



When two strangers meet by chance, their shared ecstasy challenges cultural differences and changes the course of their future.

Two societies have lived apart on a remote planet for generations. At the top of the Dwelling live the Aerotaun, people who have built wings to help them fly. The bottom is occupied by the Marimar, hearty swimmers who live and feed by the sea. Because of the mystery surrounding their ancestors' landing, suspicions and distrust thrive between the cultures.

Until a taboo encounter occurs on an isolated beach.

Ariana, an Aerotaun, cannot resist the seductive allure of the forbidden Andreus. Their few days alone ignite sexual exploration and uninhibited ecstasy. But when Ariana finally learns the shocking secret about their purpose on the planet, she must decide if her heart belongs with her people or the sexy Marimar.

Warning: This title contains the following: explicit sex and graphic language.

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Edited by Tera Kleinfelter
Cover by Kim Killion

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Taboo

Leslie Dicken

Dedication

This book is dedicated first to Betty Hanawa. I learned everything about writing romantic erotica from her skill and generosity. She was also instrumental in helping me take this story from my dreams to a plotted novel.

Also, to Lisa Paitz Spindler, who critiqued the story for me once it was written.

Chapter One

He was forbidden.

Ariana hovered behind the branches of a tree, where she stole glimpses of a lone man on the beach. He was a Marimar, that she was sure of. His wide chest and sculpted shoulders told the story of a man with strong lungs and powerful arms.

She had not seen one this close before. But then again, she had not ventured this far from the Dwelling either.

Ariana settled on a heavy limb and watched him hobble along the sand. He must have injured his ankle, for his gait was strange, more of a limp.

Even so, her mouth watered at the corded muscles on his legs. The small red cloth at the juncture of his legs did not cover much of his warm tawny-colored skin.

He was a surprising sight for her to see today, the first day of her solitary journey. She'd left early this morning, slipping out before Hanken could notice her gone. She must make this decision on her own, not have her betrothed's soft whispers distracting her.

The man below stumbled, then fell to his knees, his roar of pain sending birds into flight.

Without thought, Ariana dropped from the tree limb and landed on the warm sand only feet away from him.

The Marimar snapped his head up, eyes like the deep ocean waters widened in alarm. But then his face softened, the corners of his full lips curled.

"Aren't you a lovely sight."

His voice skated down her spine, setting her wings fluttering. She cleared her throat, found courage in the crossing of her arms. "My name is Ariana. Do you need assistance?"

"Ariana." He rolled the word with a sensual twist, sparking heat deep inside her belly. "I am Andreus."

She swallowed and stepped forward. Never had she been so close to a Marimar. Usually they were several hundred feet below.

"You-you are hurt."

He nodded, then with a grimace rose to his feet. Lifting one foot tenderly, he tried to hop away from the water's edge.

"I can help you." Ariana took another step closer to him, the scent of salt and something else—something wild and raw—tickled her nose.

Andreas raised a dark brow, but leaned on her shoulder. His weight and strength were far more than she ever imagined. Hanken, and others like her, were of slight build. It made them lighter and easier to fly.

She helped him hobble up the beach to a line of trees, where a makeshift shelter jutted out across the dry sand. Once inside, he dropped to the ground. "I thank you."

Ariana pulled her gaze from the hard curves of his chest, where virtually no hair covered his bronzed skin. He fascinated her. Her fingers itched to touch the long length of his legs, the broadness of his back.

"How-how will you make it back?"

He smiled. "I must wait for my ankle to heal. I cannot swim like this, nor can I walk."

"Oh." She fiddled with her belt, jiggling the wings on her back.

"And you?" His sea-colored eyes stared into hers without reservation. "Have you been blown off-course?"

Ariana grinned, for she *had* been blown off-course in the past by strong gales. "No. I am on a journey of solitude, but I saw you down on the beach."

"Solitude? I much prefer company myself." His lips curved into a wicked grin, dancing the butterflies in her stomach again. How is that Hanken never caused these reactions in her?

She slipped off the wing pack and sat carefully on the sand. The rough texture of the grains scratched her legs, but she did not want to insult him by brushing it away. "My Journey of Solitude is a rite of passage. Every Aerotaun takes one. I will also decide if I want to marry the mate who has asked for me."

"Ah. That is your custom, is it?"

"Do the Mar—?" She cut herself short, fearing the word Marimar might be considered an insult with his people. "What are your marriage customs?"

Andreas stretched his full length and leaned on an elbow. Ariana gulped at the bulge beneath his cloth. By the stars, was everything on him so much larger than what she knew?

His soft chuckle brought her attention back to his face. "Let's not talk of marriage, tell me instead about you."

"Me? I am as you see, an Aerotaun. What else do you care to know?"

His gaze traveled from her the top of her head, down her arms to the crossing of her ankles. She shifted under stare, feeling naked, yet worshipped. Her nipples tightened, her breath caught.

"I want to know everything." His voice rumbled, like the far off calling of a storm. "I have never had the chance to be so close to an Aerotaun before."

"I've told you my name and why I am out here alone."

Andreas lifted his chin. "Your wings. Tell me about them."

A breeze blew off the ocean, lifting his bark-colored strands and twisting them about his shoulders. His muscles flinched as he shifted. How would their strength feel as his hands glided along her skin?

She looked away, guilty at the thoughts tumbling through her mind. Only last night she'd lain in Hanken's arms.

Focusing on the blowing leaves of the hut, she leaned across her bent knees. "Many years ago, our ancestors realized that we needed an easier way to get our food than climbing the trees from the roof of the Dwelling. So they created mechanical wings."

She reached back and lifted her pair. "We are custom fitted for them at different stages of our life so that they are tailored perfectly. It increases aerodynamics."

Andreas sat up. "May I?"

Ariana hesitated before handing him her wings. "Please be gentle." His thick fingers looked as if they could puncture the gauzy fabric at the slightest pressure.

"Ah, I wouldn't dream of damaging them." He held them as if they were a newly born babe. "But then again," his grin turned mischievous, "if they were ruined, you'd not be able to fly away from me."

Her heart trembled with the idea. Stay here with him? It was absurd, of course. She had her Journey to complete and then her life to continue. And yet, Andreas was so compelling, so foreign, so completely enigmatic. She shivered just being near to him.

He handed her back the wings. "That is impressive engineering. But your culture has a history of intellect, do they not?"

She brushed some sand from her ankles and stood. "Yes, you must know the stories of The Landing."

He raised an eyebrow, but otherwise didn't move. "Of course we were told stories. But who is to say they are the same as yours?"

"Perhaps they are not." It was just as well, there were many truths she'd rather not divulge.

She glanced at the sun, which had now reached the halfway point between the sky and the sea. "I should move on. Do you have food to keep you?"

"Leaving so soon?"

But she must. Her body hummed with his presence, a deep void opened within her core. This Marimar was dangerous to her future.

"I'm happy to find you food first, but you must decide quickly, for light is failing."

Andreas straightened out his injured leg and nodded toward the water. "I prefer shrimp and crabs, but any fish will do."

Although Ariana detected humor in his words, her lungs tightened with the request. She could not possibly go into the ocean. "Have-haven't you had any of the sweet nectar fruit?"

His face brightened with that wicked grin again, making her knees weak. "Sounds perfect."

Numbly, she nodded and re-hooked her wings. She would bring him back the fruit and a few other nuts and berries to last him a day or so. Then, she would be on her way to complete her Journey of Solitude. Without ever getting her feet wet.

Andreas's gut clenched as he watched her take off into the air, her graceful legs and arms reminding him of a fairy he'd once seen in an ancient book.

He'd find a way to keep her with him. After spending just a few moments with Ariana, he had to make her his own. He always wondered why the women of his own kind did not entice him much. He did not find them alluring. They were ordinary. Too much like himself.

But Ariana lit a fire in his groin. Her smooth skin, long limbs and elegant features reminded him of other delicate creatures he'd seen fly overhead. She was a bird, a butterfly, an angel.

Hell, he'd never felt such heat in his blood, he'd never longed so much for the mere taste of one woman's skin.

Also, she was an Aerotaun. Exactly what he needed to further his goals. The fact she was so forbidden, so taboo, made her all the more perfect.

He also knew she would withdraw quickly. The Aerotaun were said to be traditional, analytical, conservative. She would not bend to him easily. Andreas grinned. But that made the challenge even more fun.

He reached for his makeshift cane and pulled himself to stand. His ankle throbbed, matching the ache in his groin. He needed cool water to bring the swelling down in both areas.

The sand was warm beneath his bare feet, reassuring and comforting. But it wasn't until he reached the chilled licks of the sea water that his tension eased.

Pain assaulted his ankle but he pressed forward, impervious to the temperature. He was at home in the water, free and alive. He could swim nearly anywhere, dive many feet below. Nearly all food and medicine were derived from the bounty of the sea. It was in his culture's history. First they'd conquered the ocean by boat, now they lived with it as one.

Andreas hobbled in until the water reached his chest. Fish swam about his waist, between his legs. Many of the ocean creatures had become used to him. Dolphins and turtles often swam by for a pat.

He looked up as sea birds flew near the horizon. Water and air together. If those animals combined the two, why couldn't the two cultures live together?

For generations the two peoples lived separate lives. Though tales of The Landing were often repeated, no one gave a clear answer as to why there was a split in the survivors.

Or why there was no longer communication between the two cultures.

Yet for years his younger brother longed to cross the ocean. His little sister envied the flight of the Aerotaun. But his people were restricted. Forced to remain locked to the tide, which always brought them right back to the Dwelling.

Andreus ducked his head under the water, then smoothed his hair back from his face. Ariana should be returning soon. He knew she wanted to be on her way before darkness settled, but he intended for her to stay.

A disconcerting emptiness filled his limbs as it always did when he left the sea. But Ariana would not join him in the ocean when she returned. He saw the fear darken her eyes. Other than a bath, he doubted she'd ever put her toes in the water.

He'd nearly reached the hut when she landed beside him. In her hands she held a basket or pouch, made from tree leaves.

"I've brought back sweet nectar fruit, toko tree nuts and razza berries. They should keep you well for a bit."

Andreus smiled his appreciation and pointed to the back corner. He'd built this hut years ago, gradually adding comforts to sustain him while alone. "There is a rolled-up pallet of leaves. Would you mind spreading it out on the sand?"

She set down her basket of treasures, slipped off her wings, and quickly set about the task. He watched her slight hips and round bottom bending and adjusting as she worked. Beneath the wet cloth, his cock stirred.

Ariana turned and faced him. "Anything else I can do for you?"

Ah, yes, many things. Allow him to taste her peach colored lips or bury his nose into the sweet smell of her silvery hair. But he must move slowly with her or she would disappear within seconds.

"Fire?" Andreus motioned to the pit he dug yesterday when he'd first arrived. Charcoaled embers were all that remained of yesterday's blaze.

But from her widened eyes, he could see that she had never been taught to make one. That would not be the only lesson he gave her tonight.

He pointed to his injury. "Please don't go until you've helped me with the fire and dined with me."

She hesitated, bit her lip, then glanced at the setting orange sun. "I-I have never been on the ground during the dark."

He leaned on the staff. "Do you fear predators?" Like himself, perhaps?

Ariana covered her arms, as if a shiver had coursed through her. "I don't know. It's frightening to do something you've never done."

Andreus studied her vibrant eyes. "On the contrary, I find it rather thrilling." He pointed to the small stack of wood he'd gathered yesterday. "Stay with me, help me with the fire. I promise to keep you safe."

She glanced again at the sun and finally nodded. Anticipation skated down his spine, roused his groin.

Together, they gathered the wood and built the fire. Nights did not get overly cool on this planet, but the light of the fire always brought a sense of contentment and protection.

Ariana gathered up her basket and placed it on the leaf pallet between them. “Which would you like to try first?”

A hint of shyness lurked beneath her lowered lashes, her tightened lips. Despite another man offering for her, Ariana was attracted to him—a Marimar. That knowledge would be very useful.

He picked up a Toko Tree Nut. “So tell me of the man you are to marry.”

She shifted and silvery hair fell across her eyes. “His name is Hanken. He will be a good provider, take care of me.”

So much that she did not say. Andreus chewed the nut, an interesting combination of oily and sweet, then reached in the basket for the sweet nectar fruit.

“But do you love him?”

Her face blanched. “I do not know if it is love. That is one of the reasons why I take this journey, to look inside myself and decide if he is the right man for me.”

He tossed the fruit in the air, “What if he isn’t?” then caught it.

“I-I am not beholden to him. There have been others who have decided not to go through with the pledge.”

Cooler air blew in from the ocean, dipping the flame and rustling the leaves of the hut. Ariana glanced away then took a bite of a sweet nectar fruit. Pink juice glazed her lips.

Andreus swallowed, desire spiraling through his bloodstream. He traced a line down her smooth jaw then brushed at the liquid on her succulent lips. Her breath caught but she did not move.

He lowered his voice, felt it tremble as he spoke. “How can you know if he is the one if you do not experience another?”

Chapter Two

Ariana held her breath as Andreus smoothed his finger across her lips. Warmth flooded her legs, tingled that spot Hanken had hurt upon entry. But it wasn't pain she felt now.

Deep green eyes held her spellbound, pulling her under to drown in their depths. She felt his hand slip behind her head and tug her toward him.

She allowed herself to be lost to his strength, surrendering to his raw, male power. Her nipples peaked, her womb ached.

Andreus laid back and pulled her atop his outstretched body. Firm muscles supported her weight, a rigid arousal jabbed into her thigh.

"Tell me," he whispered in a voice thick and gruff. "Did your lover kiss you like this?"

He lifted his head and captured her mouth. His hands held her head in place as his lips and tongue ravaged her. Stroking deeply, his tongue danced with hers, spinning her thoughts, obliterating her memories.

Andreus tasted of the tree nuts. And yet there was more. He tasted of passion, of mystery, of something that was so taboo she could not have imagined such pleasure.

Ariana returned his strokes, suckling his tongue until a moan broke from his throat.

He pulled away and dropped his head back on the pallet. "Well?" he said through erratic breathing.

Ariana cleared her throat and slid off to his side, away from his hurt ankle. She laid her head on his carved chest, listening to the rhythmic beat of his heart.

"Did he kiss you like that?"

"No," she answered quietly. Hanken's kisses were quick and clumsy. He was more interested in finding relief than awakening her body.

Andreus smoothed his hand down her arm. "What was it like for you, Ariana? How did he make you his own?"

She glanced down at the large rise under his cloth, her pulse skipping. She had never seen Hanken's body completely naked. He'd undressed in the dark before taking her virginity.

"He kissed me first." Ariana rested her hand over his stomach, the bronze skin flinched beneath her fingertips. A light sprinkling of hair began just beneath her palm, leading the way to the mystery beneath the damp cloth.

"How was his kiss?" The words were tight, edgy.

“It was quick, a few thrusts of his tongue. He kissed my neck next, but then not again.”

Andreas stroked her hair. “Then what happened, Ariana? Did he give you pleasure?”

She lifted her head, peered into those eyes the color of the sea. “Why do you want to know so much?”

“Because you cannot make a decision for your future without knowing what you are missing.”

“I cannot possibly experience everything there is in the span of a few days.”

His sexy grin returned, curling her toes. “Not everything, but enough to make you realize you are making the wrong decision.”

Ariana rose to her elbow. “Are you so certain of yourself?”

A wicked gleam danced in his eyes. “I don’t need to be.”

In the next instant, he rolled over on top of her and ensared her beneath his body. The hard length of him stretched across her body, shielding her, trapping her. Awareness swarmed through her like the gale of a tempest.

She wanted him gone, to be free of his sweet temptation. But she could not say it. The frantic whoosh of her pulse would not let her speak.

“Give me the chance.” He kissed her ear, nuzzled her neck. “Allow me to show you what you missed, what you will miss if you go back to him.”

Her throat was parched as she tried to defend Hanken. “It-it always hurts the first time.”

Andreas lifted his head, pinning her with his direct stare. “Yes, but the pain does not have to linger. Had he cared enough he could have given you pleasure.”

Ariana opened her mouth to defend her betrothed but found she had nothing to say. Hanken did not take his time with her. He had found relief within her, murmured an apology, then rolled away. Later, he wanted to take her again, but she demurred, claiming the ache remained between her legs.

Now, with Andreas’s rigid arousal throbbing on her thigh, a different sort of ache left her feeling hollow. As if she needed something to fill her deep inside.

“Perhaps he will change after we marry.” The claim was weak, even she knew that, but still Ariana felt a loyalty to the man who asked for her.

Andreas raised an eyebrow. “Or not.”

Twilight brought the sounds of insects and cooler temperatures. Her stomach hungered for dinner, but the comfort Andreas provided her outweighed any meal.

He kissed the curve of her ear, his tongue leaving a damp trail to her shoulder. Then it circled over the hollow spot at the base of her throat before continuing over to the other side.

“Will you allow me, Ariana?” He spoke against her neck, hot breath lighting a fire on her skin. “Allow me to show you what he did not.”

She closed her eyes. The insects chirped, like the songs of early morning birds. Leaves rustled in the evening breeze. Fire crackled and snapped. And somewhere, not too far in the distance, waves crashed along the sandy beach. Surprisingly, she felt at peace.

As long as she was not in the water.

Ariana moved her fingers up Andreus's back, sighing as the corded muscles tensed beneath her touch. "Show me."

He did not need to be told twice.

Like the strong current of the sea, desire blazed within his cells. Ariana tasted like the sweetest nectar and he wanted to feast on it until he could feast no more.

His fingers grazed over her tunic, flipping open one button at a time. Unlike his culture's clothing, where buttons were made of seashells, her people used the shells of nuts. At last she was undressed and her small breasts were free. Being such a slight build she did not need the bindings women of his culture wore. No, her lovely, coral-tipped buds sprang free and open for his taste.

Ariana sighed and turned her head. Her eyes were still closed, but her lips wore the bright hue of desire. That innocence and trust sent him nearly over the edge. To think, they had never met before the sun crested over the treetops and now she lay nearly bare beneath him.

His injury throbbed, but he ignored the pain. Once he'd been bitten by a shark, but he controlled his agony long enough to seek aid. And he'd not let this moment slip by due to the careless twist of an ankle.

Andreus dipped his head to her shimmering skin. Lapping the tight knot of her nipple, he felt her shift beneath him. Her hips slid sideways, then jerked upward.

Pleasure. She would feel it, know it, crave it before he was through with her. This angel from the trees would not return to her foolish lover to be used in such a crass manner. No, all women, no matter their size, had bodies made for worship.

He moved to the other breast, swirling the peak with his tongue, nipping it between his teeth. She cried out, arched her back.

Heat flooded his legs, strained his cock. It leapt, restless for release.

Darkness descended upon them in the make-shift hut. Lit only by the low fire and twinkling stars, Andreus still saw the flowing silver strands of her hair. She was beautiful. His little bird.

She tasted like the sweetest fruit as he licked his way down her stomach. But it wasn't until his lips rested upon the silky strands of her mound did Ariana's breath catch.

"What are you...?" Her voice cracked, then died away.

The man who took her virginity showed her nothing of bliss. The only desire that night had been his. Andreus would take no pleasure of his own until Ariana had found hers.

Without answering her question, he kissed the inside of her velvety thighs. She wriggled beneath him, igniting the fervor he tried to keep restrained.

Plunging forth, he licked her mound, then thrust his tongue within the folds. She bucked her hips, but he wrapped his hands around her waist to hold her still.

Insistent on her finding gratification, Andreus licked and suckled her sensitive pearl. He lapped her cream, oily and sweet like the toko tree nut, like a winged goddess should taste.

Ariana clenched her thighs around his head, dug her fingers into his hair. He felt the tension in her rise, stretch. But he was relentless in his pursuit. He wanted this woman to have the ecstasy she deserved. Come morning, she would not want to leave his side.

He rolled the glistening pearl under his tongue, bringing a cry to her lips. "Please...oh, please!"

Andreus knew what she cried for. More than just his tongue within her damp folds, she yearned for fulfillment. His cock begged to be the one to assuage her need. It swelled, then pumped out a small trickle of fluid.

But it was too soon for that. He wanted more control over his actions when he finally took her. Right now he was too rampant, too wild to last long.

Instead, he pulled his mouth away from her and slipped two fingers deep inside her wet channel.

Ariana's sob echoed in the forest behind them. Her sheath convulsed, flooded his skin. Hips jerking, she rose up on her elbows, panting.

Her flushed skin and swollen lips spiked a raging urgency.

Unashamed, he reached beneath his cloth and stroked his cock. Her hot eyes watched him, heightening his arousal, pushing him harder, faster.

Clenching his jaw, he jerked four, five times. Then with a tight squeeze of his fist, he roared into the night air and sprayed the pallet with his scalding fluid.

Chapter Three

At daybreak, Ariana awoke. Even though nothing else had occurred after Andreus took her body in his mouth, her blood still hummed. Shivers skated along her spine.

She glanced at him sleeping. His chest rose and fell evenly, his eyelids fluttered. She scanned the length of him. The brawny shoulders and arms, perfect for swimming. A hard, chiseled chest and stomach, honed from years of activity and vigorous work. His legs were long and powerful, covered in fine hair.

One glance at the red cloth ignited a fire in her belly. The shape there was long, firm, erect. Ariana swallowed, her mouth suddenly parched. She remembered the feel of him against her thighs. And then...the feral gleam in his eyes as he brought himself relief.

Her nipples tightened, ached for his wet mouth.

Ariana licked her lips. An Aerotaun always returned a favor, thus she would attempt to bring him the same ecstasy he caused within her.

Gently, she stroked the rigid outline of the cloth, watching his face to see if he awoke. Andreus sighed and turned his head, but did not open his eyes. She slid her fingers up and down the length, as he had done last night. His hips moved, but he still slept.

Slowly, she pushed the material down and out of her way. His arousal sprang out, large and powerful, like the rest of him. Her breath stilled. By the stars, he was magnificent. Even though she had not seen Hanken's erection before he entered her, she knew he did not possess the same dimensions.

Ariana shifted so that her head was facing Andreus's face. She wanted to watch as she tasted him, wanted to see the look of hunger on his face when he awoke.

The morning sun filtered through the leaves of the hut, casting shadows along the curve of his jaw. The smell of saltwater and musk mingled in her nose, making her mouth water.

She lowered her lips to his flesh, pressing them against the unbending firmness. It reminded her of a tree trunk, unyielding and mighty. The vein beneath her mouth pulsed.

Ariana swept her hair out of her way, watching his chest rise and fall. She slipped the tip of her tongue out to taste him. His flavor was raw and wild, like the sea he tried to tame.

Her pulse quickened, womb throbbed, as she lapped the smooth flesh. Andreus tossed his head to the side, his breathing rising to crash with the waves.

Swirling her tongue, she reached the tip where salty tasting fluid glistened at the small opening. Taking a deep breath, she opened her mouth and swallowed the length of him. Up and down, she stroked the sides of her mouth along his shaft.

Heat flooded her core, tingled her fingertips. Still, she did not stop. Ariana suckled him the way he had done to her last night.

His hips jerked, erection pulsated. A groan echoed within the hut. "Ariana..."

Andreas was awake.

She didn't look at him but kept going, wanting, needing to bring him to a shattering release.

The salty taste trickled along her tongue again. He was close.

Panting, Andreas gripped her shoulder, squeezed her skin.

She felt it build, the strain and tension crackled along his skin. Her nipples spasmed with denied release. The apex of her legs dampened, as if his mouth had been pleasuring it again.

Ariana sucked him hard, pulling her tongue along the underside of his flesh, tickling the tip. She wrapped her fingers tightly around the base.

"Have mercy!"

Then, with a primitive growl, he yanked her head up to his chest as fluid squirted onto his stomach.

His breath was harsh and quick beneath her ear. A mist blew in from the ocean, cooling the scorching temperature of her skin.

"I have been blessed a second day."

Ariana grinned. "I was only repaying my debt from last night."

"Ah." He chuckled. "Then we shall find ourselves in such debt every night."

Her stomach clenched. *Every night*. Andreas still spoke as if she could stay with him. But how could she? He was a Marimar, a culture long since separated from her own. Too many years, centuries even, had passed since these two peoples had arrived on this planet together.

This moment she shared with Andreas was only that. A moment. She may not return to Hanken's arms, but she would return.

Ariana moved off of him and changed the subject. "How is your injury?"

Andreas grinned. "After what just happened? I still can't feel anything beneath my knees."

"Good. Shall we have some breakfast?"

Without waiting for a reply, she retrieved the basket from yesterday and pulled out the fruit, nuts and berries. Back at the Dwelling, they often had eggs on the morning, but she was not in the mood to hunt for them now.

Andreas sat up and wiped his stomach off with a leaf he tore from the structure. "I want to rinse off in the water first. Care to join me?"

Her gut swirled into a knot. Though the gentle lapping of the waves on the shore appeared benign, she couldn't shake the fear of the dangers lurking below. True, her fears may have derived from outlandish stories told to her as a child, but still she could not step where she could not see. Many more predators skulked in the shadows of the deep than in the open air or tree branches.

Swallowing, she shook her head.

Andreas shrugged, found his staff, then pulled himself to stand.

She ducked into the woods to relieve herself, then rinsed her hands in a bucket of fresh water he'd collected last night.

Ariana nibbled on berries as she watched him make his way across the glittering sand and walk straight into the water. No hesitation, no testing of the temperature.

Those strong legs moved forward into the waves until the wide expanse of his back disappeared. Only his head remained above water. The sun glistened off the surface, brightening his handsome face as he turned to face her.

He was breathtaking. Brilliant.

Her heart ached, lip trembled. When she was gone from here, she would feel the loss of him. But she knew—and certainly he must also—that there was no future for them.

Andreas moved along the shoreline until he reached an outcropping of rocks. He ducked below the surface.

Ariana held her breath, waiting for him to re-emerge. It must have been minutes before he came back up, a triumphant grin on his face. He waved his hand, showing her something she could not make out.

He hobbled out of the water and found his staff, but his limp was worse. As he approached, she noticed swelling on his injured ankle and a dark color developing below the skin.

"Is the pain worse?" she asked as he ducked inside the hut.

"Nah." But the wince in his face as he lowered himself to the ground told the real story. He held out his hand. "I have more food for breakfast."

Ariana wrinkled her nose at the slimy-looking creatures sliding in and out of the seashells.

He rekindled the fire then set about scraping the poor animals out of their homes and into a bowl made of wood.

She popped another berry in her mouth. "So how did you hurt yourself, anyway?"

Andreas stilled. His tanned shoulders tensed. Then he resumed cooking. "I am not quite sure you're prepared to hear the answer."

What could be so horrible? Had he killed a man? Unease slithered up her spine. Suddenly, she realized he was truly a stranger. A Marimar. She knew very little about them, except what she'd been taught in school. And she'd been taught to stay away.

Ariana recoiled, moving away from him. She reached for her wings, prepared to take flight in case he became violent.

He stopped frying the animal meat and turned to her. Sea green eyes changed from relaxed to alarm. “What is it?”

She should go. By the stars, she should have never stayed.

“Don’t leave. I’ll tell you what happened if it will allay your anxiety.” He rose again to his feet. “But you’ll have to follow me.”

Ariana hesitated, but then she saw the pain written in the tenseness of that strong jaw. Even if he were dangerous, he could do little harm to her in his present condition. She stood and followed him out onto the sand, keeping her wings securely on her back.

They crossed the beach to a small path leading into the thick forest. Andreus leaned on his staff, his limp more pronounced.

The muscles in his back rippled with each step. Thoughts of tasting his skin tumbled through her mind, pooling heat between her legs. Yes, he was dangerous to her, but perhaps not in the way she imagined.

The dense trees opened up to a clearing up ahead. The sound of rushing water filled her ears, until it was nearly a roar. And there it was. A sun-drenched lagoon with water cascading down several layers of rocks. Unlike the ocean, this water was crystal blue. In fact, as she edged closer, Ariana realized she could see all the way to the bottom, where brightly colored fish darted between rocks and plants.

She turned to look at Andreus, whose easy grin had returned, although his eyes remained guarded. “You injured yourself swimming here?”

“No.” His sigh was laced with sadness. She did not understand it in such a beautiful place. Although she still feared being in the water, even she appreciated the unique spirit of this hidden lagoon.

Ariana pushed aside flowering bushes and lowered herself to a large boulder. “Then tell me.”

Andreus hobbled to the line of trees and pushed aside a mass of undergrowth. Muscles straining, he pulled on something until he shouted a groan and let go. “You’ll have to come here. I cannot move it while injured.”

Her heart beating like the quickened flutter of wings, she slipped off the boulder and joined him in the shade. He moved aside more leaves and branches and stood back.

Ariana stared, her blood chilling. Lungs tightened in a frightening grip. It would have been better had he killed a man.

“This is why I did not want to tell you.” His voice was quiet, but not ashamed. “My foot twisted in the mud as I tried to move it.”

“You-you have broken our laws.”

“I know.” Then he slammed his fist on the wood. “But they are *your* laws.”

Ariana bit her trembling lip. She should not have stopped to help him, she should have never spent the night. “The laws clearly state you may not cut down trees for any purpose other than shelter or fire.”

Andreus carefully climbed inside the wooden vessel. “It is a boat, Ariana. It can provide shelter, if needed.”

She shook her head. “It is forbidden.”

His eyes darkened with fury. “Do you know why it is forbidden? Because they are afraid we will try to leave. They don’t want us to go across the ocean. Even after all these years. Tell me why.”

Her stomach clenched, tears blurred her vision. She could not tell him why. But he was right. They did not want anyone to cross the ocean. On the other side was the landing pad with the space ship that had brought their ancestors here.

She crossed her arms and turned away. And it was her people, the astro-archeologists, who caused the disaster. The space shuttle was destroyed, un-repairable. For centuries, following generations were trapped in an ancient dwelling—just to hide their shameful secret.

Oh hell, he was losing her. Just as he predicted, she was cut of the same conservative cloth as the rest of her people.

Although the feuding that erupted a century ago over finding a way off the planet had disappeared, the painful fall-out remained. Even without communication to Aerotaun, all children grew to learn the rules. And the most important one was not destroying the trees for any purpose other than shelter, food or fire. No one had dared to cross that edict.

Ariana could not question the restrictions or push for a new future. She, like the rest of her culture and many of his, had accepted this place as their permanent home.

He did not. Andreus promised he would take his brother across the ocean. And he would.

Without another word, he climbed out of the boat. Pain shot up his leg as his foot touched the ground. A low ache throbbed in his skull, deep in his joints.

Ariana still did not look at him as he passed by her. He could smell her, sweet like the nectar fruit. Only a short time ago, her mouth had swallowed him whole. His cock twitched at the memory. She brought him higher than any treetop. He felt weightless in her embrace.

Now she would leave him.

“Come have a drink.” He knelt before the lagoon and scooped up the clear water.

Wordlessly, she joined him. Her wings fluttered in the gentle breeze as she knelt. Her reflection shimmered on the water’s surface. Beauty did not begin to describe her. Large, bright eyes, straight nose and pretty, upturned lips. A curtain of silvery hair swept down from her shoulder.

She was an angel, a butterfly. And soon she would take flight.

Andreus reached out for her hand. She stared down at him, then bit her lip.

“I-I should go.”

“You don’t have to.”

Ariana swallowed more water then rose to her feet. Her long legs gleamed with the sun’s kiss. “This...you and I...” She turned away. “Can I get anything for you before I go?”

Her tenderness, her faith, her trust.

Andreas splashed his warming face, but the fire on his cheeks did not dim. He found the walking staff and pushed himself to stand, but could not put any weight on his injured leg. “I cannot force you to stay, nor can I lie and say that I do not care if you go.”

He hobbled to the path, but did not hear her follow. “You know where I am, should you decide to return.”

“You look as if you’ve fallen ill.”

The concern in her voice lifted his heart. She did care for him, but something prevented her from staying. Was it her lover or the restrictive teachings of her people? Either way, he did not want her here, no matter how much she tempted him, unless she truly wanted to stay.

Andreas wiped the sweat collecting on his brow. “I will be fine.”

“Do you have enough food?”

He turned back to level her with a stare. But despite the aching in his limbs, he wanted nothing more than to crush her against him. She’d stirred his blood like no one before. But he’d not abandon his dream to leave this place. Not even for her.

“Go, Ariana.”

She blinked then set her chin. Without a sound, she lifted into the air, her wings taking her high up over the trees. Then she was out of his sight for good. But not out of his heart.

Chapter Four

Ariana stopped for something to eat, then flew nearly ten miles before she realized she'd been a fool.

Still flying near to the coastline, she came to rest on a large branch jutting over the beach. Black birds squawked at her arrival and scattered into the air.

Typically she experienced peace, unwavering tranquility, at the long silent flight. But now she felt only emptiness.

She'd left Andreus all alone. And he was growing more ill.

Even without brothers or sisters, Ariana saw many others grow sick with fever. Glassy eyes, flushed face, sweating brow.

What kind of person was she to leave him in that condition?

By the stars, he unsettled her.

Every part of who she was. Her body had ignited in passion at his touch. Her mouth hungered to taste him. And now he made her question the very culture she was born into.

Who were her ancestors? What had they done to leave five hundred people stranded on an alien planet?

The Marimar did not know who caused the space ship's destruction. Lies and half-truths concealed the true story of The Landing.

And yet Ariana never once contemplated leaving. Accepting her lot in life, her future as a wife and mother, she went willingly in Hanken's arms. Now the thought of him left her unsatisfied.

But what of the rest? Was it possible for her to return to the top floors of the Dwelling to live the rest of her life as was expected of her?

Rolling, gray clouds crested over the horizon. If she were to get back to Andreus before the storm, she must leave immediately.

She did not make it in time. The rain drenched her skin, the winds blew her off course, but she landed at his beach before darkness fell.

Ariana found him in the hut, lying on the leaf pallet, his injured leg resting on a large overturned bowl. His ankle had swollen past the size of a sweet nectar fruit, his face shined with sweat.

Her stomach clenched, throat tightened. He was more ill than she assumed.

She knelt by his head and wiped the dampness from his brow. Rain blew in, threatening to extinguish the fire. She looked around for a blanket, but found none.

“Andreas?”

He turned his face toward her, his eyes slowly opening. “My angel has returned...”

She swallowed relieved tears. “You have a fever. I need to get you medicine.”

His lips curled as his hand found hers. “I prayed you’d come back to me.”

“I shouldn’t have left you.” Not when he was so sick. Her fear had superseded her compassion. “I’ll return shortly with something to revive you.”

Andreas squeezed her hand. “The seaweed is thick, grows near the rocks.”

Seaweed? She wasn’t going in the ocean. A concoction of berries and tree sap would lower his temperature.

“The-the leaves are long, you can wrap it around my ankle.” He winced, ground his teeth.

“But—”

“There are small pods on it, crush and mix those in fresh water for a drink.”

Ariana glanced out the waves, crashing on the shore. The storm whipped the gray, foaming water. Terror seized her heart. She couldn’t go in there.

No, there wasn’t a need. The trees would provide for her.

She brushed a kiss on his cheek, her lips burning from the heat on his skin. “I’ll return soon.”

Ariana brushed the wet hair from her face and stepped out into the cold rain. The trees she needed were close by. She’d be back with the ingredients and he would be well again.

But gathering tree sap during a storm proved much more difficult than she’d imagined. The small bowl she’d found had more rain in it than the sweet, sticky substance. Frustration brought a hot sting of tears to her eyes. But she could not wait any longer. This would have to be enough.

The fire had nearly gone out when Ariana returned to the dripping hut. She slipped off her wings and stoked it back to life, then mixed the sap and berries together over the heat.

This would work for him. It must.

Once the brew was warm, she knelt beside him again. “Andreas?”

He moaned, tossed his head to the side.

“Please.” The ache in her voice surprised her. “Come back to me.”

Ariana lowered her lips to his. She slipped her tongue along his lower lip, warmth curling in her belly. She would bring him pleasure a thousand times over once he got well.

His hand pressed against the back of her head, eliciting a grin from her. So he had not grown entirely weak.

“Make me well,” he whispered against her mouth. “So I may ravage you again.”

She shifted so that his head was cradled in her lap then lifted the bowl to his lips. He took a long swallow then lifted his gaze up to hers.

“This is not from the sea.”

“No, it is the medicine I use.”

Andreas licked his lips. “It is sweet, but I am not sure it will work.” He lifted his hurt leg and pain wrinkled his face. “I-I need the poultice still.”

Ariana encouraged him to take another sip. “It may work yet. You must drink it all.”

Obedient, he gulped the remainder of the concoction. She went to move the bowl away but his hand grabbed her arm. “Stay with me.”

Ariana tossed the bowl to the sand and slid down next to him. “Of course.” She curled onto his shoulder, stretching her leg over his and her arm across his chest. His damaged ankle still rested upon its bowl.

Andreas soon fell asleep again, his chest rising in even breaths, his hand resting on her hip.

She stared at the approaching darkness to the horizon, where the clouds kissed the angry sea. She could not fathom going across that water, not even in flight. Even if a grand adventure lay just beyond the curve of the planet, fear trembled deep within her bones.

This planet, the Dwelling, was safe. Known. There was no reason to leave. The concept had never once taken root in her mind. It was not until she met Andreas that she even realized so much else existed.

Ariana closed her eyes, exhausted from the flight, the storm, and the concern over Andreas. Once tomorrow came, and he was better, she could begin her journey home.

The fog lifted, if only slightly.

Andreas turned his head and his lips brushed against silky strands of hair. Ah, his little bird had returned.

Dull pain still assaulted his ankle, his head still ached, but he felt better than yesterday. Especially since Ariana had come back.

He kissed her forehead, waking more than just her. His cock rose with a flourish at the touch of her skin.

Blackness surrounded them. The rain had ceased, but clouds lingered, blocking the light from any stars. But what did he need of light? He could feel instead.

Andreas smoothed his palm up the softness of her arm. She whimpered and burrowed deeper into his chest. But he was not deterred. He felt alive, as if she brought him back from the brink of death.

He leaned over and kissed her forehead, her cheeks, her nose. His mouth watered to taste her tongue, to sample the essence of her cream. In an instant, he was rock hard, ready for her mouth. Or, better yet, her tight sheath. "Ariana."

She didn't answer but moved her fingers over his chest. His breath lodged in his throat as she circled over his nipples then flicked them with her nail.

Torture. Sweet, blessed torture.

Andreas covered her hand with his own and slid it down to his cock, groaning when she gripped it firmly in her palm.

There was no wind tonight, no breeze to stir the tree branches or leaves of the hut. There was no sound other than the constant crashing of waves on the shore. Soon he would have their moans echoing in the forest.

He shifted her on top of him, then pulled her tunic over her head. Her bare breasts pressed against his skin. The curve of her hip cradled his erection.

Capturing her face in his hands, Andreas pulled her lips down to his. She'd come back to him. She'd saved him. Gratitude and contentment surged to his mouth, where he thanked her with a greedy kiss. He nipped at her lip, suckled her tongue, made her one with him.

His ankle throbbed, but the fire blazing through his bloodstream overpowered it. He had to have her.

Andreas skimmed his hands down her back and cupped her bottom. Oh, so round, so firm. His cock pulsed, pleading for her heat. Grinding her hips over his erection, he arched his back, pushing himself against her.

Harder and tighter he moved her. Her breasts bounced on his chest, the pert nipples grazing his damp skin. He slipped the clothing from her waist and she kicked it the rest of the way off.

Bare flesh greeted his hands now. Andreas groaned, squeezed her, felt himself spiraling out of control.

She was so soft, so wonderfully smooth. He lifted his head but saw nothing save for flickering of lightening far off in the distance. He so wanted to see her naked body. Tomorrow. Tomorrow he would take them back to the lagoon and take her amongst the flowering shade trees.

Ariana cried out and reached for his cock. Her strokes stretched him taut. Another minute of this and he would empty himself in her hand.

He pushed her hand away and clenched his jaw, searching for the escaping measure of self control. His erection shuddered and a few drops of semen trickled out.

Once the raging urge had passed, Andreas scooped her bottom in his hands again. But this time he slid a finger between her legs and probed for that waiting warmth.

Ariana clenched his biceps and whimpered as he slid one finger in and out of her wetness. "More," she sobbed, the plea echoing her pleasure.

Andreas plunged another finger in, thrusting them deep inside, between the cheeks of her ass. He flicked her sweet pearl, raising her to the highest mountain. She squirmed, rocked her hips, rubbed his arousal to the edge of insanity.

Hell, he was insane. His hard cock should be inside of her, pumping its way to an exploding release.

He pulled his fingers out, shoved the cloth out of his way, and freed his erection for her willing body. Ariana rose up on her knees, feeling for him, positioning herself.

Andreas lifted his hips to meet her halfway.

Then his leg came crashing down onto the pallet. He roared as blinding pain pierced his ankle then ricocheted up his leg.

Ariana immediately scrambled off of him. "Oh, Andreas, what happened?"

He couldn't speak, couldn't unclench his jaw. Shooting stars burst in his head. Fool! He should have wrapped it in the seaweed the first moment he injured it.

Now he gasped for air, struggled to find a calming breath.

Her fingertips brushed his leg and he growled. The burn returned to his face, flaming his ears. Sweat beaded along his forehead, dripped down the sides of his face.

Waves upon waves of agony scoured through his body.

Andreas dropped his head to the side, blinked in the darkness, and prayed for oblivion.

Ariana bit her lip, but the tears still fell. It was her fault. Had she listened and braved the ocean, he wouldn't have been in such agony. But she was convinced her remedy would work, certain her people knew better.

Now, in the inky blackness of night, she could not seek the seaweed he needed.

She wiped the sweat from his face, cringing each time he moaned. Andreas had finally passed out or fallen asleep, but the pain still wracked his body.

Worried she was causing him more distress, Ariana scooted away and wrapped her arms about her knees. A tight band gripped her heart. She could not leave him now, not until he was completely well. Yet her journey was to last only four days. Her family and Hanken would be expecting her.

Ariana put her chin on her knees and waited for the dawn.

Chapter Five

With the first orange fingers of daylight, Ariana rose to her feet. She'd not done much more than nod off a time or two during the night.

A glance at Andreus confirmed her fears. He had not improved. His entire body glistened with sweat. His ankle, a mottled color of purple and blue, had inflamed like large gnarled bumps on a tree.

Her throat constricted with the salty taste of tears. Then she faced the ocean. A knot wound tightly in her gut but she stepped from the hut and into the misty air.

The damp sand greeted her bare feet. Though the storm had moved on, clouds remained, chilling the air, coloring everything in a dingy gray cast.

Ariana straightened her back and stepped forward to the surf. She tried to remember what Andreus had done the day before, how he'd moved directly into the waves. He'd not even bothered to look beneath his feet, to check for danger. He never even seemed to notice any change in temperature.

She could do this. She had to do this. Andreus suffered due to her snobbery and anxiety. And that shamed her completely.

Ariana stood at the water's edge, debating whether to remove her clothing. She had nothing else to change into once she was wet, yet being naked in the water made her feel more vulnerable.

A cry rang through the air.

Ariana hurried back to the hut, where Andreus was up on his elbows. Eyes glassy, cheeks blazing red, he lifted his chin. "Water..."

She blinked back tears and fetched the small jug. Only a mouthful remained. He swallowed it in a single gulp and collapsed again to the pallet.

Fighting the suffocating weight of her guilt, Ariana slipped her wings on, grabbed the jug and lifted into the air. First, she'd get more drinking water and then she would go into that seawater. She would find what he needed before he suffered any longer.

She landed beside the lagoon, cool mist swirling over the surface, enveloping her legs. This place was the most beautiful sight she'd ever seen on this planet. Even with the early morning light, the flowers sparkled, the waterfall sang, the fish danced at her feet.

Peace reigned.

Ariana scooped up the water, filling the jug to the top. She turned to lift off when the wooden boat caught her gaze.

A boat.

She had never seen one before yesterday. Though she had heard the stories of The Landing and how the large ship carried the crew and astro-archeologists from the spaceship dock to this island. There were even old drawings of that sea-faring vessel.

But since that time no one had built a boat. It was against the law.

Could there be more to it than just conservation of resources? Were they truly, all these years later, still trying to hide their mistakes?

Ariana took a step toward it. Still partially hidden beneath the brush, Andreus's boat looked small and almost useless.

But as she swept the branches and leaves off with her free hand, she saw its amazing size and depth. He must have been working on it for months, years maybe. It could seat about twenty people, plus room for gear and supplies.

His craftsmanship was truly amazing. What tools did he use? Did he have any help? One thing was for certain, he would never be able to move this boat to the ocean by himself.

Ariana quickly covered it up again as best she could and flew back to the hut.

Setting down the jug of water, she noticed that Andreus was just as she left him. Asleep. His entire body, from the firm shape of his chest to the sinews of his legs, was covered in a sheen of sweat.

Ariana swallowed a few nuts and berries, then stripped out of her clothing. The air swirled over her skin, raising goose bumps.

A sour taste filled her mouth as fear threatened to impede her efforts again. She forced one foot in front of the other, her feet rolling in the damp sand. She did not stop at the water's edge, but compelled herself to continue on, just as Andreus had done.

The cold water snapped at her toes, but Ariana moved forward. She would not look down. To see the shadowed movements would only paralyze her. Instead, she focused on the cropping of rocks Andreus had indicated.

A chill spread through her bloodstream, but she clenched her teeth, willing herself onward. At last, as the water touched her belly button, Ariana reached the large clumps of seaweed.

She could see it under the water, down at her knees. Her stomach clenched as she realized she'd have to sink down to grab a hold of it. Or worse, go under completely to get it by the root.

A splash snared her attention. Pulse thundering, she looked behind her. A silver tail flipped the water again then disappeared out of sight.

Terror seized her heart.

Immobile, Ariana waited for the creature to reappear but nothing happened. The sun had now risen high enough to burn the mist away. Its brilliant orange reflection shimmered across the smooth ocean surface.

Quickly, she squatted and yanked at the seaweed. The water rushed up to her chin, splashed on her nose and ears. The taste of salt invaded her mouth, trickled into her stomach.

Ariana pulled until she could hold no more. Arms full, she hurried from the water and stopped only when she heard the splash again.

This time the creature leaped out of the water completely then dove down again, flipping its tail as it went under. Relief broke across her lips, forming a grin. She had seen these animals before as she flew overhead. They often leapt out of the water in pairs, seemingly playing with one another. She would have to ask Andreus what they were called.

Andreus. She rushed over to the hut and dropped her bundle at the entrance. Wet, she did not want to sit in the sand and have it cling to her body. So, she stood at his feet and stripped the leaves from the pods, creating two piles.

She had gone into the water and emerged unharmed. But triumph eluded her. Instead, her throat sparked with pain. Hopefully, it was not too late to save him.

A noise startled him. Andreus forced the weight of his eyelids up. He blinked at the morning light but could not focus. A blurry outline of the hut told him he still rested out on the beach, not back in his rooms at the Dwelling.

The pain in his ankle throbbed, yet it felt different. Pressure around it oozed some type of salve. He could feel the swelling lessen.

Andreus swallowed against his tight, parched throat.

Blinking again, a hazy figure came into view. The figure stood up from his feet and crushed something in her hands. Her skin glowed like the most brilliant of pearls. He saw only shadows, elements of light and dark.

Light, sun-kissed hair swept down across the woman's shoulders, stopping at her small breasts. Two nipples, like two circular pieces of coral, told him she stood bare. A glance farther down her stomach confirmed his amazement. Indeed, this mirage stood at his feet with nothing covering her silken body.

Despite the illness churning through his blood, his cock jerked to attention. He'd not have the energy to sink himself inside her flesh, but in dreams anything was possible.

The figure moved closer holding a small pitcher. She lowered to her knees before his head. "Here, drink this." Her voice was angelic, threaded with gold.

Andreus lifted his chin and swallowed the liquid. Bitterness seized his tongue, scorched down his throat. After a few mouthfuls, he pulled away.

She set the pitcher down and smiled. "That should be enough for now."

He reached out to touch her face. This goddess, she must be real. If not, he was having one hell of a fever-inspired dream.

He traced a line down her chin, over her plump lips, to the long column of her neck. Her pulse beat madly against his fingertips but she made no move to stop him.

The sun burned the sand outside the hut, creating a blinding golden hue beyond the hut opening. Andreus licked his lips, continued his exploration, feeling the weight of her breast in his hand. He flicked his thumb over the coral nipple, eliciting a hushed gasp from her lips.

She slid off her knees and laid across him, giving him easier access to her bounty. And what a bounty it was. Even though his vision was blurry his mouth hungered for those ripe peaks, his palm itched to caress that fine curve of hip.

Andreus explored his vision, tracing a warm trail from her shoulder to her delicate knees. No poultice, no medicine could make him feel any better than the velvety softness of a woman's skin.

She closed her eyes as he cupped her bottom. His cock twitched, greedy for her touch. But he'd not go there. No, he would feast on this lovely angel with his hands. If he had the energy, he'd give her some of his tongue, too.

Her hips thrust forward. "Oh, Andreus..."

The naked goddess rested her head on his chest, her feathery hair tickling his skin then rolled over to her back, spreading her legs apart slightly.

Andreus clenched his teeth. If only he were well enough to slide his cock in there. But he knew his ankle would never allow it, not to mention the energy-sapping fever.

But he could thrill her.

Andreus kneaded her nipples again, tweaking them until she cried out. Then he slid his hand down her flat stomach to the puff of hair between her legs. Her legs opened wider.

He found her gold nugget swollen, hot. His angel writhed beneath his nimble fingers. Her face flushed, lips parted.

"Andreus, please..."

Two fingers plunged deep inside her core. Her shout, like a bird's call, rang against the trees. But he did not release her. Instead, he thrust his fingers into her, rubbed her nub with his thumb and forced her to ride the powerful cresting wave. She jerked her hips, taking him in deeper.

His arousal burned, ravenous to be the one in her heat. Soon, he promised it, very soon.

A strong wind blew across their bodies, cooling his skin, enriching him with strength. He drove into her slick sheath vigorously, faster and faster, until she clenched her thighs and threw her head back. This time, she produced only an exhausted whimper.

As Andreus slid his fingers out, she lifted his hand to her heart. He felt the rapid beat, the heightened breaths within her chest. She was real. This was not a dream. This was his lovely Ariana who'd come back to him.

She tugged on his hand again, bringing it to her mouth. His erection shuddered as she slipped his fingers inside her mouth. Her tongue swirled around them, tasting her cream, reminding him of her mouth on his cock.

He closed his eyes, squeezed them tight. Her mouth sucked at his thick skin, searing him to the very bones. She drove him mad. Mad with desire, mad with need. He'd never be whole again if she wasn't by his side.

"Ariana." Her name stuck in his throat, as pleasure obliterated all other thought.

She tortured him relentlessly until he could no longer control his actions. With his free hand, he reached down and grabbed his flesh. It took only one hard tug to bring fierce, blissful relief.

Andreas wrapped his arms about her back, holding her close to his heart. Ariana was made for him, brought to him by something called Fate or God or the mysteriousness of the universe.

He'd never let her go again.

Chapter Six

Once again, she could not sleep. Ariana waited for the first signs of light then lifted up into the trees. Brilliant stars still twinkled overhead, offering her peace when she felt nothing but turmoil.

Down below, Andreus slept still. His breathing had become more even, his swelling had gone down considerably. He'd turned the corner to wellness. She may be able to leave tomorrow as she planned.

Ariana lay across a thick branch on her stomach, watching the waves crash on the shore below. She could never think of the sea again without being reminded of Andreus.

He belonged to it, commanded it.

And though she entered the water and returned unscathed, her soul did not flourish in those depths. It was the clouds, the air, which renewed her strength.

She belonged with an Aerotaun, a man who could frolic with her in the treetops. Andreus was amazing, compelling, unrestrained and spirited.

But he was not her future.

Ariana forced the invading tenderness from her throat and rose to the air again. She had to gather more food for the remainder of the day and then prepare for her journey home.

Andreus was awake and drinking water when she returned. His eyes were no longer glassy, his face no longer shining. The several treatments of the seaweed had brought his health back.

"I was worried you'd gone for good."

She forced a smile on her face. She must leave him tomorrow. How could he possibly expect her to stay? "I-I've brought some new food for you to try."

He raised an eyebrow and sat up straight. "More fruit and nuts?"

Ariana winked. "Just wait a bit and you'll see."

He laughed and leaned back on his elbows, watching her with hooded eyes. A quick glance at his legs showed a stiff rise under his cloth. It seemed that nothing could keep this man, or his arousal, down.

She mixed the buttery shoots she'd collected along with two different kinds of tree sap. A few sprinkles of berries and her delicacy was complete.

"Here." She handed him a small bowl of it.

Andreus latched onto her wrist, his green stare dangerous. "I'd rather eat you."

A flush crept up her cheeks. Despite the intimacy they shared, he still had the power to make her blush. "Try this. It's good. We call it Tree Sap Pudding."

He took a hearty bite without hesitation. It was as if nothing could scare the man. Unlike her trepidation at new things, he relished them with a thrill. “Delicious. Is there more?”

Ariana spooned more into his bowl then watched him eat. Unlike the sickly man from yesterday, Andreus had returned in full color. The pain must linger in his ankle, but the swelling had shrunk considerably. His muscles and tendon flinched and bulged as he moved. Even his tongue licked energetically.

A dizzying crackle raced through her, tickling her nipples and curling her toes.

She clenched her thighs, but the sizzle between her legs did not dim. Hard to believe she’d only lost her virginity a few days ago.

Gulping, she turned away and gathered the dishes. “I need to rinse these out.”

“And I need to rinse myself.” His warm chuckle echoed in the hut.

Ariana stood. “Go ahead in the ocean, I’ll clean these at the lagoon and return shortly.”

She snapped her wings on and carried the dishes over to the sparkling fresh water.

The serenity washed over her immediately. All tension and concern slipped away like the water trickling over the rocks. Flowered blooms invigorated her with their sweet succulence. Tree limbs brushed along the water’s surface with the slight twist of the breeze. And darting between the bowls she washed, colorful fish played “catch me”.

“I come here often.”

Ariana gasped. She had not heard Andreus come up behind her. She set the rinsed bowls on a stone. “Does anyone else know of this place?”

He leaned on his staff and grinned. “Just you and me.”

“So,” she glanced toward the line of trees, “you created that boat all by yourself?”

Andreus nodded. “Found pictures in a few ancient books. Then I carved several hand-held models until I got the hang of what I was doing.”

“But-but it’s so large, how could you possibly do that on your own?”

He grinned and hobbled over to the water’s edge. “There is a saying among my people—where there is a will, there is a way.”

She sank back on her heels as he lowered himself to his knees. He splashed the cool water on his face several times then slicked back his brown hair.

“Ah, much better.” He offered a wicked grin. “Care to join me for a full bath?”

Despite the daunting thought of immersing herself fully in the water again, her blood hummed, begging for the chance at his touch again. Yet, his temptations made her return to the Dwelling that much harder.

Andreus shrugged a shoulder and settled down into a vibrant patch of grass. “It can wait. Tell me instead of your home life. What’s it like living at the top of the Dwelling?”

Ariana unlatched her wings and slid them off. Crossing her legs, she trailed her fingers along cool softness of the water. “I don’t imagine it is much different than yours. Each family is restricted to a certain number of rooms and only one child.”

“We are too, although the medicine we use for birth restriction must not be as effective as yours for I have one brother and one sister.”

That would explain why there seemed to be so many more Marimar than Aerotaun.

She watched a red butterfly flutter past them. “We search for food from the trees. Birds, eggs, nuts, fruit, sap, seeds—they all contribute to our diets.”

Sun shimmered on his hair, creating a golden halo. He reminded of pictures she’d once seen in a book. *A Roman god*, the caption read. Licking her lips, Ariana felt a sinful urge to leap from her spot and land herself on top of him. But she did not move.

“We make our own clothing. Work each day, yet play as well.”

Andreus grinned. “What do you play?”

Ariana swirled her hand in the water, where the tiny fish darted between her fingers. “When we are first fitted for wings and taught to fly, we play a game called ‘catch me’.”

“Tell me about it.”

“It’s simple. We chase one another until someone is tagged. Then that person becomes the chaser. It teaches us skills we’ll need in flying without becoming a boring lesson.”

His chuckle echoed against the trees. “We do something similar in the water. Although most children learn to swim by the time they are learning to walk.”

Her brain tickled with questions. What must it be like to live in the darkness of the forests and depths of the sea? How did he go about finding a bride?

Before she could ask, he leveled a stare at her. “I want to know what you learned of our ancestors. The stories you heard of The Landing.”

Ariana drew her knees in tight as her heart shuddered. She’d never been told not to mention the disaster that had ruined their chances of leaving here. But, then again, no one ever expected her to talk to a Marimar either.

She brushed her hair from her shoulders and rested her chin on her knees. Just beyond Andreus, a flock of brilliantly colored birds took flight. She coveted their graceful lifts, their smooth glides. She envied their simplicity in life. Suddenly, being an Aerotaun did not seem so freeing.

“We all arrived here as one large group, nearly five hundred strong, I believe.”

Andreus stared at her without a response. He questioned out of more than mere curiosity or lack of conversation. She could easily see that he searched for an answer of some sort.

Ariana twirled the blades of grass at her feet, marveling at the sharp edges. “The space craft landed elsewhere on the planet, the only place without trees. Then a large ship carried them across the sea.”

“Who were the people on board?”

“Scientist of all sorts. Archeologists, chemists, botanists, engineers.”

“Is that all?” Sharpness sliced through the words.

She’d insulted him. And his people. “No, of course not. There were the space shuttle staff and crew to man the ship.”

They were the group that settled at the bottom of the Dwelling after the ship burned. They became the Marimar, a robust stock of hard working people.

“What else?”

“The space shuttle became inoperable, even when the crew tried to fix it. And once everyone had finally given up and left the landing pad for the Dwelling, the ship caught fire. We were stranded over here.” She tried to sound as unemotional as possible, but the guilt prickled in her gut.

She picked up a small pebble and tossed it into the water. Small ripples waved outward. “You know the rest. Your people took up residence at the bottom of the Dwelling and mine moved to the top.”

Andreus stared at her, waiting. For what, she didn’t know. If he wanted more details, he would not get them from her. What had happened in the past was done. This was their life now. She’d not be the one to disrupt the peace.

“Have I captured everything? Are you satisfied?”

His stare lingered, as if he debated an answer within himself. Then, he seemed to make up his mind as a sexy grin spread across his lips. His heated gaze sent shivers to her toes.

“Hardly.”

She held back.

Andreus saw it in the way she fidgeted, refused to look him in the eye. Sooner or later he would get the truth. For too long his people had been forced to live at the bottom of the Dwelling, living by rules and policies put in place by the Aerotaun. And though many years had gone by without any interaction, he felt the bitterness swelling within his family and friends.

It was why he built the boat. His brother Darrius yearned to see what lay on the other side of the horizon from the moment he could talk. Once it was clear that their father would not break the rules, Andreus set out accomplish the task.

He would not let the scientists claim of the inoperable space craft dissuade him from his purpose.

Andreus watched as Ariana splashed her feet in the lagoon, her joyful smile twirling in his heart. He was meant to have her. Just as he was meant to build the boat. He would bridge the gap between these two cultures and lead a group of pioneers across the sea. Ariana was the key to make it happen.

But first things first. His fever was gone, his ankle almost normal. And his cock was impatient for her slick heat.

Andreus rose to his feet. He tested his leg and found he could put weight on it with only a mild tenderness. Good. He wanted no more painful disasters to thwart his chances of being inside her.

Ariana did not look up as he slid the cloth from his waist. Naked, he walked past her and over to the pyramid of stones. The grass was warm on his feet, the sun sparkled on the water.

Andreus climbed up to the highest rock and stood at the top. From the corner of his eye, he could see her now watching him. It aroused him, raising his erection higher. But he was not ashamed. Nothing frightened or embarrassed him.

A breeze swept past, lifting his hair, making him feel as if he could fly. What would it be like to really fly? To soar above the trees, become one with the stars.

What special gifts the Aerotaun had, a treasure they did not share. He clenched his teeth, remembering his sister Marita watching them fly overhead. She envied their lithe bodies, their graceful movements. She didn't want to be a fish; she wanted to be a butterfly. But no matter how hard Andreus tried, he could not replicate the wings of the Aerotaun.

He forced away the hostile thoughts and leapt.

Diving head first into the lagoon, the air rushed past him in a thrilling ride. With an invigorating splash, he broke the stillness of the water.

Tranquility seeped under his skin as he swam beneath the surface. Only a minor twinge niggled at his ankle, no aching assaulted his joints. His cock, still hard, throbbed for attention.

Andreus swam without taking a breath until he saw the moving shadow of Ariana above the water. He grinned and snatched at her feet.

Rising out of the water, he heard her shriek. But a hint of a smile lurked within her bright eyes as she lay back on the grass. He pulled her farther into the water, until she was submerged up to her knees. Then he leaned across her, trapping her within his arms.

"You're dripping on me." But already her breathing was more rapid.

Andreus glanced down. Droplets littered her clothing like barnacles on a turtle's back. "Well then, you might as well get wet."

With that he lowered himself on top of her. Her eyes widened, face flushed. Her nipples poked through the fabric.

"Come with me," he whispered against her mouth.

He saw the hesitation flicker but then she wrapped her arms around his neck, arched her back. Heat crackled through his bloodstream.

Andreus nipped at her lips then plunged his tongue inside when she parted them. She tasted of the dessert, sweet and irresistible. Their tongues danced, battled, fought for domination.

She wriggled beneath him, rubbing his cock to a dangerous edge. He could take her right here and now and find heaven. But he wanted more, he wanted to touch every part of her first.

He sat up and pulled her tunic over her head. Small breasts sprang free for his touch. He cupped them, squeezed them, flicked the coral with his fingers. Ariana whimpered, bit her lip.

But he was only beginning.

He lowered his mouth to them, savoring the taste of her skin, the bounty under his tongue. The knot strained, tightened. Ariana bucked her hips. She would easily shatter if he put his hand or mouth between her legs. But she would not get off so easily today.

No, today it was his cock's turn. It had waited long enough for her silkiness.

He kissed her stomach, circled her navel with a slick of wetness, then teased the skin at her waist. She grabbed his wet hair. "Oh, Andreus, this is torture..."

A small tug of male pride curled his lips. He'd have her screaming before it was all over.

With a quick yank, he removed the last of her clothing. His little bird lay bare beneath him. Except now she looked more like a mermaid, with long silver hair and skin shimmering against the water.

Andreus stood and pulled her to her feet. She hesitated then took a deep breath and followed him into the water. He stopped before the level reached his erection and faced her.

Ariana blinked. Licked her lips.

He let her decide. Now that he had gotten her into the lagoon, she could take the lead on what to do next.

Without a word she sank to her knees. Water rose up over her breasts to her neck. She smiled, then darted her tongue out, flicking it over the tip of his cock.

Andreus groaned.

She opened wider and took him in fully, her sleek mouth swallowing him whole. Shivers sparkled his toes. His hands clenched into fists.

Andreus stood over her, watching his cock slide in and out of her moist, warm lips. Her teeth gently scraped his shaft until at the tip she licked the gleaming dab of liquid.

Andreus growled, pulled her to stand. "Enough."

He lifted her to his waist and she wrapped her legs around him. His cock rubbed the mound of hair, teasing him mercilessly.

But he must wait.

Nerves dancing like the fish at his feet, Andreus carried her close to the waterfall. He sat her atop a boulder and spread her legs.

Her breath hitched.

He brushed a nipple. "Pleasure yourself."

"W-what?" Her face paled.

"You've seen me do it. Make yourself slick while I find something I need."

But her panicked look remained.

He shook his head. Maybe she just needed a head start. Andreus lowered his mouth to her white thighs. He nibbled his way up to the apex, then swirled her pearl with his tongue. She cried out as he lapped her, the flavor of her cream driving him mad with desire.

Ariana bucked her hips, reaching for her release. He licked her until she writhed under his mouth then pulled away.

“No...” She was panting.

But he grinned and walked to the shore. As he poked through the underbrush, he saw Ariana squirming. She clenched her thighs together, bit her lip, and pouted.

Even as Andreus found the plant he needed for a lubricant and stripped off the leaves, he waited in the shallows. With enough time...

And sure enough his passionate angel could not resist. He watched as her fingers made their way from her stomach to her mound. She stroked herself, slowly at first.

Andreus grit his teeth, his cock pulsing, as she moved her hand faster, then thrust her fingers inside. Her whimpers escalated to moans.

Dizzy with an agonizing desperation, he scooped out the plant salve and smoothed it on his erection. The touch of his hand nearly had him undone, but he forced the urgency away.

He returned to Ariana as she crested the swell. Her face was flushed, her lips darkened, her eyes hooded.

Andreus pulled her hand away and slid her back down to him. She sank into the water and immediately reached for his hard flesh.

He groaned, need pulsating hot in his blood. No more delays. Andreus grabbed her ass and lifted her up. She spread her legs and he yanked her onto his waiting cock.

Finally, heaven! He did not need wings to soar.

Ariana squealed, her tight sheath convulsing around him in a quick orgasm. But it wasn't over yet. Not anywhere close.

He tried to thrust inside but the resistance proved too much. In this area, his beloved water worked against him. And he'd rather fly.

Still nestled deep inside, Andreus brought them to a shallower corner where several flat boulders lined the shore. He found one the perfect height and sat her on it.

Her gaze held him, she trusted him, needed him to satisfy her every itch.

Andreus raised an eyebrow and grinned. He would not disappoint her. He quickly withdrew and flipped her over so that she lay on her stomach. Her legs dangled to the water and tight ass gleamed in the sunlight.

“Andreus...” He heard the confusion and hunger in her voice.

“I've not left you.”

With a hard thrust, he sank himself back inside her slick channel. Through glazed eyes he saw Ariana brace herself on the rock. Liquid fire burned as he pumped her. He gripped her hips, pulled her to him, pounded her with an agonizing force he didn't recognize.

The sun was hot on his face, the water warm on his legs. But nothing mattered but Ariana and her willing heat.

He glanced down, arousing himself even further to see his cock slide in and out of her. This was where he belonged. Inside her. With her. He could not bear to spend another lonely night.

Ariana arched her back. "By the stars...oh, Andreus."

Hell, she was close, but not as close as him. The tickle raced from his spine, then blasted into a full-fledged tremor.

Too soon!

Andreus yanked her harder, faster, that lovely ass kissing his stomach. His head buzzed, pulse thundered, muscles tightened.

Like a wave, tension rose.

Ecstasy crested.

He drove deep inside her then crashed. Emptying himself into her sweetness, he howled into the still air.

Chapter Seven

Lying face down on the warm, hard rock, Ariana felt taut, as if she'd burst any moment.

Andreas had brought her to climax before, but she'd never had his thick hard flesh inside of her.

And now he slid it out. "No!"

She needed more. Release, she must find that agonizing release.

He chuckled behind her. She was about to turn over but his hand pressed on her back. "Not yet."

Before she could protest, his wet tongue slid over her bottom. He circled one cheek and then the other, drawing closer and closer to the aching spot between her legs.

"Andreas, please..."

But he continued to kiss her, tease her. His hand slipped under and squeezed her breasts. She arched her back to give him easier access. Soon, oh heavens, she had to peak soon.

Andreas smoothed his palms down her sides, over her waist and onto her legs. His lips pressed against her skin, edging ever nearer.

Then his tongue flicked at her swollen bump. Dizzying quivers ricocheted throughout her body, tightening her nipples, curling her toes.

"Yes," she whimpered.

That was all it took. Like a man starved of food, he devoured her, lapping their mingled juices, thrusting his tongue deep inside.

Ariana squirmed, fighting the tension destroying her every thought. She felt his hands join his mouth, push in her crevices, fill her up as his erection had done. He stroked a finger between her cheeks, the tingling surprise spasming her belly.

Heartbeat whooshed in her eardrums. Breathing rose to a pant. She wound tighter, reached harder, as the tormenting surge swelled in her bloodstream.

Now, she needed it now. "More!"

Andreas obeyed. He slid fingers into her openings, nipped and suckled her sensitive nub.

The tension burst and Ariana screamed as her womb convulsed, her body shattering into a thousand stars. For a brief second, her sight dimmed, her muscles went limp.

Andreas pulled away and rested his head on her back, his breathing still harsh. "If I didn't have the urge to collapse, I'd climb the nearest tree and shout to the clouds."

She swallowed, still trying to catch her breath. Hanken had never brought a tingle to her, much less an explosion like that. Which reminded her, she needed to get back.

Ariana pushed up on her elbows. "I-I need to rinse off."

"Of course." She could hear the smile in his voice as he moved off her.

She turned to see him dive under the water and swim away. Sinking slowly into the clear lagoon, Ariana watched with awe as Andreus moved gracefully under the surface, not coming up for air until he reached the other side.

To her the water was soothing now, not frightening as it was before. She wished she could stay and frolic in here all day.

Andreus swam back to her then rose up like a mighty sea king to stand before her. His hair was slicked back, his face shining and ruddy. Powerful shoulders and a sculpted chest begged for her touch.

She wanted him again. And yet, it would be a mistake. Each moment she spent with him made it harder for her to return home.

Andreus threaded his fingers through her hair. "You are so beautiful, my little bird."

Warmth spread to her toes but she swallowed it away. Already the sun broke over the line of trees, heading for its descent into the ocean's horizon. She had to prepare for her return to the Dwelling. Both physically and mentally.

She moved past him toward the side where their clothing lay. "I'm ready for something to eat, aren't you?"

He laughed, hearty and carefree. "But I just ate."

"Oh." Her cheeks burned, but still her lips curved into a smile.

Ariana climbed out onto the grass and looked around for something to dry herself with.

"The sun." Andreus stretched out beside her. "Lay back and let the sun dry you."

And so she did. A few minutes later, the singing birds and rushing waterfall faded into a soft whisper.

When Ariana awoke, the sun was halfway to the sea. Andreus still slept next her, glorious in his nakedness. Oh, how she would miss his well-muscled form. She'd miss his bravery, his caress, his passion for nearly impossible dreams.

Her lungs tightened as she pulled on her clothing. Perhaps it would be easier to leave this way, while he was asleep. She would not have to endure the good-byes.

Ariana took a last look at the lagoon, magnificent in all its beauty. From the perfumed scented blossoms to the sparkling water, she would never forget it. Of course, she could never forget what happened here. To her body and quite possibly her heart.

She snapped on her wings, refusing to look at Andreus's boat partially hidden in the brush. That she could forget. She *must* forget.

"I want to fly in the air."

Startled, Ariana swung around to see Andreus up on one elbow. There was a hint of mischief in his eyes and something else. Something she did not want to recognize.

“These wings won’t work on you. They are calibrated for—”

“Yes, I know.” He slipped the cloth on then stood. “But I can climb the trees.”

She blinked. “Can you? Some are many stories tall.”

He cocked a grin. “There isn’t a challenge I can’t handle.”

“Very well then.” She led him to the line of trees and found one with the best set of secure limbs. “Are you ready?”

He nodded and reached for the first branch. The climb did not go as slowly as Ariana expected. His ankle gave him no trouble and his robust upper body made it seem effortless.

Yet when he finally reached the top, her flying up beside him the whole time, sweat glazed his forehead. He sank on the highest sturdy limb to catch his breath.

Ariana looked up. Only several feet remained of smaller branches and leaves. But they would not support his weight.

“If I had a machete I could cut those away for you.”

Andreus wiped his face with the back of his arm and smiled. “I’m already in heaven, so there’s no need.”

She recoiled. There it was again, that look in his eye. Stomach clenching, Ariana lifted to the top and broke through the canopy.

The sun warmed her face instantly. Only a few clouds drifted across the azure sky. This was her tranquility, her comfort. She could stay up here for hours, just staring off into the distance.

“What’s it like up there?” Andreus called.

“It is more beautiful than words can describe.”

“Tell me what you see.”

Slowly, Ariana turned in a circle. “Thin, white clouds move slowly across the brilliant blue sky, like lazy birds floating on a calm sea.

“And the ocean. I see it stretch for miles, the color deep and eternal.”

She turned again. “There is the lagoon. My, how the water sparkles from here. It looks so small near to the ocean, like a puddle left from a storm.”

Andreus sighed down below. “Lovely, Ariana, is there more?”

She glanced over her shoulder. “Just endless trees for miles...wait.”

Squinting her eyes, Ariana flew up higher. It was so far she wasn’t sure if it were only an illusion of the heat.

“What is it?” He sounded merely curious, not alarmed.

But she was worried. At this altitude she had a better vantage point. And what she saw definitely looked like smoke. And that meant a fire.

"I see a column of smoke." Concern laced her words, burrowed into her gut. Fire spelled trouble one way or another. Either it meant destruction of some sort or a death, since all bodies were burned.

Biting her lip, she flew down to Andreus. He had stretched across the limb on his back, staring upward to the sky.

"I have to go."

His lips flattened. "They can handle whatever it is without you."

"It could be a relative. I-I am due back anyway."

"Why must you go?" His green eyes locked onto hers.

She lowered to a branch near him and sat on the rough surface. "I can't stay, Andreus. You must know that."

"I don't. You can do whatever you like."

"Like break laws and build boats?" Even as she said it, she knew it was a mistake. He'd defend his ideas, leaving them both angry and unhappy. And yet, maybe it was best to part this way.

Andreus stared at her, hurt lurking in his gaze. "I thought perhaps you were different, that you might understand."

She fought hot tears. "Ah, it makes sense now. You wanted me because I was an Aerotaun. You, the rebel, would take me by your side and show everyone how the two cultures could get along so well."

He sat up. "I did not use you. You could have walked away, said no, at any time."

"I'm walking away now, Andreus."

"To go back to your lover?"

Lover? Oh, he meant Hanken. No, she could never go back to him, to live like a flower who would never blossom again. "I go back because the Dwelling is where I belong."

Andreus narrowed his eyes. "You mean the upper floors of the Dwelling."

Pain scratched at her throat. "I don't have to listen to your bitterness."

"Bitterness? Have you any idea at all what it is like for us down below? Do any of you ever come down from your perch to peek at the life trapped below?"

"No." Ariana blinked, but it only blurred her vision. "In my innocence I always believed that just as birds had the freedom to fly, so too did fish have the freedom to swim."

He dropped his head into his hands. "Ariana..."

"Good-bye, Andreus." Like a falling leaf, the soft words drifted behind her into the shady darkness.

Ariana rose up to the sky and started for home.

Andreas waited, an ache expanding in his chest, until the approaching darkness drove him from the tree. The trip to the bottom seemed to take much longer than the climb up.

When he finally reached the ground, the pain had deepened into a massive void.

He swallowed against a tight throat as the awakening stars cast their glittering beauty upon the lagoon. A sweet scent of evening flowers perfumed the air. Even in the shadowed light, he could still see the rock upon which he'd found heaven with Ariana.

Andreas clenched his jaw. Even the memory of those moments were not enough to remove the hollow emptiness.

Had he used her?

Certainly he found her attractive. He'd delighted in her slick warmth and responsive body. He was enthralled with her graceful flight, curious of her fears of the water.

But he'd been compelled to have her since the very moment she spoke to him. Since the very moment he realized she not a Marimar.

Perhaps Ariana was right. Maybe a part of him had yearned to capture the heart of Aerotaun. To prove that the two cultures were not so different, that love could break any barrier. Even one centuries old.

Andreas took several gulps of water, unsettling several birds who'd come for a late swim. Yet the cool wetness did not alleviate the sting in his throat.

He'd failed. Ariana chose to return home. She did not understand his plight or share his desire for adventure. To her, the last few days were nothing more than a learning experience in sexual gratification.

Now what? He turned to face the line of trees. Deep in the shadows, his boat waited. It took him years to create that vessel, hours of solitary work with only a dream to keep him company.

He and Darrius plotted their adventure as boys. Then as he grew into a man, Andreas promised his little brother he would find a way to take them across the ocean. He would not let the Aerotaun rules keep them trapped here.

He found the root of a local plant, washed it in the lagoon and gnawed on it.

In the dark, he crossed the grass to the boat. He didn't need the sun to know the lines and shape of the craft. The smooth, silky wood felt like a lover's skin under his fingers.

Andreas had given everything of himself for this boat. Until he'd met Ariana. Now he could not bear to be near it.

What good would it do him? Even if he could leave now, Ariana would be left behind. Once he departed from this shore, Andreas doubted he'd ever set foot on it again.

This boat. His dreams. They were probably what scared her away. She even said she was frightened of doing something she'd never done, of the unknown, of change.

Now, for the first time in his life, he was afraid. Afraid to spend the rest of his life without her.

Andreas growled. If he wouldn't risk burning the entire forest, he'd set a fire upon the craft. What did his dreams matter if Ariana was not a part of them?

There was no point to remaining out here any longer. In fact, why return? The memories of the hut, of this lagoon, would only bring him anguish.

He'd set out for the Dwelling upon the earliest light, but he had something to take care of first.

Andreas retrieved his axe from the brush.

Chapter Eight

The smell of yesterday's fire no longer lingered. Ariana emerged onto the roof of the Dwelling and glanced up at the orange sunrise. Here she was, at home, and yet she felt like a stranger.

She didn't know the dead man who was burned yesterday. He was an elder, holding a high rank among the Aerotaun. And so she spent the rest of the day angry with herself for rushing back. Even if she had to return, she didn't have to leave Andreus so early. They could have had the rest of the day together.

Ariana wandered past the chairs and canopies to the high wall overlooking the inlet. In the past, she barely gave a glance over the side.

Today, she saw the Marimar swimming in the water far below. From this height she could not determine if Andreus was among them. What good would seeing him do? Besides making her knees weak with wanting his hands on her, she would only be reminded of their many differences.

Of why they couldn't be together.

The crisp air settled on her skin like a numbing salve.

"I have been offered the open position."

Ariana tensed at the sound of Hanken's voice. She'd hoped to find peace this morning. Although she still awaited the Sacred Words, she did not want to see him now. She did not want to give him the answer he sought.

He joined her at the wall. "You know the one left open by Garinger's death yesterday?"

She sighed and crossed her arms, but would not look at him. He obviously thought she might be more impressed by his new status. But it would take far more than that to win her heart. "I'm happy for you."

"Ariana."

She winced. She longed to hear it spoken with a delicious sensual timbre. Andreus could speak her name in such a way it made her toes curl.

Hanken sighed, but did not push any further. "Are you ready to hear the Sacred Words? Your parents chose me to tell you."

Because they assumed she would wed him. He would be the one to go deeper, explain the rumors and half-truths.

Her mouth dried. What if the full story was worse than what she already knew?

Hanken touched her arm. "Tell me what you heard about The Landing."

She watched the Marimar move in and out of the water. None of them ever looked up to the sky. Or was it seeing the Aerotaun that they avoided? “I was told it was our ancestors’ fault that the space shuttle broke. The explosion was caused by a miscalculation. Of course, they would never admit this to the others.”

“Ah, Ariana.” His fingers swept down her arm. She clenched her teeth, but didn’t move away. “You were told the common story but it is not the complete story.”

She wanted to recoil from him, but the burning need to know the full tale forced her to remain. Glancing up into his blue eyes, she saw a different man than she knew last week. Hanken was not a bad person; he would not hurt her or leave her. He would provide for her well. But was that enough?

“Then tell me.”

He brushed blonde strands from his face and straightened to an official looking pose. “Having completed your Rite of Passage and spent four days alone, you are permitted to learn the Sacred Words.”

But she hadn’t been alone. She was with another man. A man who’d brought her ecstasy. A Marimar whose dreams rested on an accurate history to plot a new future.

Hanken bent low, his warm breath near her ear. “What of my offer for you?”

Ariana held her breath. She could never love Hanken, no matter how well he treated her.

Yet, could she ever find love with any Aerotaun now? Each time she closed her eyes, she would see the powerful form of Andreus, his wicked sea-green gaze, that sexy grin.

Perhaps she would never marry.

Ariana lifted her chin. “Let us discuss that later.”

Hanken’s blue eyes widened, his lips twitched. He must believe she wanted to tell him while they were alone in his rooms. He assumed she would accept his offer then open her legs to him. He was wrong.

He reached out to her face but then pulled back. “Well, you are right in that it was our ancestors who caused the space craft to become permanently irreparable. But it was not an accident.”

She snapped her gaze to his face, a knot twisting in her stomach. “Not an accident?”

Andreus rounded the corner, his heart dragging with the supplies he carried behind him. He didn’t look up, didn’t want to see the Dwelling. He just wanted to vanish into his rooms and sleep his life away.

Several friends waved their hellos as he passed, but he gave them barely a nod.

An overwhelming sense of emptiness invaded his cells, as if he’d been outside the water for weeks. But that wasn’t what burdened him now. No, a different sort of loss drained him of life.

“Andreus.”

He lifted his gaze to see his brother standing near the Dwelling steps, his dark hair blowing in the breeze. “Darrius.”

“You were gone longer than we expected. Are you unwell?”

A sardonic grin curled Andreus's lips. He was well externally, but inside he'd never be the same again. "I injured my ankle but it has healed."

Darrius raised a brow but did not press further. "Come inside. There is much I want to hear."

Only his brother knew about their secret boat. It was so taboo Andreus had never let Darrius help. He did not want his brother in trouble if they were caught.

But what could he tell him now? Not only did an Aerotaun know about it and could possibly reveal its existence, Andreus did not wish to complete it. His dreams died the moment Ariana flew away. The moment she chose her world over being with him.

Darrius helped to gather the tools and bowls he brought back. "You look as if you aren't going to return."

Andreus squeezed his eyes closed and sighed. "I'm not."

A tight grab on his shoulder shook him alert. "Why? What's happened?"

Only the most magnificent, sensual, amazing days of his life. He glanced up to the high roof of the Dwelling. He could see figures up there, but it was too far to determine who.

"It's over, Darrius. *This* is our world."

His brother pushed him into the forest, away from prying eyes and ears. Finally, they stood deep in the shadows, where insects courted one another among the trees. The smell of sap permeated the air, reminding Andreus of the pudding Ariana had made. And how her tongue tasted just like it.

His cock stirred under the cloth, bringing him more heartache.

"I want to know the truth, Andreus."

Darrius crossed his arms, leaned against a trunk. His brown eyes glittered like the impatient young man he was. He needed only another year or two before maturity would give him tolerance.

Andreus lifted a shoulder. "I have come to accept that the space craft cannot be repaired. I suggest you accept it, as well."

"Why this sudden switch?"

Because the boat didn't mean anything anymore. Not when he had to leave Ariana behind. "It took me a few days of solitude to realize we've been chasing rainbows."

Darrius narrowed his eyes. "You always go alone, this time was no different."

Andreus wearied of his brother's relentless questions. Wasn't it enough that his heart lay bare, exposed to the burning rays of the sun?

"Leave me, Darrius. I will check in on Marita and then I need rest."

He turned to head back to the Dwelling, but a hand clamped on his shoulder. "I will not leave you until I have answers. Real answers."

Anguish mushroomed, expanded into rage.

Andreus wheeled around. "Fine. There was a woman."

“A woman?” Darrius stumbled back, eyes wide.

“Yes, a woman. But I cannot see her again, nor do I want to leave her.”

“Why? Who is she?”

Andreas hung his head, his chest aching. He pointed to the sky. “An Aerotaun.”

Chapter Nine

Hanken leaned against the wall, facing the courtyard. “As I said, it was no accident. The government of our home planet had a secret mission to colonize this world.”

Ariana blinked, her mouth dry, palms damp. “Colonize? Are you saying they deliberately sabotaged the space craft so that no one could return home?”

The knot deep in her gut tightened at his nod. “We were to establish a civilization. We’ve done rather well, don’t you think? We actually have two.”

She clutched the railing, gulping the wave of nausea. To be a survivor on a remote planet was one thing. But to be an unwilling victim was quite another. Her ancestors used innocent people. Tore families apart. Created a world with hostility and deception.

“Ariana?” Hanken took a hold of her elbow. “You don’t look well. I didn’t realize it would be such a shock.”

“But-but the Marimar.” She pointed down below. “They have no idea. They’ve been living here under the assumption they were stranded accidentally.”

“It’s been a very long time, Ariana. They have established their own culture and so have we. No one has been hurt by it.”

But maybe they have been hurt. The bitterness inside Andreus was genuine. He spoke as if the Marimar were beneath the Aerotaun, not respected. They even had to live by others’ rules.

She had to tell Andreus. He deserved to know the truth. If he wanted to take his boat and sail across the ocean to the space craft, he should have the chance. Perhaps it could be repaired now. Perhaps...

Ariana glanced at Hanken’s pursed lips. They would never bring her the same pleasure she experienced in the last four days. “Were there communications back to the home planet?”

Hanken’s jaw tensed. “Certainly in the beginning.”

“And now?”

He stared across the rooftop to the rising sun on the other side. “I wouldn’t know.”

Somehow she thought he did. Right now it didn’t matter. She just had to let Andreus know, tell him he could follow his dream. But would she need proof?

“I’m not feeling well.” In truth, she wasn’t.

“Why don’t I take you to my room to lie down?” Exactly what she hoped he’d say.

And, after a swift kiss on the lips and a gentle pat on the arm, Hanken left her alone in his room. Ariana waited a bit to make sure he wouldn't return then got up to search the sparse area. Since they had to make do with whatever their ancestors brought with them, or what they found on this island, no one had many material possessions. Only the lucky few had old books, usually handed down through the generations.

Paper was in such short supply that it was forbidden except for strict business reasons to write on any. And even then it was on paper ripped from an old book.

Yet, Ariana searched through the room for any paper record of what Hanken just told her.

Folded neatly in a basket next to his bed, she found a brittle sheet of paper. The writing scribbled around the margin of the original letter, inviting Hanken to join the leadership. There was nothing telling in there.

But as she looked closer at the original letter, she could still make out a few words. Her pulse jumped as she saw an official looking symbol at the top of the page. And elsewhere she caught the words "civilization" and "colony".

Pain sparked in her throat. By the stars, Hanken had been correct. And Andreus had been more right than he ever realized. His people were not survivors of a lost expedition. They were victims of a government research expedition.

Ariana folded the letter and tucked it inside her waistband. Slowly she peeked out the door. Hanken was nowhere in sight.

She watched the sun crest over the treetops as she clipped on her wings. Then, for the first time, Ariana descended to the dark water below.

Andreus left his brother and started for the Dwelling steps. A murmur rose from a gathered crowd on the beach.

As he got closer, fingers started pointing his way, then the group of people broke apart. And in the middle stood Ariana.

His heart trembled, breathing halted, groin roused.

She was beautiful. Like an angel, a butterfly. His little bird.

Ariana ran over to him, her eyes bright. He didn't expect her to fall against his chest. Gasps rose from the onlookers, but she didn't seem to care.

Andreus wrapped his arms around her, inhaled her sweetness. Contentment swam through his blood. "Oh, Ariana. What is it, my love?"

"It's awful," she said against his skin. "You've been right. But it's worse than you ever expected."

His pulse accelerated. "What is? I don't understand what you're saying."

She glanced around then led him down the beach to a private alcove, where several rotting tree stumps faced a fire pit. Birds chirped in the branches above them. "Hanken began to tell me the Sacred Words..."

Pressure banded about his chest. Had she gone back to that man? Was she lost to him for good? "Sacred Words?"

"My Rite of Passage. He told me what really happened, that not only did my ancestors disable the space craft," she sniffed, "they did it on purpose."

He narrowed his eyes, clenched his jaw. She didn't make sense. Why would the scientists strand themselves here on purpose? "Sabotage? But why?"

Ariana brushed her hair over her shoulders. "Because they were ordered by the home planet's government to colonize this world."

Air rushed out of his lungs. "Colonize? Establish a civilization?"

Biting her lip, she nodded.

"And we were never to be told?"

"No. I think even some of my ancestors didn't know. Only a select few had knowledge of the true reason for the journey."

Andreas sank to a tree stump, too stunned to feel the fury he knew would come later. "I-I can't believe this."

"I'm so sorry." She pulled out an ancient paper. "Here is some proof of the conspiracy. But don't you see, you should take your boat and try to find your way back. I'm sure many others will want to join you now."

He glanced at her. "Would you?"

She crossed her arms and looked away. "I don't know. It's all so shocking, so frightening."

Andreas jumped up and took her into his arms again. "I won't leave this place without you, Ariana. I'd rather stay here, even if I can not have you."

"I-I've thought of nothing but you these last hours. I would go with you over the sea if it meant being close to you."

He kissed the top of her head, breathing in her pure essence. "And I love you more than anything, even my dreams of leaving here."

Ariana looked up, tears glistening in her eyes. "We could run away to the little hut on the beach."

"The hut is gone. I tore it down last night."

"And the boat?"

Andreas grinned. "The boat is still there. Shall we make it a shelter so it won't be against the law?"

"By that lovely lagoon? Absolutely." Her sexy, curved lips squeezed his heart and hardened his cock.

She leaned forward and pressed her mouth against his. Their tongues danced in a perfect rhythm, as if they'd never parted. Ariana tasted like the sunshine, the clouds, the rain. She was the air. She was heaven.

"Come." Andreus led her back to the crowded beach. "I want you to meet my brother. He'll want to hear the good news."

"Good news?"

"Our dream is still alive." He enfolded her soft fingers into his own. "And now with you by my side, the fantasy has become real."

"Will you tell the others what I've told you?"

Andreus stopped and gazed down at her bright eyes. He would do just about anything she asked, including tearing the boat apart, splinter by splinter. "Do you wish me to?"

"I merely brought you the information." Ariana leaned on him, her small breasts pressing deliciously against his chest. "It is up to you to expose it to the others."

He tilted her head back, cupped her jaw. "Why me?"

Ariana licked her lips, a promise of the night to come. "Because you will be the one to lead them."

About the Author

To learn more about Leslie Dicken, please visit www.lesliedicken.com.

Send an email to Leslie at leslie@lesliedicken.com. You can also follow her at twitter:
<http://twitter.com/LeslieDicken> or friend her on Facebook.

Look for these titles by Leslie Dicken

Now Available:

The Price of Discovery
Taboo
Beauty Tempts the Beast
A Tarnished Heart

Coming Soon:

The Iron Heart

She can save him...or bring him to ultimate ruin.

A Tarnished Heart

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The Earl of Markham's life is unraveling before his eyes. The harder he tries to pick up the frayed ends, the quicker his carefully guarded control slips from his iron grasp. Five years after the death of his wife, the threat of blackmail hangs over his son's inheritance.

His only hope to quell the gossip before it begins lies in a headstrong young commoner as wild and free as the English countryside she loves. She is wrong for him in every way. Yet she brings life to his colorless world—and warms his heart with a fire that threatens to shatter the wall around his heart.

Lizzie Parker is content with her garden, her village and caring for her aging father. She wants no part of the glittering London Season, but her father will not be denied his wish to see to her future. Still, she plans to do everything in her power to vex the man charged with taking her away from her beloved home. The man who once broke her heart. Markham.

She never expected his kisses to tame her resistance. With each touch he rouses her senses, until suddenly she's not at all sure where she belongs...

Warning: Blackmail! (oh my) Secrets! (oh my) Love Scenes! (oh oh my) and even a trip to the magnificent Crystal Palace in London. You won't be able to put this one down.

Enjoy the following excerpt for A Tarnished Heart:

Lizzie picked up her pace, biting back hot tears.

"Miss Parker! Come back here."

Instead she lifted her chin and continued.

Markham's now familiar growl echoed behind her.

"Lizzie! Wait for me," Edmund called.

But she wasn't going to slow down for him, either. Home. It was all she ever wanted. What a fool she'd been to venture into the village when she could be spending every moment with her father.

Clopping horses approached, then the animals reared to a noisy stop and the door swung open beside her. Before she could react, Markham climbed down the steps and lifted her like a sack of feathers.

"Put me down, you boar."

Edmund yelled for her, but it mattered little against a man the size of Markham.

Her captor dropped her onto the seat cushion, yanked the door closed, and rapped on the wall. Within seconds, the vehicle sprang forward. The dowager wasn't there.

"How dare you? You think because there is no chaperone you can carry me off like a barbarian?" Her pulse leaped at her throat, an anxious pacing tiger trapped within a cage.

Markham settled into the seat opposite her, his black hair in disarray like a horse's mane. "It is time to return to London." The blasted man was not even out of breath.

"But I've not spent enough time with my father."

His dark stare glinted with restrained emotions. "It is not my fault you chose to squander your time, Miss Parker."

"Squander my time." The nerve of him. "And that gives you the right to lift me off the ground and kidnap me?"

"You were being stubborn, as usual."

Oh, that man and his bloody self-importance. "I'll show you stubborn."

She reached for the door handle but Markham's powerful fingers clamped down on her wrist. Without letting go, he moved onto her side, pushing her away from the door.

"I won't have you leaping out." The words tickled down her spine, spiked awareness deep in her core. Her breasts ached, nipples tightened.

His spicy, foreign scent washed over her in a conquering wave of dizziness.

"Let me go."

Markham leaned closer, his penetrating eyes halting her resistance. Her breath stilled as those perfectly formed lips hovered just inches from her face. She could see every nuance of his skin, every fine line around his eyes. "Apparently, you don't know with whom you are dealing."

Her eyes narrowed, a flush racing up her neck. "But I do know...a rude, boorish, self-absorbed peer who thinks he can manipulate people however he pleases."

He showed no reaction, damn him. "And you are a foolish country girl who has no gratitude for the opportunities she's been given."

"Opportunities. What do you know of my dreams?"

"Oh, I know of your dreams but I can't tolerate thinking of you with *him*."

Markham's jaw snapped shut. His gaze shuttered from surprise to detached to unreadable so quickly Lizzie barely had time to recognize their meanings. Had he not meant to say that out loud? Could it be possible that Markham harbored some feeling for her?

She squeezed her eyes closed but the last sight of his kissable lips lingered in her vision. If only he would move off her. How could she think of Edmund, remain true to him, if this man drove her to such stretches of distraction—or such ranges of passion?

The weight on the cushion shifted, causing the seat to squeak. A terrible sense of emptiness filled her as she expected him to move away. But his scent drew nearer to saturate her senses, his one hand held firm to her arm. Despite the loud rumbling wheels, his breathing echoed in her ears.

Then his warm fingers brushed her cheek and no sound could penetrate the thundering of her heart.

Markham swallowed, certain she could hear his pulse hammering.

Passion flared in his veins. Jealousy, anger, desire careened and shattered within his blood, like a small boat upon a raging river. His flesh throbbed for her, his heart drummed.

If seeing her in the arms of Edmund Greene wasn't enough to begin his quest for her heart, having her slender body beneath him was. And, yet, if his damn stepmother hadn't insisted on calling upon friends this morning, she'd be here. Her presence would keep his wayward urges in check.

But she wasn't here. Not yet. And Markham couldn't help but sweep his gaze down the length of her. The rapid rise and fall of her breasts brought his erection to full attention.

A faint scent of roses hovered, intoxicating him, pulling him under a spell of hazy lust.

Markham lifted one of her vibrant curls and wrapped it around a finger. He envisioned the strand wet, drops of water slipping down his skin. He licked his lips, but then dropped the curl as if it would burn him.

He'd make this girl fall in love with him. He wouldn't fail his father. He'd not allow his heritage to vanish or for Lucas to live in shame. She aroused him in ways he'd never imagined, piqued his curiosities, enlightened his mind and enraged his passions.

Markham released the grip on her wrist and cupped her face with both hands. Before they even reached Oxford, Miss Parker would be under his spell.

Her vivid green eyes burst open. "No."

Markham searched for shadows in her gaze, those secrets that kept him at bay. But anticipation and yearning overpowered her resolution. She revealed herself too easily. Despite any resistance, this fairy craved his touch.

"No, what, Miss Parker?"

Her pink tongue ran along the inside of her lips, moistening them, tempting him. "Whatever it is you're about to do. Don't."

He lifted her chin. "Are you so sure about that?"

"No...yes."

"It seems you are uncertain."

"You can't...you can't do this to me."

"Do what? Kiss you? Do you really wish me to stop?" Markham brushed his thumb across her lips. Her protests silenced as her eyes drifted closed again as if commanded by his touch.

Her lips parted. "Please..."

Her warm breath invited him to lower his mouth to hers. He kissed her lips delicately, tasted her sweetness, swallowed her sighs.

A surrendering whimper escaped from her throat.

Intensity exploded. Swells of need crashed against his skin, into his scorching arousal, even within his very bones. He slid his way inside her mouth, searching for the velvety smoothness of her tongue. She tasted like honey and hyacinth and all that reminded him of the countryside.

Her fingertips brushed his shoulders. The devil. He wanted her to touch him. Touch him everywhere with those tiny hands, graceful as a butterfly's wings.

He ravaged her mouth, drank in her spirit, indulged his desires. She responded with an equal hunger, her tongue stroking his, her back arching. Shudders wracked through him, his nipples puckered.

Markham trailed his lips down her neck, where her heartbeat leaped against his tongue. His hands itched to capture her breasts, knead them with his fingers.

His erection throbbed, desperate for the heat of her body, or even the touch of her tiny hands.

His craving for this tempting pixie bewildered him, and yet he could think of nothing he wanted more. If only he could push her down onto this cushion and remove every piece of clothing, every barrier between his skin and hers. He could thrust himself deep inside and find heaven.

But heaven must wait. He could not take her body, discover her secrets, until he'd secured her heart.

Markham wrenched himself from the nectar in his grasp. He let her go so suddenly that she slumped against the seat, eyes opening in surprise. Stark vulnerability contrasted against the bright flush of her cheeks. Devil, she may have let him continue. And then he would be the very rake he so despised.

Without a word, he slid across to the other side. He waited for her sharp tongue, for the assault. But she only said, "Have-have you retrieved my items from my father?" The words trembled.

He nodded, unable to trust his own voice.

She stared at him. "Why, Markham? Why did you kiss me when you despise me so?"

He said nothing. He could not tell her that he feared her heart would remain locked away for the curate, when the stinging ache to have her dulled his reason. Nor could he say that to protect his son's future, she must fall in love with him. He could not give her the answers she sought.

Right now, he could give her nothing.

They stared at one another until rain beat a steady rhythm on the roof. Soon, Markham could see the familiar shadows darkening her eyes. Then, she bit her lower lip and finally turned away.

When the dowager joined them only a short time later, Miss Parker's silence turned into the light, even breaths of sleep.

Is he her darkest dream...or her most terrifying nightmare?

Midnight Secrets

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Cassiopeia's dreams have never been her own. They are harbingers of death. Yet when she learns her gentle cousin, Mary, has disappeared from a remote castle on the Cornish Coast, the official story doesn't fit with Cassie's prophetic dream.

The mystery compels her to leave the safety and middle-class comfort of Oxford to take a job as a maid in the house of Killdaren. There she discovers more than the daily indignities the working class must endure. There's a darkness surrounding Sean Killdaren, a man born with his hands at his twin's throat. Whispers of the murderous Dragon Curse...and an aversion to daylight that adds *vampire* to spine-chilling rumors.

When Cassie encounters him in the shadowy corridors, his touch should make her tremble in fear. But that's not what makes her knees shockingly weak. It's the spell of desire he casts with his wicked green eyes...and the small acts of kindness that soften her heart.

The closer she comes to the truth, the greater the danger. Mary isn't the only woman lost to the Killdaren brothers' curse. And as a killer lurks ever closer, Cassie wonders whom she can trust...and if she will be the next victim.

Warning: Contains a prim and proper advice columnist who finds herself in situations not covered by the rules of etiquette, and a deliciously dark hero who sees more than a maid in itchy wool...he sees the only star that lights his tortured life. Lace hankies strongly recommended.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Midnight Secrets:

A leather gloved hand clamped over my mouth and nose from behind. An arm wrapped around my stomach and arms, trapping me, and jerking me back against the hard body of a large man. I couldn't breathe, I couldn't scream, I couldn't reach my pistol. I could barely move. Terror flamed in my breasts and fired through my veins. The man pulled me deeper into the darkened room, shutting the door. Dear Lord. Is this how Mary disappeared?

Wrenching violently, I tried to free myself, but the man clamped me tighter to him, crushing me with his strength. I pressed my head back, fighting to ease the pressure on my face enough to breathe. In my panic I remembered the size of Jamie Frye, his anger, the veiled threat that if I were to die none would care. Then the hand covering my mouth and nose loosened enough for me to suck in blessed air. I smelled leather, mint and something frighteningly unknown, but compelling enough that I drew another needed breath.

“The scent of roses,” a deep, cultured voice with a hint of an Irish burr whispered close to my ear, and I knew it wasn’t Jamie. “The feel of a woman.” As he spoke, his arm about my stomach slid higher, pressing beneath my bosom, almost caressing the undersides of my breasts a moment. I rammed my spine back, lifting myself to my tiptoes, trying to keep from knowing the warmth of his muscled arm so intimately against me. This brought his mouth and the heat of his breath closer to my ear.

“The actions of a thief.” His tone was soft, menacing. My heart thundered harder, more painfully. “Will you come to such an ill fate, lass? ‘Like a rose, she has lived as long as roses live...the space of one morning’? Or will it be even less for you?”

Any affinity I had for Malherbe’s poetry met a quick death at that moment. I shook my head, trying to speak, but only managed a muffled squeal.

“Let’s see what you’ve stolen, my rose.”

I didn’t understand what he meant to do until he moved his gloved hand from beneath my breasts, sliding downward, pressing firmly along the contours of my body all the way down to my hips, then brushing over my intimate flesh as he slid from one dress pocket to the other, and finding my father’s pistol. His body jerked with surprise and he drew a sharp breath.

“Run or scream and I will kill you instantly.” He pulled the pistol from my pocket. His voice chilled and became deadly. I’d never heard true menace before now.

“Are you an assassin?” He released me, shoving the muzzle of the pistol into my back, urging me deeper into the room.

My legs shook, and my vision blurred. “Assassin? Good God! Please. I don’t know what you’re talking about. I haven’t stolen anything either. The pistol is mine. To keep me safe.”

I heard him light a lamp, filling the dark-paneled room with a muted glow. I barely saw the billiard table before me and the numerous game tables beyond that. I was too aware of the man behind me with my pistol to my back.

“Take off your cap,” he ordered.

Squeezing my eyes shut, I pulled off my cap, feeling almost as if I was removing my clothes before him. I hadn’t taken the time to pin my hair and it spilled down my back.

“Turn around, slowly.”

I did as he asked. Opening my eyes to fearful slits, I kept my gaze on the pistol and his large, black-gloved hand. At that moment I wanted to know if and when he would pull the trigger more than who he was or what he looked like. He’d barely eased my pistol back enough to allow me room to turn. As soon as I did, he pressed the muzzle deeper into my breast, directly over my pounding heart.

When he didn’t shoot, when he didn’t say anything at all, I finally lifted my gaze and met his deadly green stare. Sean Killdaren was everything his portrait promised and more.

“Who are you?”

Swallowing a lump of pure fear, I found my voice. "Cassie Andrews. I'm...the new housemaid."

"I don't know how well you can see, but I assure you, I am not that stupid. You're no more a housemaid than I am a street urchin. The truth."

"'Tis the truth. I am Cassie Andrews, and I...I needed work. Hard times...my father lost his post." I held up my blistered hands.

"Where are you from?"

"Oxford." I cringed, realizing I should have lied.

"You're educated. You can't convince me that between this hell and Oxford there wasn't a single teaching post."

"I left home...there was a...scandal. I had to," I said, desperate. Inferring that I was a fallen woman seemed the only plausible excuse for why an educated woman would seek employment as a housemaid so far from home. I took heart in that every word I'd said was essentially the truth. I considered Mary's death a hidden scandal.

Bolstering myself with that, I met the fire of his gaze as he studied me. Dressed completely in black right down to the cape he wore, he was as dark as his midnight painting had portrayed him and just as dynamic. The cleft of his shadowed chin, the fullness of his mouth, the height and breadth of him in person loomed larger than life, even more so than the painting. Only the fire in his dragon green eyes gleamed brighter than his picture, and I noted a sharper, more sinister edge to him, as if he could very well be a vamp—

I mentally shook the ridiculous thought away.

"Why the pistol?"

I swallowed and shut my eyes. "Protection. The scandal." Heat flooded my face.

"Look at me, lass." He pressed his gloved fingers to my chin.

I met his gaze with trepidation. How could I so unashamedly lead another person to such untruths?

His thumb caressed my cheek and a different sensation besides that of fear, coiled inside of me. The unknown emotion gripped me just as strongly as my terror had, but left me wanting to know what his ungloved touch would feel like against my cheek.

Whatever he looked for, he must have found it in my gaze, for he lifted the pistol from my breast and stepped slightly back, releasing my chin. "You'll not need a weapon in my home, so I will keep it safe for you for now. Before you go, I want to know why you were eavesdropping on my father and Sir Warwick."

"I...got lost. I wanted a book to read."

"And you thought making use of the library a servant's right?"

I shook my head no and lowered my gaze, feeling the sting in his question, but then couldn't stay silent. "Don't you think servants thirst to know things?"

"Perhaps," he said oddly. "The library is down the opposite corridor from here."

I nodded, starting to back away from him.

“I’ll escort you.”

“That’s not necessary.”

“You know the way?” He lifted a brow, clearly questioning the validity of everything I’d just said. His gaze bore down on me, and I backed away faster even though he didn’t move.

“No. I just...don’t think I’ll be able to read after...this. I’d like to retire now.”

A ghost of a smile seemed to curve his lips, but it came and left so quickly that I thought I imagined it. I kept backing up until I felt the door behind me and found the doorknob. Opening it, I winced at the pain from my blisters. Just before I escaped, he spoke so softly I almost didn’t hear him. “Perhaps you’ll meet me there some night.”



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