his closed expression he would be up to the challenge.

She saw his attention flick to the side. Following his gaze, she saw he watched Allure and Harmony.

Turning back to the twins, she spoke again. “Harmony Davis and Storm Davis will be our exclusive Seers.” Kalina watched the fierce pleasure flash across Harmony’s face before it went blank.

She nodded. “I will inform Aunt Storm of our new assignment.”

Kalina returned her nod, then looked at Christos. The expression of resignation on his face was comical. The look in his eyes said he hoped she knew what she was doing and getting herself into. She knew Harmony would do what was necessary. As for Storm Davis, she would have to assign her with a partner who could counteract her impulsiveness.

Turning to the rest of the agents, Kalina spoke again. “The Assassination Unit’s name has been smeared by our leader. We were betrayed by team leads. We will rebuild and show the rest of the Agency that the code of Ryne is not just words, but what an Assassination Agent lives by. We are the Assassination Unit

of the Phoenix Intelligence Agency, and no one will bring us down." Raising her fist in the air, she watched as the agents matched her.

Their cries of support rang through the air. Kalina looked over at Ryne and saw the pride in his face, giving her a tender look. Then he turned and helped the Security Agents get the prisoners out of the room.

Mocking laughter filled the air, and turning, Kalina watched Jared break free from a guard, grabbing the man's gun. The ex-leader pointed it at her and pulled the trigger, joy written plainly on his face.

Chapter Six

Kalina raised her hand and a masculine back filled her vision. She heard the report of the gun followed by him falling against her. She felt power rise, heard a high-pitched cry, then nothing. Stumbling back, Kalina caught Ryne and lowered him gently to the floor. Frantically, she searched for his injury, hands stroking, searching for any hint of damage.

“Ryne, where are you hit?” Her voice was high, panicked.

Breathing hard, he opened his eyes. They shimmered with pain. “Fuck, I think I broke a rib.”

“What?” She didn’t understand.

Ryne looked at her and grinned. “I broke a rib.”

Kalina looked at him, then ran her hand down his chest. Reaching out with power, she sensed he was right about the rib. Laying her hand over the injury, she repaired it before she smacked him on the chest.

Ryne flinched. “Don’t beat on a downed man.”

Kalina rolled her eyes. “Get up, you slacker. I have work to do.”

Ryne stood fluidly, bringing her with him. He tightened his grip and pulled her into his arms, kissing her senseless. Then he stepped back, winked and walked back over to the guards. Picking up one of the prisoners, Ryne walked out of the room. Kalina watched him go.

Dragging her attention away, she looked for Jared. Stepping forward, she looked down, seeing the scorch mark that was left of him. Looking back at Ryne in the area outside Jared's office, she saw the agents watching him with awe and respect. She sighed. The legends of The Ghost would get even crazier now. They were silent as he left the area. Nothing was said as the rest of the Security Agents left, followed by Christos.

Once everyone had gone, the agents looked at her, grins on their faces.

The attention made her squirm. "Let's get to work."

Laughing, they went back to their desks. The last one out closed the door. Shifting her attention between Lennox, Allure, and Harmony, who had stayed, Kalina crossed her hands behind her back.

"In a week, I want an evaluation of the team. Then we'll divvy up the agents between us. Harmony, you and Storm need to check every agent to make sure there are no more traitors. Including me."

Harmony looked surprised. "You?"

Kalina nodded. "It will be your job and Storm's to make sure this doesn't happen again. No one is above this check. To ensure your safety, Lennox will be your partner."

She saw them exchange a look.

Lennox seemed indifferent, while Harmony appeared furious. "I can take care of myself."

Kalina sighed. "I know you can, but a lot of this team will try to test you. And from now on, everyone will have a partner." Harmony opened her mouth, but Kalina cut her off. "Don't question me, Harmony. I'm your boss now and you follow my orders." Her voice sounded harsh, even to her ears.

Harmony nodded stiffly.

"Dismissed." Kalina turned away and went back to the shattered glass and broken wall.

Looking out at the sky, she saw the indigo rain was still falling. Raising her face to it, she let it drench her, then stiffened as she felt an arm come around her followed by another. She looked left, then right, into the concerned faces of Harmony and Allure before allowing herself to relax.

"I'm sorry about Jared, Kalina," Harmony's voice was soft.

"He was an asshole," Allure countered.

Kalina looked at her out of the corner of her eye. "You didn't like him."

Allure shook her head. "No, I knew from the time I joined he was an ass."

Kalina was surprised. "You never said a word."

Allure looked at her. "I'm a good soldier. I learned to work with people I thought were asses a long time ago."

Kalina tried not to laugh.

"Why don't you tell us how you really feel?" Harmony asked dryly.

Allure snorted. "I just did."

Kalina chuckled and touched their arms wound around her. They all watched the wind blowing, drenching them with rain. After a moment, Kalina broke the silence.

“I can’t believe it. Jared a traitor and me the leader of the team. Shit. I don’t want to be chained to a desk.”

Harmony patted her hand. “You’ll be just fine. You made me afraid to cross you.” She shivered playfully.

Kalina looked at her, chuckling. “If only that were true, Harm.”

Harmony’s look was sly. “It was true for a minute.”

Kalina laughed. They joined her.

“So, when are you going to tell us about that scrumptious man you’re mated to? Hell, girl, it’s been over a week. You could have at least called and told us,” Allure groused.

Kalina looked at her out of the corner of her eye. “Nosy.”

Allure nodded. “And you know it. Give us the details.”

“Leave nothing out,” Harmony seconded.

Kalina let them pull her away from the open window. Waving her hand, she repaired it within a moment. They settled on the couch, sandwiching her between them. They fired question after question. She answered them absently. Feeling a strange sensation, she looked up and saw Ryne watching her through the open door. He winked at her, blew her a kiss and walked away. Kalina watched him, then turned her attention back to her friends.

* * *

Five hours later, Kalina walked into her empty house. Turning on the light, she glanced around the room, feeling strange. Since she had mated with Ryne, she hadn't been back. Walking deeper into the living room, it felt even stranger being there. Continuing into the kitchen, she passed the table and went to the sliding glass doors. Opening them, she stepped into her gardens.

Kalina paused, raising her face to the indigo rain that continued to fall from the sky. She knew it wouldn't stop until tomorrow. Lowering her head, she walked into the lush garden oasis she'd created. Walking the winding paths, she let her thoughts go back to all that had happened.

He betrayed me. Oh god, he betrayed me.

Falling to her knees, she felt the mud soak into her pants, welcoming her. Dropping her head, she mourned for Jared and for her lost faith and trust. Hard arms curled around her. Stiffening, she tried to pull away, but he held her firm, turning her. He raised her face and looked at her, really looked at her.

Kalina's gaze locked with pale blue. Ryne's expression was tender along with understanding. It was her undoing. Leaning into him, she let the tears fall. The keening cry of pain buried in her chest free broke free. Collapsing against him, she wailed as the hurt filled her. Jared had been like the father she never had. She had given him her trust, and that wasn't something she did lightly.

The rain mixed with her tears as she cried while Ryne murmured to her, stroking her hair. Harsh breaths racked her lungs. Curling into him, she let his

strength infuse her. Dry heaves made her shudder. After a while, the storm of tears passed, but he continued to hold her and run his fingers through her hair.

Looking up at him, she saw the tears on his lashes mixed with indigo rain. Reaching up, she touched his face, slid her hand into his hair and drew him down to her. Lightly she kissed his lips, tasting his tears as they mixed with her own. Pulling away, Kalina stared into his eyes.

“I love you, Ryne.”

Pleasure filled his face, then a fierce emotion quivered in his eyes. “Don’t say it out of pain, Kalina.”

She thumped him on the chest. “Why do you have to second guess how I feel? I said I love you, damn it! Do you have something to say to me?” She followed each word with another thump of her fist on his chest.

Ryne chuckled. “If you’ll stop beating me up I might.”

He took her hand and kissed it. “I’ve been waiting for you to say it.” He cupped her face between his hands. “I love you, Kalina Garon.”

Kalina was startled, hearing her name linked with his. Her lips quirked. “Who says I’ll carry your name? Maybe you’ll carry mine.”

Ryne laughed and hugged her. “Not on your life. You’re mine, Kalina, and you *will* carry my name.”

Kalina put her hand over his heart. “I love you, Ryne Garon, my husband, my mate.”

Shifting, she straddled him and kissed him. Ryne's arms banded around her as he held her close. Murmuring, she sank her hands into his hair, freed it from its bindings.

Widening her stance, she stripped them of clothes, then sank down onto his already hard cock. She gasped as he filled her. Ryne groaned into her mouth in response. Stroking forward against him, Kalina's body ignited in a flash of sensual fire.

Ryne locked his arms around her, rocking in a counter motion to her thrust. Her pussy undulated around his hard shaft as it pumped into her. Kalina closed her eyes, letting her head fall back, gasping at the sensations he gave her. The rain drenched her face, sliding down onto her tongue. It tasted of their passion, their love.

Rolling her hips, she took more of him. He shivered in response, growling deep in his throat.

"Ryne," Kalina shouted to the sky, their love manifesting in the skies.

Opening her eyes, she saw lightning flash red and orange in response. Quickening her pace, she rose slightly off him, then slammed down. Crimson lit the heavens as Ryne groaned harshly. Lowering her head, she watched as his eyes went opaque in response to her taking. Locking her legs around him, she undulated and felt his dick hardening inside her even more. Gasping, Kalina pumped down onto him, feeling herself teetering deliciously on the verge of release. Ryne's hands slid down her back and around her hips, tightening

painfully as he pulled her down harder onto him. It toppled her over the fine edge of need into pleasure.

“Ryne, fuck me,” Kalina screamed as orgasms ripped through her. Her voice faded in the vicious grip of pleasure.

*

Watching her face, Ryne saw the harsh tightening of it as pleasure racked her. Her pussy milked his cock, demanding his release. Holding it off, he pumped into her, driving her into another orgasm. The rain drenched his skin, making his blood heat. It slid off her face and ran in indigo trails along her skin. His lips sought hers, tasting the rain and her when they were sealed together. They were sin and decadence rolled into one. It drove him into a frenzy of want and need.

Sliding his hands over her hips, he cupped her full ass and pulled her hard against him. Her gasp of surprised pleasure filled his mouth. He drank down her cry, groaning in return. She shivered in reaction. Her legs tightened around him while her pussy sucked on his cock in greedy demand. Pulling back from her delicious taste, he looked up at the rain. Lightning flashed yellow and green in time with the thrust of her hips. Kalina locked her hands in his hair, dragging his face back to hers. She locked eyes with him. In her tawny gaze, he saw not only wanton lust. He saw love.

Kalina’s lips curled and she kissed him, sucking his tongue into her mouth. He briefly felt a sharp pain as she bit his tongue and then purred. Heat

burst through him as the scent of cinnamon and caramel infused his skin. His cock pulsed in reaction. Orgasm ripped through him, driving the breath from his lungs. He tried to pull his lips away to groan. But Kalina held him, her hot hands keeping his face still for her possession. Groaning anyway, Ryne let her take him. She thrust down, he moved his cock in and out as it pulsed, filling her. Kalina sucked on his tongue, biting him again. The pleasure tripled, making his heart race until it felt as if it would leap out of his chest. She purred again, making his mouth and his cock vibrate. Ryne moaned harshly as she sucked in the sounds of his pleasure.

Kalina murmured, eating at his mouth while her hips undulated and his cock sank deeper into her wetness. Her scent became stronger then, and Ryne wrenched his lips away as heat and fire poured over his skin. Falling back, he caught himself on his hands. Staring at Kalina, he watched her plunge herself on and off his cock. Locking his arms, he stilled the trembling as she took him.

His breath caught at the fierce expression she wore. Her eyes flashed and she growled, a low, throaty sound. The lightning flashed in tandem with her thrusts, giving her face a surreal glow. Kalina groaned harshly, and Ryne felt her pussy tightening painfully on his cock. Grunting, he felt pleasure pulse out of his shaft, filling her. His arms gave out causing him to fall back. Kalina followed, not breaking her up and down motion.

“Kalina...fu...c...k...m...e...” Ryne panted.

Kalina smiled and impaled herself on his shaft again. She twisted and screamed as another orgasm ripped through her. Ryne felt his sac tighten once more. He reached up to pull her down to him. He kissed her, swallowing her screams, giving her his own. Pleasure pulsed from him in a continuous flow, draining him until he was spent. His arms gave out weakly as Kalina collapsed on his chest. Her harsh breath tickled his chest while her heart beat against him.

Breathing hard, Ryne said, "You're trying to kill me."

Kalina laughed breathlessly. "What a way to go."

Laughing, Ryne rolled until she rested under him. Settling himself deeper inside her, he stared down into her flushed face. She smiled, opening her eyes. He thrust slowly and watched as surprised pleasure filled her gaze.

"Ummm...yes..." Kalina murmured, arching her back.

Pumping his hips lazily, he felt the heat between them quicken again.

* * *

Ryne jerked awake, feeling as if something were wrong. He looked around and saw they were in Kalina's bedroom. Beside him, she had a solemn look on her face.

"What is it?" His heart was heavy with dread.

"I need you to go with me someplace and ask no questions. I need you to trust me." Kalina touched his cheek, the look on her face intense.

There were a lot of questions crowding his mind, but he would wait. Turning his head, he kissed her palm, then looked back at her face. Leaning over, he kissed her, then withdrew.

“Let’s go.”

Gratitude filled her expression as she pulled away from him and stood. She held out her hand. Reaching up, he took it and let her help him from the bed. Standing before her, he said nothing as she dressed them. She looked at him, still serious. He felt the air charge just before they faded. In seconds, they came back to form. Ryne looked around at the massive, richly decorated chamber. He didn’t recognize where they were.

Glancing back at Kalina, he saw her staring across the room. Following her gaze, he saw the woman who stood there turn to look at them. There was no surprise on her face, just bitter acceptance. He knew who she was, but couldn’t fathom why they were there.

Kalina let go of his hand and walked up to the woman. He followed her, standing so he could see both of them, ready to protect if needed.

Kalina stopped before the woman, a look of defiance on her face. “Hello, Mother.” Kalina’s tone was cold.

Chapter Seven

Shocked, Ryne looked between the woman and Kalina, seeing for the first time the resemblance.

The woman raised her chin and spoke in an equally cold voice. "Kalina, what are you doing here?"

Pain flashed briefly on Kalina's face, but it quickly disappeared. Ryne went over to her and took her hand. She gripped it tight, knuckles white.

Turning to the woman, he defended his mate. "Don't talk to her like that, Niya."

Niya looked at him, her amber gaze cold. "Ah, Firebird, so it's true. You have mated with Kalina." Her glance raked him up and down. "Don't think that because you're family I won't kill you."

Ryne took a step toward her, but Kalina's hand on his arm stopped him. He turned his attention toward her and her look plainly said to let her handle the situation. Deferring to her, he stepped back, watching both women warily.

*

Kalina stared at the woman she used to call mommy. Niya returned her look coolly. She didn't let the pain she felt show, buried it deep in her heart. She had come here for a reason and she would see it through.

“Why did you abandon me?” Silently, she cursed herself. That wasn’t what she had meant to say.

Niya looked surprised, then reached out to touch her. Stepping back, Kalina decided she couldn’t deal with this. Turning to Ryne, she saw he waited to see what she would do.

“Let’s go.” She walked away and heard his footsteps fall in line with hers.

“Kalina, I didn’t abandon you.” Anguish evident in Niya’s tone.

Ignoring it, she continued to the door.

“Kalina, I promised myself I would give you space to mourn. When you didn’t return, I knew you hated me and left you alone.” Niya seemed to be pleading for understanding.

She felt tears well in her eyes. It was a lie. Her mother had abandoned her when she needed her most.

“I left you alone in the Earth Realm at your choice.” Anger filled Niya’s voice.

Kalina reached the door and opened it.

“Kalina Erutan, you are my daughter and I would have broken all those vows if you had but called me.”

Stepping through the door, Kalina refused to hear her mother’s words.

“Kalina Erutan, I love you with every breath in my body, soul and spirit.”

Turning swiftly, Kalina roared, “Do not speak to me of love,” she shouted. With her voice still raised, she continued. “You know nothing of love. Love does

not leave a child alone when they have lost all they hold dear. Love does not ignore you when you cry for the mother you thought loved you.”

Kalina’s breath came in harsh bursts as she watched the tears shining in Niya’s eyes. Ryne touched her shoulders, but she shrugged him off violently and bolted across the room as she screamed, “Love does not have an expiration date, Mother. I have not felt any love from you since the day my brother and sister died. You don’t know the meaning of love. If that is love, I want no part of your so-called love.” Niya flinched at each word.

Taking a breath, Kalina glared at Niya, letting all the contempt she felt for her show. “You blamed me for something that wasn’t my fault. I was a child, Mother. I was eighteen and thought I knew it all. We all did. When we were attacked, I called for you, but you never came. I had to watch as my brother and sister, your children, were slaughtered before my eyes. I had to defend myself and fight them. Kill them for what they had done. I had to bury my sister and brother in the land they died in because our mother had not the time or care to come to help us. The time to help me, her only child left, to mourn the loss of her sister and brother. My mother had no time to mourn with me. “

Niya stood, her hands clasped, silent tears running down her face and Kalina only felt disgust for the woman.

“You have nothing to say, Mother? Nothing else to say about this love you have for me?” Kalina watched her, then continued. “You show more care for

Earth and its inhabitants than you do for me, your flesh and blood." She pounded her own chest after each word.

Turning away, she felt fingers grip her hand and spin her around.

Niya was enraged. "You know nothing of my pain. Nothing. My children died that day. My daughter hated me, and you did not call for me or I would have been there. I would have been there. By the time I felt it, I was too late to save them, to help you." Niya took a step forward with each word she spoke and Kalina backed up. "How do you think it made me feel to have my child look at me with such hate, such loathing, and know she blamed me for the deaths of her siblings. The loss of her innocence? I trained you to fight, to protect yourself, but I never expected you would have to use your lessons at such a tender age."

Niya stopped and looked at Kalina, the harsh lines on her face fading to lines of sorrow. "God, how do you think I felt knowing my only child left blamed me? Blamed me so much we have not spoken for three centuries." She wrapped her arms around her waist as if in pain. "The care I show to this Earth is because I am Mother Earth, Kalina. But first and foremost, I am *your* mother. I love you and always will love you, no matter what you believe." Niya turned away. "If you want to go and keep hating me, then go, but don't you dare tell me what love I have for you or my dead children."

Kalina stared at her mother's trembling shoulders and tried to understand the woman's words. She thought of that day – the craziness, the blood and the aftermath. She barely remembered anything past the killing rage she felt after

seeing the men slaughter her sister and brother. Distantly, she remembered her mother's tearful face saying she hated her and never wanted to see her again.

Suddenly, the cloudiness in her mind shifted and she saw the truth.

Reaching for Niya, Kalina turned her around. Niya resisted, but she held firm. "You came to me that day and said you never wanted to see me again. You told me you blamed me."

Niya shook her head fiercely. "No, I didn't. I—"

Kalina cut her off. "I know now it wasn't you. Who told you about the ambush?"

She grabbed her mother's hand as she tried to jerk away. Pain flashed in Niya's eyes, then the realization Kalina had already reached. She shook her head.

Touching her cheek, Kalina nodded. "Yes, Mom. It's her and she's the same one who stole *The Book of Terra*." Niya jerked in reaction. Kalina wouldn't release her. "The search kept leading us in circles. I came here after all these years to talk to you, although I didn't want to. It seemed too easy and pat that the Book could disappear from here without anyone knowing. I wanted to ask you if you had any clue where Eve could be or the Book. She wants to kill you, to take over your role as Mother Earth. She wants to control all of nature, everything here and in the other realms."

Kalina watched as fury lit her mother's eyes.

Loud clapping filled the air. She stiffened and looked behind her. She noted that Ryne had moved closer.

Watching the woman standing there, Kalina remembered the softness of her touch and her kindness when her mother had abandoned her. It had all been a pretty little lie.

She put her hand on her hip, glaring at them with a sneer on her face. “You were always too smart for your own good, niece. I should have killed you along with your siblings that day by the river. But it has been so much more delicious watching you suffer.” She turned her attention to Niya. “Watching you both suffer. You’ve been so easy to dupe, Niya.”

“I trusted you, Aunty Jayde.”

Jayde laughed and returned her gaze. “Trust is a foolish thing, child. Too bad you learned this lesson too late.” Jayde looked at Niya. “Your mother would do well to have taught you that. She was too busy ruling her kingdom.” She spread her arms. “Oh, great Mother Earth. Or – oh yes, how do the human’s think of you? – Mother Nature.” She dropped her hands. “Pash on the human’s with their small minds and destructive natures. At least I’m honest about what I want.” She put both hands on her hips. “The world is all I want. Control of it is a beautiful thing.”

She paused and turned to Kalina. “Ah, my oblivious niece. You think my dear old sister hasn’t cared about you all these centuries. Niya knew all about what happened in your life.”

Kalina looked at her mother, shocked, and saw the guilty look on her face.

“So you didn’t know about that,” Jayde said. “Good old Christos, your brother’s best friend, was your safe harbor. He kept an eye on you and let Niya know you were okay.” Jayde laughed, looking at Niya. “God, Niya, you think I didn’t know? You were so obvious. As obvious as the lust you feel for him.” She chuckled. “I don’t know why you don’t fuck him and get it over with. Anyone in a room with the two of you can see you want to fuck each other blind. But no, you wouldn’t. Always following your warped moral code.” Jayde stared at Niya, the hate plain on her face. “I was born first. I should have been in charge of all this. I will take what is rightfully mine. Hell, I’ll give Christos a good ride before he dies.” She turned her look on Kalina again. “Jared should have taken care of you long ago. Why are you not dead?”

Answers to questions she’d had for year’s connected in Kalina’s mind. “All those years you came to see me, it was really to see Jared. For you two to plot and plan.”

Jayde turned a nasty smile on Kalina. “Oh, I came to check on you, to make sure you were suffering enough. But, oh, Jared was so persuasive, and we discovered a mutual need to rule and get out from under the weaklings we currently serviced. It took years, but it is upon us. Jared was supposed to make sure you died horribly.”

Kalina returned her aunt’s evil smile with one of her own. “Jared is where he deserves. He’s just a rotting ink spot in my office.”

Sorrow, quickly followed by rage, flashed over Jayde's face. Her hand shot out and she threw a dagger at her. Kalina didn't move, waiting for it to come. At the final moment, when she raised her hand to catch it, another hand beat her to her target. She watched as her mother caught the dagger, then spun, throwing it back from whence it came. Jayde dodged and shrieked. Kalina watched as Niya clamped her hand over Jayde's throat and raised her off the ground.

"You killed my children." Niya's voice rang through the room.

The wind roared in, shattering the glass and whipping everything into a frenzy. Kalina stumbled under the press of power filling the room. The air increased and she heard the roll of thunder in the distance. Lightning flashed, illuminating the space. Fear filled Jayde's face rather than hate. She raised her hand to break the hold, but Niya didn't move or flinch, holding her in the air. Kalina watched the color leave Jayde's honey-toned skin. Niya rose off the floor, her hand still holding Jayde.

"My children. Your niece and nephew. How could you, Jayde?"

The air funneled, ripping all the furnishings into the air. Kalina heard the sound of rain and saw the golden mist mixed with crimson roll through the room.

Jayde saw it too and shrieked. "You should never have had them. I would have ruled, but you had to get in heat over that pitiful human. Imagine, you

mating with him and bringing him here. It was so easy to slip a little something in his drink and watch him *die*."

Pain swamped her, nearly crippling her. They had all assumed her father had died of natural causes. None of them had suspected anything else. The heartache increased along with the wind. Kalina watched her mother's face and plainly saw the devastation, her eyes unseeing with it.

Jayde laughed. "How was I to know you were already breeding with his brats? I had to bide my time. You are a trusting fool, Niya. It was so easy to kill your husband and children and turn the one left against you. "

The fury in the room paused as shock ran through her mother. Kalina saw the calculation in Jayde's gaze a second before she struck. Her hand flashed out and she hit Niya across the face. Niya looked at her, death replacing the pain, and Kalina shivered at the side view of the expression.

Hearing running footsteps, she saw the other Amazonian Warriors fill the room, all brandishing weapons.

Jayde shrieked at them. "Help me."

They lowered their weapons, and one stepped forward. "We follow Mother Earth, not you."

Jayde shrieked again. "I have been your leader for centuries. She has done nothing for you. All she does is mourn. Give me your loyalty and I will let you rule with me."

The woman looked at Jayde and smiled grimly. "You like to think you lead. You cannot rule with deception, Jayde."

The woman looked at Kalina, nodded, and stepped back with the rest of the Amazonian Warriors. Kalina, having recognized her childhood friend, Tempest, nodded in return. She had always known Tempest would turn out to be a leader. Returning her attention to her mother she saw she still held Jayde steady. Jayde, realizing she would get no help, lashed out, hitting Niya across the face again. Niya let her, saying nothing.

Kalina saw the wind roar in wilder. It whipped around the women, blocking them from view. The only sound in the room was the howling of the wind, it subsided as quickly as it rose. Flowing out the windows. All was silent.

Kalina stared as her mother stepped over the prone, bloody body of her aunt and came toward her.

Niya's face was contained as she approached Kalina and took her hands. "Daughter, I'm sorry for all you have suffered. Go now, while we handle this mess, and I will speak with you later."

Kalina protested. "Mom, I have to—"

"Shh..." Niya silenced her. "No. We'll straighten it out later. Go now. The only clue I have of Eve is a riddle. 'Where bay meets Lindbergh, and hits below the belt, will Eve be found and risen on the place of Thomas.'" Her mother touched Kalina's hair then her cheek. "That is all I know. Use it and find the Book and Eve."

Kalina touched her mother's cheek in return before turning to go. Taking Ryne's hand, she went to the door.

"Niya, you bitch." Jayde's voice ripped through the room.

Turning, Kalina heard the whistle of a blade slice through the air. Jayde flew backward as the dagger imbedded in her shoulder. Blood blossomed at the site of the wound. She looked at them, hate in her eyes. She would live.

"God, I always wanted to do that," a voice said.

Kalina met Tempest's gaze.

Tempest grinned. "I heard you're a big shot over there in Phoenix Intelligence Agency. Why don't you give me a job?"

Kalina looked at her and grinned. "Pass the training program and I will."

Tempest's smile widened. "Expect to see me real soon."

She turned and went to help the others with Jayde, who had started to shriek again.

Her mother focused on her. "Don't raid my warriors for your Agency, Kalina."

Kalina smiled. "I'll only take those who want to come and pass the program."

She saw the Warriors turn and look at her. Niya sighed, shaking her head. "Christ, you always were a troublemaker." Niya grinned and waved.

Kalina watched her mother walk to Jayde and stand over her. "Let's talk about your plan and all your misdeeds, oh sister of mine. Take her to the Hall of Mirrors."

Jayde wailed. Kalina turned, and taking Ryne's hand, led him out the door. Jayde's screams increased.

"What is the Hall of Mirrors?" Ryne's voice was quiet.

She looked at him. "It will display everything she has done tenfold. They will lock her in there forever."

"Why didn't your mother just kill her?"

"A true warrior gives a punishment that meets the atrocity done to you." Kalina, even though she hadn't spoken to her mother for centuries, knew the way she thought. She looked at Ryne. "She is like you in her beliefs of putting blame where it belongs. Besides, death is too painless a punishment for all Jayde has done."

"You're wrong." His hand on her arm stopped her. Ryne raised his hand to her cheek. "She would be a bloody shell by now. I would have killed her for all the pain she caused you."

Kalina heard the fury in his voice. Leaning into him, she felt his grip tighten. Raising her face to his, she looked in his cold, blue gaze and knew he spoke the truth.

"Ah, you make me all warm inside, being ready to kill for me," Kalina teased.

His lips twitched. "Yeah, you're rubbing off on me. Take us home."

He leaned in and kissed her. Kissing him back, Kalina did as he requested.

Ryne pulled away and looked around. Following his gaze, Kalina saw she had brought them to his bedroom.

Ryne sighed, looking longingly at the bed. "I wish we could. But we have to figure out the riddle your mom gave us."

He turned away, but Kalina grabbed his arm. He looked back at her, a question on his face. Instead of answering, she moved in and kissed him. Ryne's arms banded around her. Kalina turned them and pushed him onto the bed. He fell back staring at her with a smile on his lips.

Chapter Eight

Watching the hunger in his gaze, Kalina lifted her hand and loosened her hair, letting it drop around her.

Ryne's eyes heated in reaction. Staying focused on him, Kalina placed a knee on each side of his body and dropped down on all fours. Ryne leaned back on his arms and watched her. Kalina crawled up his body as he scooted back on the bed, stopping when his head hit the pillows. Kalina kept going until her face hovered over his. She looked at him lying beneath her, his inky black hair spread below him, his pale blue eyes flashing with heat.

Smiling, Kalina dropped her lips to his, Ryne's arms came around her before he rolled them over. Startled, she looked at him with wide eyes.

He smiled, a devilish sparkle in his gaze. "My turn."

Kalina moaned as he slipped inside her with a deep thrust. Lowering her eyes, she watched his face as he thrust into her waiting heat. It was fierce, while in contrast, his thrust was lazy. Ryne twisted his hips, setting off devastating sensations. Raising her hands, she put them on his shoulders, gripping them as he moved in and out. Her pussy clenched his cock greedily. Ryne looked into her eyes. Kalina's breath caught at the tenderness in his gaze. Ryne smiled and pumped his hips into her. Putting her legs around him, she felt him slip deeper. She gasped, while he groaned at the feeling.

Kalina screamed as her release slapped her over the edge with a force that left her breathless. Ryne continued to pump into her as she undulated around his hard shaft. His thrusts set off another orgasm, and another. They happened so quickly they overlapped each other and she screamed in reaction.

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Hearing Kalina's cry, Ryne increased his thrusts, driving on her orgasms, more and more. He hissed as she clenched around his cock. Kalina ground down against him, taking him deeper into her wetness.

"Kalina," Ryne panted.

"Ryne," she moaned in response.

Ryne felt the pressure release and his cock pulsed as his orgasm took him. Roaring loudly, he pumped his hips as Kalina milked him. Her fingernails scored his shoulder, making him hiss. She screamed again. Twisting his hips, he felt another orgasm rip through her. Leaning over, he closed his lips on hers, swallowing her cry of passion.

Kalina's hands gripped his back and pulled him deeper into her. Pumping faster, he felt another release grip him. His cock pulsed, filling her up. She continued to grip him, her hold harsh. She kissed him wildly. Grunting, Ryne slumped against her. Her kiss gentled and she released him. Sighing, he snuggled his head against her breast, listening to her heart beat a rapid tattoo.

Kalina's hands stroked his hair, lulling him to sleep. Hands pushing at him woke him and blearily, he looked up at her flushed honey face.

“Give me a minute.”

Kalina laughed. “No. I was thinking of the riddle.”

Ryne groaned and rolled off her. He shivered at the feel of leaving her pussy.

“What about the riddle?” He yawned, exhausted.

Kalina sat down crossed-legged. “My mom said the only clue she knew of Eve was, ‘Where bay meets Lindbergh, and hits below the belt, will Eve be found and risen on the place of Thomas.’ I was thinking of it, and I wondered what the hell it could mean.”

Ryne sat up, crossing his legs under him and faced her. He saw her mind racing, wheels turning. Watching her, he thought of it. The words connected, and he looked at her, seeing the same answer on her face.

“Lindbergh Bay in St. Thomas.” They said it simultaneously.

Kalina flew off the bed, her bare butt flashing in his face. Reaching out, he touched the soft globe.

Kalina glanced over her shoulder and grinned. “Later.”

Chuckling, he got off the bed and waved his hand to don his clothing. He looked at Kalina and saw she was dressed in her hunting clothes. He took in the fitted vest that partially covered her navel. Walking to her, he trailed his fingers along it and she shivered in reaction. Watching her amber eyes, he held her and took them away to St. Thomas.

Soon enough, they were looking at the rolling surf of Lindbergh Bay. Turning his head, Ryne saw a group of people standing in front of them.

A man turned his attention to them. "You're too late."

Ryne felt it, the rush of power. He saw a woman holding the Book behind the man.

The woman murmured, "Uststst eheheh ststst Risiieii Eevee sususus."

Ryne yelled to Kalina. "Get the Book and stop her."

Kalina nodded and flew at the woman. The man reached for her, but she dodged out of the way and hit the woman, knocking her back. The man turned to grab her.

Streaking over to them, Ryne went in front of the man, punching out as he did so. The man flew backward, then flipped in the air, landing on his feet.

Ryne spared Kalina a brief glance and saw she and the woman were locked in combat. He winced as the woman kicked Kalina in the stomach. She took the woman's foot, pulled her up, flipped her and punched out.

The woman skittered across the beach, falling in front of the man. Kalina looked at Ryne and held up *The Book of Terra*. He saw the sun glinting off the golden pages. Kalina materialized a sack and put the Book inside, then put the strap over her body. She looked at him and nodded. As one, they turned to face the man and woman.

The two stood side by side and they rushed Kalina and Ryne. Reaching out, he grabbed Kalina's hands and swung her in the air. She kicked out with her

legs, knocking both adversaries back. The man flipped in the air, falling hard on his face. The woman skidded across the beach and groaned. Bringing Kalina up and over his head, Ryne felt her thigh settle over his shoulder. His fingers close together, Ryne pushed his hands out. He glanced up and saw Kalina resting on his shoulder mirroring him. He looked back at the man and woman who staggered to their feet. The man rushed them.

“Ailllellelell Detetetethhh Crulliie!” Kalina sounded her war cry as she flipped off his shoulder and into the air. She flew over the man and hit the woman’s body. They flew back down the beach. Ryne waited for the man to come at him and moved his hands in a fast circular motion, driving him back.

Pulling his hand back, he punched out hard and whispered his order. “Die.”

The man shuddered and fell, his eyes glazed over. Stepping over him, Ryne wiped his mouth. Looking down at his fingers, he saw the blood glistening on the tips. Shaking his hand free of blood, he walked away.

A wash of power made him stagger and fall to his knees. Then it held him immobile. Turning his head, his eyes met pale yellow. Ryne took in her devastating, rich honey-toned face—a face carved by a master artist. A sloping forehead led to sharply defined cheeks, an aristocratic nose, full lips and a firm chin. The look in her slightly tilted eyes was death. She smiled, displaying a sharp set of teeth.

“Who has awakened me from my slumber?” She eyed him and licked her lips. “Whose sweet blood touched my lips?”

She moved to him in a blur and clamped her hand around his throat. Slowly, she raised him to her face, rubbing her nose over his, breathing along his skin. She leaned in, closed her eyes and sniffed.

Her eyes opened again, their eerie yellow color flashing with red. “Firebird, have you come to welcome me home?” She leaned in to kiss him.

“Bitch, you better let go of my mate,” Kalina yelled over the sound of the surf.

Ryne felt the yellow-eyed woman flinch, then look behind her. He saw Kalina raising her sword and slashing down. The woman flicked her hand, pitching him down the beach. He shook out his stupor and watched in fear as she turned, catching Kalian’s sword as it descended and saw the stranger smile. Getting up, he felt weak as he ran toward them.

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Kalina watched the flash of death in the woman’s yellow eyes. Eve gripped her neck with one hand, wrenching her sword out of her grip with the other and pitching it away. She raised her hand and slashed down, claws extended. Instinct made Kalina raise her hand. Nothing happened. Looking at Eve, she saw her attention was arrested by bracelet she wore. Punching her hand out against Eve, she winced as pain shot through her hand. The other woman didn’t even flinch.

She peered at Kalina curiously. "You wear my bracelet yet attack me. Why?"

Kalina gaped at her. "Eve, you're going to destroy the world."

The woman looked at her, shocked, then her eyes lit with laughter. "Who told you such a foolish thing?"

Kalina looked at her, confused. "You're Armageddon."

Eve shook her head. "Are they still telling that old fib?"

She chuckled. Kalina still watched her cautiously. Her eyes had changed to a soft whiskey.

"Let her go, Eve," a harsh voice sounded behind them.

Eve turned in a graceful motion. Kalina saw her mother striding down the beach, her Amazonian Warriors armed for battle following behind her.

Eve gasped. "Niya, what are you doing here?"

Niya stopped a little away from them, raised her hand and flung a bolt of lightning. Eve's hand flashed out, catching it. The lightning raced up her arm, across her shoulder and into her mouth. She sucked it in. Eve looked back at Niya.

"Why is everyone *fucking* attacking me?" Eve asked.

Niya brought up another lightning bolt. "Let go of my daughter."

Eve looked at her. "She's your daughter. Oh Niya, your child."

Niya growled. "Let her go."

Eve looked at Kalina before she let her go. "Oh, yes. So sorry."

Kalina collapsed on the sand and stared up at the woman. Eve looked bemused as she stared back at her.

“Get away from her, Eve.” Niya’s voice was a deep growl.

Eve stared at Niya, confusion on her face. “Why do you act so cold, Niya? I thought we were friends.”

Niya looked confused, staring at Eve, bewildered.

Eve returned her look. “Ah... my spell worked too well, erasing all the memories of me from everyone.”

Eve opened her hand and blew on it. A pale yellow mist rose into the air, drenching them. Kalina watched her mother stagger, then right herself.

When she turned her attention to Eve, Niya had tears in her eyes. “Oh god, Eve. Why did you do this? Wipe away all my memories of you and our friendship?”

Eve looked at her, a sad smile on her lips. “I didn’t mean to be gone so long. I couldn’t bear life without Adam and I had to heal. I never thought it would be so many millenniums. Can we continue our friendship, Niya?”

Eve held out a hand to her mother. Niya looked at it and walked forward, linking her fingers with Eve’s. She smiled at Eve and pushed their shoulders against one another.

“You always liked to show you were more powerful,” Niya grumbled.

Eve laughed. “Of course, since I am.”

Niya looked at her. “I’ve had millenniums on you. Don’t forget it.”

Eve waved a graceful hand. "Whatever. How is Phoenix?"

Kalina, watching them, interjected. "You know each other and Phoenix?"

Eve turned to Kalina and smiled gently. "Of course, child. I built it to protect humanity."

Niya nodded. "Yes, I remember now. She did want protection for her children."

"Yes. I left it with you, Niya," Eve said. "How is it doing?"

Kalina's eyes narrowed as she looked at the guilt flashing on her mother's face. "You're in charge of Phoenix Intelligence Agency?"

The guilt increased. "Not really. I let Christos have free rein."

"Really, Niya, no one *lets* me do anything." Christos interrupted, drawing their attention. He walked up to the women with Ryne. Ryne helped Kalina stand and he put his hands around her waist. Christos walked over to Niya and Eve. Her mother gasped and shuddered, then stilled.

Christos smiled fiercely at her mother, then turned to Eve. He nodded his head. "You shouldn't have cast such a spell, Eve. Kalina could have killed you and endangered us all."

Eve looked at him, then at Niya. "He is very insolent and delusional. She would never have killed me."

Christos chuckled. "Kalina?" He gestured toward her with his hands.

Knowing what he wanted, Kalina touched her stomach and felt her tattoo heat. Drawing it out, she held it up. It glinted in the sunlight. She saw the acknowledgement in Eve's eyes.

"The Dagger of Humanity." Eve nodded her head respectfully. "The one thing that can kill me. Niya, you taught her well."

"I know." Kalina heard the pride in her mother's voice.

Eve focused on Kalina. "For my life, I will grant you your deepest desire."

Kalina shook her head. "I want nothing."

Eve smiled gently. "Ah, child, that is a lie. I can see it in your eyes.

Briuisies."

Kalina felt a massive ripple of power, then stillness. Tears filled her mother's eyes. Turning, Kalina gasped as she saw Killian, her brother, and Kaitya, her sister. They walked up to her, hand in hand, and hugged her tight. Pulling them to her, Kalina heard their heartbeats, knew they'd been returned to her. With her arms wrapped around them, Kalina looked up to see the tears raining down their mother's face.

Eve stood between Ryne and Christos, watching the joyous reunion unfold.

"Thank you." Emotion made Kalina's throat tight.

Eve nodded. "They are Firebirds and Amazonian Warriors, a fierce mix."

Her sister kissed Kalina's cheek, and then her brother. Both of them stepped back and went to embrace their mother. They reached Eve and nodded

respectfully. With a brief look she nodded back regally. Christos embraced Killian fiercely, then shoved him only to have Killian shove him back and laugh. They put their arms around each other. Christos reached for Kaitya with the other hand and led them away down the beach.

Eve watched them. "Ummm...he is a luscious piece of manhood." She studied Christos' retreating back.

Niya glared at her. "Keep your hands and eyes off, Eve."

Eve winked at her, a devilish twinkle in her gaze. "You have a claim on him?"

Niya shifted and glanced at Kalina watching them blatantly listening.

Niya grabbed Eve and dragged her away, whispering, "It's complicated."

Eve laughed, not lowering her voice. "God, you're still a prude."

Niya glared at Eve and huffed away. Eve ran after her and grabbed her arm. Niya stuck out her leg to trip Eve and Eve pushed her in retaliation. They linked arms, going down the beach chuckling.

Kalina heard her mother say, "I have so much to tell you. I've missed you."

Eve replied, the emotion raw in her voice, "I've missed you also, my friend. I want to hear it all."

Her mother looked back at Kalina and blew her a kiss. Eve looked at her and smiled, an ageless look on her face. They turned and disappeared behind the others.

Ryne's arms came around her waist she leaned back into him. Raising her head, she looked at him, at the love shown in his gaze. He lowered his head and kissed her.

Pulling back, he looked at her, regret plain on his face. "We have to go back and debrief."

Kalina looked out at the clear crystal waters of Lindbergh Bay and turned to him. "Later. Let's take a honeymoon."

Ryne smiled. "Where do you want to go?"

Kalina reached up and cupped his cheek. "Right here."

Ryne lowered her to the sand and Kalina gazed into his eyes, lit by the setting sun.

"I love you, my husband."

Ryne smiled in response. "I give my soul into your keeping, my wife."

Kalina looked at him, resting her hand over the steady beat of his heart. Ryne leaned in and kissed her. Kalina felt a gentle indigo rain wash over them.

About the Author:

Taige Crenshaw has been enthralled with the written word from the time she picked up her first book. It wasn't long before she started to make up her own tales of romance.

Her novels are set in the modern day between people who know what they want and how to get it. Taige also sets her stories in the future with vast universes between beautiful, strange and unique beings with lots of spice and sensuality added to her work.

Always hard at work creating new and exciting places Taige can be found curled up with a hot novel with exciting characters when she is not creating her own. Join her in the fun and frolic, with interesting people and far reaches of the world in her novels.

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