



CYNDI  
FRIBERG

TAKEN BY  
STORM

## **Taken by Storm**

ISBN 978-0-9848798-1-6  
ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.

Taken by Storm, Second Edition  
Copyright © 2012 Cyndi Friberg.  
Cover art by Dar Albert

This edition is a major revision of Taken by Storm,  
Copyright © 2011

With the exception of quotes used in reviews, this book may not be reproduced or used in whole or in part by any means existing without written permission from the author, Cyndi Friberg.

This book is a work of fiction and any resemblance to persons, living or dead, or places, events or locales is purely coincidental. The characters are productions of the authors' imagination and used fictitiously.

## Praise for *Beyond Ontariese*

### **Taken by Storm**

"*Taken by Storm* had it all—tense action, suspense, erotic sex, humor and a wildly imaginative plot."

~*The Romance Studio*

"Unplug the phone and put the kids to bed; once you start reading *Taken by Storm* you won't want any interruptions!"

~*Fallen Angel Reviews*

"For a story that will delight, entertain, and keep you on the edge of your seat, I highly recommend *Taken by Storm* and award it RRT's Perfect 10."

~*Romance Reviews Today*

### **Operation Hydra**

"I highly recommend *Operation Hydra*...it's one of the best science fiction romances I've ever read. **Perfect 10!**"

~*Romance Reviews Today*

"Outstanding! This segment only whetted my appetite for more. The heat between Kyrsta and Trey could cause a nuclear meltdown."

~*Simply Romance Reviews*

### **City of Tears**

"WOW! *City of Tears* by Cyndi Friberg is one amazing blend of science fiction at its best and romance at its hottest..."

~*eCata Reviews*

**Taken by Storm**  
*Cyndi Friberg*

*Beyond Ontariese, Book One:* Tal dar Aune, a powerful shape-shifting mage, comes to Earth on a desperate quest to find a mysterious woman before his nemesis destroys her. Little does Tal know the "helpless" female he's come to save is the key to peace on his war-torn world...or that he'll long to touch her, take her, make her his.

Unaware of her royal roots or alien origins, Charlotte spends her first thirty years on Earth. Then Tal bursts into her life with all the subtlety of a thunder storm. He's rude, arrogant, and easily the most desirable man she's ever encountered. With a ruthless madman hot on their heels, they can't afford to be distracted by the attraction rapidly growing between them, but the emotions are too powerful to ignore.

## Prologue

*Ontariese*

*Cycle 1 of the Great Conflict*

E'Lanna dar Aune sank to her knees, a low groan torn from her throat. Her lover's hands moved to steady her, but E'Lanna allowed nothing to distract her from her purpose. They had so little time. If they were detected, all was lost.

She fixed her gaze on the babies lying side by side in front of her. Identical in every way, their luminous eyes stared back with trust and adoration. Tears blinded her.

How would she live without them?

Stretching out her hands, she scanned the babies meticulously, making sure she had left nothing unbound. There must be no sign of their power, no hint to draw attention to them.

"It is time, Your Majesty," her lover, also a Mystic, said, and gently squeezed her shoulder.

She nodded and tried to stand but her entire body trembled. *Oh no!* Her power could not fail her now. She had yet to Summon the Storm. The binding ritual had drained her far more than she realized.

"Steady," the Mystic said, helping her to her feet.

Two couples stepped forward, their costumes appropriate to the separate destinations awaiting them. E'Lanna caught her bottom lip between her teeth, holding back the protests raging within her. This was the only way.

The Mystic gently picked up her babies and handed them to their guardians.

E'Lanna wrapped her arms around herself and choked back a sob. She couldn't let this destroy her. The safety of her daughters must come first.

Quickly turning to the grassy clearing, she summoned the metaphysical plane. Thunder shook the ground and lightning branched out across the violet sky. She opened a transport conduit and poured energy into the vortex. The grass danced with sizzling vibrations and her robe whipped around her body. Bracing her legs farther apart, she Summoned the Storm.

In a sudden, violent burst, six bolts of lightning struck the ground simultaneously, creating a visible circle of energy surrounding her. Reaching out through the vastness of space and time, she searched, guiding the conduit until she found the location she desired.

The Mystic stepped up beside her. His hand was gentle at the small of her back. "I will hold the vortex," he offered.

He was allowing her time to say goodbye.

One of the guardians passed the first child to her and E'Lanna drank in the sight of her delicate features, memorized the softness of her skin and her scent. She pressed her lips to the baby's temple and implanted her image, ensuring her daughter would remember her face.

"We will cherish her, Your Majesty, and protect her with our lives," the guardian assured as E'Lanna returned the baby.

The tightness in her throat made it impossible to speak so she nodded and motioned toward the vortex. The couple stepped through as E'Lanna shook with anguish and loss.

The Mystic wrapped his arms around her, pressing himself against her back, supporting her, offering his energy.

E'Lanna ignored the tears streaming down her face. Her task was not yet complete. She must protect the other twin. Gathering her power into a more manageable stream, she merged with the Mystic, allowing him to augment her rapidly depleting strength.

Focusing again on the transport conduit, she accessed the power of the storm, channeling the energy into the vortex and guiding it in a new direction, to a separate destination.

"Quickly," she urged, motioning the couple forward. E'Lanna kissed the other baby, gently caressing her face. With her lips pressed to her daughter's temple, she implanted the memory. Her heart gave a sickening lurch as she raised her head and passed the child to one of the remaining guardians. "Go now. I am losing control."

They didn't hesitate. Lightning punctuated their departure and the conduit closed behind them.

E'Lanna collapsed into her lover's arms, releasing the shuddering sobs she could no longer contain. He held her tightly, rocking gently and whispering against her hair.

Crushing the fabric of his robe in her fists, E'Lanna looked up at him, her expression fierce. "You must promise me, no matter what happens, you will protect them."

"With my life," he said emphatically.

"You must trust no one. *No one*. Do you understand? I am torn asunder by my responsibilities, but you can offer your allegiance to them alone."

"I offer it freely."

Burying her face against the warmth of his throat, she clutched him tightly and abandoned herself to grief. She must be strong. So many depended on her.

She would be strong again tomorrow – but for now, she would mourn all this conflict had cost her.

## Chapter One

*Ontariese*

*Cycle 89 of the Great Conflict*

"I'm not looking forward to this," Tal muttered as he joined his brother in the vestibule of the Traditionalist Sect Council's headquarters.

Trey chuckled. He sprawled in a chair, one brawny leg hooked over its arm, swinging negligently. He always appeared carefree and comfortable, but Tal knew better. Shrewd intelligence lurked beneath his reckless façade and his intense amber gaze missed nothing.

"If it were up to you, little brother, you'd never leave the Conservatory," Trey chided. "The TSC wants a quick report and then you can zap yourself back to your safe little fortress and practice your spells."

Ignoring the semi-playful jibe, Tal folded his arms across his chest and tightened his hair until it lay in a neat, black coil down the center of his back. "We have nothing to report, so why are they wasting our time?"

"Vee still can't figure out where Joon went?"

"We know when the portal opened and an approximate destination but..." Tal's words trailed off as an argument broke out on the other side of the closed chamber door. "The TSC sounds as productive as ever."

"You'd better change your clothes. If you stroll into the esteemed council chambers in the simple robes of a Mystic, Prefect Aune will not be pleased."

There were so many things that displeased their father. Tal had long since abandoned his efforts to remember them all. But he didn't argue. He visualized a formal Ontarian uniform and felt the shift ripple across the surface of his body. Glancing down, he inspected the result. Crisp, pleated trousers and a formfitting jacket. A row of bright gold buttons and a wide belt, the only decorations distracting from the austere black fabric.

Trey stood and smacked him in the middle of the back. "You look damn good in black." He laughed. "Good thing you don't wear it more often."

A similar black uniform offset Trey's vivid coloring. He had tucked his multicolored hair behind his ears, but refused to bind the bright red, gold and orange strands at the nape of his neck as was proper. Mischief danced in Trey's amber gaze, and Tal smiled despite the tension wrapped around him like a rope. It was hard to remain somber around Trey.

The chamber doors flew open, demanding the attention of both men. Tal could see into the room. He hated the pomp and formality in which the TSC reveled, so as his brother said, he generally stayed away.

A massive U-shaped table dominated the room. Any person wishing to make a presentation to the TSC was forced to stand in the middle, surrounded by the council's haughty stares and aloof expressions.

The man standing there now did not appear cowed by their arrogance. *Vee*. Tal smiled. His mentor and closest friend, Vee refused to bow to the dictates of any man, society or

government. His flowing dove-gray robes intentionally flouted convention and proclaimed his standing as a Master-level Mage, a designation Tal had only recently achieved.

Without turning from his face-off with the TSC, Vee motioned them forward. Tal glanced at Trey, who was grinning from ear to ear. No one stood near the doors so Vee must have thrown them open with the power of his mind.

"I was not ready for their reports, Vee," Roe Aune thundered, rising out of his chair, his palms flat on the table.

"You shall address me with proper respect if you expect the same from me, *Roe Aune*," Vee said in a cold, clipped tone.

Tal watched his father struggle for composure. Only those who knew him well understood the effort needed to restrain his temper. His nostrils flared, his eyes narrowed, his lips compressed until they were invisible, but he managed to regain control and sit.

"Point taken, *Master Vee*. I was not yet ready for Commander Aune and Master Aune to join our assembly," the prefect muttered.

"I have already explained all there is to know. We have exhausted our discourse," Vee dismissed impatiently. "With each moment you spend berating our efforts, *Dez dar Joon* slips farther away."

"How can it be that with all of the technology of our military and the combined power of the Mystics we cannot find one man?"

"Enough!" Vee's voice rattled the intricately etched windows set at regular intervals within the sculpted walls of the chamber. It was not the volume but the intensity of his tone that vibrated the entire room. "I have explained our plan. If you have no further *questions*, we shall proceed."

"Has the Symposium provided you with nothing useful?" Prefect Aune asked.

"The Symposium is still searching the Wisdom of the Ages for anything that might shed light on *Joon's* motivation. I expect another transmission as soon as I return to the Conservatory."

"Then go. Do whatever you must to capture *Dez dar Joon*. We have enjoyed a lull, an intermission in the hostilities, for nearly ten cycles. The House of *Joon* cannot be allowed to escalate this war again."

Vee's only response was a stiff nod. He turned abruptly, his robes flaring out behind him, and strode from the council chambers. Tal and Trey fell in behind and the massive doors slammed shut the moment they cleared the threshold.

"If that man were my sire, I would have strangled him in his sleep. How have you endured the exasperation?" Vee's angry stride kept him half a step ahead of the other two men.

"I came to the Conservatory when I was a child," Tal reminded him.

"Boarding school," Trey put in, and they all laughed.

Vee opened a transport conduit and took them to the wide, covered gallery surrounding the Conservatory. Trey stumbled as they exited the vortex but the two Mystics didn't miss a beat.

"You mentioned a plan," Tal said.



Heaving a long, ragged breath, Vee explained, "We shall Summon the Storm and follow Dez dar Joon in Trey's ship."

Tal skittered to a halt and stared at Vee. "Has a *ship* ever been transported through the vortex before?"

"None of which I am aware," Vee admitted.

Trey laughed. "This is precious. Why don't you two just zap through the vortex and bring him back?"

"Since Dez dar Joon has begun emulating my energy pattern, I am no longer able to detect him," Vee confessed. "Traditional scanners might be more effective, especially given this planet's primitive state."

"Fine by me, but can you two do it?" Trey asked.

"I shall guide the ship from within while Tal stabilizes the vortex from without."

"That sounds easy enough."

Tal glared at his brother. This was no time for Trey's sarcasm.

"We'll want a small ship, minimal crew. Something undetectable to their technology." Trey grinned again. "When do we leave?"

"Make whatever preparations you find necessary. We shall join you as soon as I have heard from the Symposium."

Trey nodded and Vee sent him back through the vortex.

"He hates that, you know," Tal said.

"Transporting?"

"Not so much utilizing the vortex as being tossed through space like a leaf on the wind."

Some of the tension eased from Vee's expression. "I shall offer my apologies when next we meet."

"Has the Symposium made any progress?" Tal changed the subject.

"I was in the midst of a link when your father summoned *me* like a disobedient child."

Tal managed not to laugh at the obvious affront in Vee's tone, but a smile tugged the corners of his mouth. It was not often that anything could rile Vee. Prefect Aune had certainly done so today.

They went to one of the meditation chambers. When the Symposium sent him massive amounts of information in a short period of time, it was necessary for Vee to cast himself into a nearly catatonic trance.

Tal stood by silently as Vee arranged himself comfortably upon the padded floor. "I should not be long."

With a shake of his head, Vee emerged a few moments later. "We were unable to pinpoint his destination, but we have successfully narrowed the search area to a manageable field."

Never one to mince words, Vee continued without giving Tal the opportunity to question his decisions.

"I will infuse you with the needed languages and background information before we begin. The Symposium has given me the image of a woman. We believe she is involved, but we are not sure how. The other Mystics will supplement the Storm. This has never been attempted before."

“I’m aware of that,” Tal said. He felt his senses stir with an uncomfortable combination of excitement and foreboding. He didn’t fear Dez dar Joon, but each time they chased after him, Tal couldn’t help but feel Joon was in control.

Vee glanced at him, apparently sensing the surge of emotions within him. Tal looked away. Vee knew all of the reasons Tal pursued Dez dar Joon. Perhaps this time it would finally end.

“As soon as Trey is ready,” Vee concluded, “the adventure will begin.”

## Chapter Two

*Aspen, Colorado*  
*Present Day*

Holidays were hell for Charlotte Layton, and New Year's Eve was the worst of all. She was twenty-nine years old, financially secure, physically attractive – and utterly alone.

Knowing this night would hit hard, she'd retreated to her cabin near Aspen. Hidden in the majestic tranquility of the Colorado Rocky Mountains, this was the only place on Earth where she could find anything resembling peace.

After several hours of staring at the television in a sightless stupor, she decided to make a list. Lists helped her organize her thoughts and set priorities. She divided the notepad down the center and labeled the columns *Pros* and *Cons*.

Taking a quick sip of coffee in between each entry, Charlotte quickly started to fill the page.

"Pros," she began. Hearing the entries helped her analyze them. "Large, reputable law firm. Lots of opportunity to advance. Their program to prepare me for the bar." With a chuckle, she added the word *exam*. This past year had been more than enough to prepare her for the bar.

Forcing her attention back to the notepad, she continued the list. "Moving my life in a new direction. Getting away from Victor's family."

The last one made her smile. It should be enough to solidify her decision, but she felt obligated to read the cons.

"Selling the house in Cherry Creek. Moving to a place where no one knows me." She paused, tapping her pencil against the edge of the kitchen table. Was that really a con? How would she ever get beyond this hopelessness when everything she did, everything she saw reminded her of Victor and Stephen?

Her wooden chair vibrated as the low rumble of thunder passed through the cabin. How bizarre. Didn't it have to be warm for a thunderstorm? Tossing down the pencil but keeping the coffee mug, she walked to the window and glanced out into the darkness. All she could see through the clear winter night were trees and stars.

This cabin had always been her sanctuary. Even if she moved to Seattle, she intended to keep it. She returned to the kitchen table and the decision facing her. Picking up the pencil, she focused again on the cons. "Actually moving." That was always a pain. Even with movers it could be a nightmare. "Exchanging sunshine for rain."

She tapped the pencil against the last entry, unable to speak the words. *Not being able to visit their graves.*

Grief slammed into her with physical force and her coffee mug shattered. Screaming, Charlotte jumped back to avoid the flying shards and splatters of hot liquid.

What the hell just happened?

She ran for a dishcloth, quickly sopping up the rivulets of coffee. Stepping back, she surveyed the mess and couldn't believe her eyes. Pieces of ceramic lay scattered across the tabletop, but her gaze gravitated toward the notepad. Coffee had saturated the paper in a distinct pattern. A nearly perfect oval now accented the words *not being able to visit their graves*.

Charlotte trembled. What was going on?

She'd been beyond tears for weeks. Part of her heart had been ripped from her chest with no warning, no anesthesia. Was madness setting in?

Grabbing the trash can from under the sink, she swiped the table with the damp dishcloth. Ceramic fragments, notepad, even the pencil, went into the plastic bin.

Charlotte pulled on her leather jacket and hurried outside. *Breathe. Just take slow, deep breaths.* She stared out across her sloping yard toward the rock formation that marked the edge of her property.

You're here to plan the future, not relive the past.

Moonlight glistened off patches of snow scattered across the hill beside the cabin. Tall pine trees cast long, spiky shadows, creating eerie shapes against the ground.

Relax. This is your haven. Nothing can hurt you here.

The crisp scent of pine mixed with chimney smoke. She inhaled again, comforted by the familiar smells. Cold mountain air stung her cheeks and made her nose tingle. She drew up her hood and buried her hands in her pockets.

It was time. If she didn't move on soon, the insidious cancer nibbling at her soul would consume her completely.

A loud explosion jarred Charlotte from her musing. She stumbled to the front of the porch, steadying herself against the railing. The earth shook and lightning branched across the sky.

"We don't have thunderstorms in December," she whispered.

Three more flashes followed in quick succession. The area glowed with eerie light.

She stood transfixed by the spectacle. How was this possible?

A sizzling bolt of lightning slashed in front of her face, driving her back a step. She screamed. The air vibrated with an electrical charge and thunder shook the earth.

What the hell is going on?

Smoke curled up into the moonlight beyond the ridge adjacent to her cabin. A moment later flames leapt into the night sky. She flew into the cabin and searched frantically for her cell phone. Houses were scattered all over this mountain.

The 9-1-1 operator asked the nature of her emergency.

"A tree was just struck by lightning. There's a fire."

After a long pause, the operator said, "You're calling from a cell phone. Please give me your exact location."

She relayed the information and glanced out the window. The fire had spread. "Hurry! It's really taking off."

"Are you sure it was lightning? It's much too cold —"

"For a thunderstorm," Charlotte finished for her. "I thought the same thing, but I saw it hit and the thunder shook my cabin."

The dispatcher insisted Charlotte hold the line until she heard sirens. Ending the call, Charlotte tossed the phone onto the small kitchen table and headed back outside.

The rock formation separated her cabin from the fire, but flames leapt from tree to tree. The rhythmic flash of strobes assured her the firefighters were near. They would likely contain the blaze long before her cabin was in danger, but she wasn't taking any chances.

She turned, intending to scrounge for a hose, when an odd flash caught her eye. Something glinted at the base of the rock formation. Was the underbrush on fire? It hadn't snowed for several days but it shouldn't be *that* dry.

Fear tumbled through her abdomen. One quick gust in the right direction and her property could join this nightmare. Darting back into the cabin, she dumped the firewood out of its metal bucket and filled the bucket with water.

Smoke stung her eyes and made it difficult to see, but she moved as quickly as her sloppy burden would allow. She reached the rock formation and waved her hand back and forth, trying to disperse the smoke.

A soft moan emanated from the shadows. Oh dear God, someone was out there. She set down the bucket, wishing she had grabbed a flashlight. Had someone been struck by lightning?

Or had they started the fire?

Suspicion drove her back a step. She couldn't just abandon someone if they needed help. Taking a deep breath, she started to call out to the firefighters.

Before the cry could pass her lips, some unseen force pulled her forward and buckled her knees. A strong hand clamped around her wrist and Charlotte screamed. She scuttled backward, but the hand held tight to her wrist.

A man pulled himself from the bushes using her resistance as leverage. She cried out again as more and more of him was revealed. His chest was wide, hairless, and bare to the frigid night air. Moonlight gleamed off his smooth, pale skin. A long, loose garment hung open from his shoulders to tangle about his legs. The sculpted contours of his chest and arms were offered no protection by the garment.

The man's other hand found Charlotte's upper arm, pulling her forward. Long black hair streamed all around him, disappearing into the leafy debris. She couldn't see his features, but it was obvious he had no intention of letting her go. She tugged against him frantically, her heart hammering in her chest.

He spoke rapidly but she couldn't understand his words, could hardly hear him over the roaring in her ears. His voice snapped with authority and urgency. Trembling uncontrollably, she continued to resist.

The intensity in his tone suddenly faltered. He collapsed against the ground, dragging her with him. An exotic, spicy scent filled her nose as she sprawled across his chest. She lay there helpless for a moment, inhaling the unusual scent. It made her dizzy and weak.

His hand grasped her hair painfully and pulled her face toward his. Charlotte tried to scream but his mouth managed to find hers through the tangle of their hair.

It wasn't a kiss. She felt the cool pressure of his lips connecting with hers but the contact wasn't tender or intimate. It was as if he were merely forming a seal between their bodies.

For a long moment he just held her there, molding his mouth to hers. She couldn't move. Was he paralyzing her somehow or had her fear rendered her motionless?

Her skin tingled. Her muscles vibrated with a subtle pulsation. His mouth moved and the tingling became painful. She arched away from him, struggling to separate their mouths. His hand tightened in her hair and his arm firmly encircled her back.

Charlotte panicked, writhing desperately to break his hold. He rolled over, dragging her beneath him and pinning her against the frozen ground. She felt heat gathering in the center of her abdomen, burning and building until her whole body shook with tension. Then he drew it out of her, like sucking soda through a straw.

He finally tore his mouth from hers and Charlotte screamed. She shoved against his chest but he was no longer solid. Her hands passed through him and she screamed again. He shimmered, wavering between substance and spirit for just a second and then disintegrated entirely.

Scrambling to her feet, Charlotte searched the shadows in stunned disbelief. What, in the name of God, had just happened? She leaned forward, resting her hands on her knees. She gasped and panted and lights danced before her eyes.

You're breathing too fast. Slow it down. Think. You need to think.

Someone was running toward her. She could hear their heavy footfall crashing and skidding across the uneven ground. Sucking in a shuddering breath, she scrambled for somewhere to hide, but her rescuer appeared too quickly.

He wore full firefighter regalia, complete with a masked helmet. The beam of his flashlight crossed her face. Charlotte squinted and averted her gaze.

"Are you all right, miss?" he asked, laying his gloved hand lightly on her arm. "We heard someone screaming."

He flipped up the transparent plate protecting his face. Still, she could barely make out his features in the shadows. He was well over six feet tall. She couldn't decide if his obvious brawn comforted or intimidated her.

"Is everything all right?" he asked again. "Are you injured?" The beam of his flashlight made a cursory pass over her body.

"I'm sorry," she said in a shaky voice. "I didn't mean to distract you from the fire."

He brought the flashlight up again, close to but not directly in her face. "What made you scream? Are you sure you're not injured?"

His gaze searched her face and Charlotte had to look away. How could she begin to explain what had just happened? "There was this... I saw..." She shook her head and crossed her arms over her chest, shaking helplessly.

"What is it?" He moved closer. "What frightened you? Why are you out here alone?"

"I'm not sure," she whispered. "I thought I saw..." She suddenly realized how insane she would sound if she attempted to explain the truth. She forced herself to smile but drifted back a step.

He looked her over more carefully, ending his assessment with a chuckle. "You're not even wearing shoes." He shined the light on her wool-lined, leather slippers.

"I was trying to find my cat, but it got so smoky I couldn't see."

He didn't seem entirely convinced. "The cat will find its own way home. They always do. And we're here to deal with the fire. We've got a paramedic with our unit. I'd like him to take a look at you."

She shook her head. "Don't be ridiculous. There's nothing wrong with me except a momentary lapse in judgment. You've got a fire to fight and I'm going back to my cabin."

"We've got the fire contained. Thank God, everything is frozen or we could have had a real mess on our hands. Which house is yours? I'll walk you home." He grinned, his white teeth a stark contrast to his sooty face. "Just in case you weren't imagining things."

"That's not necessary."

He pulled off his glove and extended his hand. "Sanders. Rod Sanders."

She shook his hand. "Charlotte Layton."

"See, now we're not strangers so I can walk you home."

Relenting with an anemic smile, Charlotte started down the hill. "It will be a very short walk."

"Are you the one who called in the fire?" he asked, striding along beside her.

"Yes."

"Do you live here or did you come up for the ski season?"

That wasn't a professional question. Still, he seemed to be nice enough. If she couldn't trust a fireman, who could she trust? "The cabin is mine but I live in Cherry Creek. And I'm not much of a skier."

"You up here all alone?"

"That's none of your business."

As they rounded the rock formation, the lights from her cabin made his flashlight unnecessary. He flipped it off with a soft chuckle. "You're right. I apologize."

He sounded *mostly* sincere. She motioned toward the cabin. "Well, that's it. Thanks for seeing me home."

"Would you like me to check out the cabin?"

His persistent helpfulness had lost its charm. "No, thank you. I know my imagination just ran away with me."

"All right then. Happy New Year."

"Happy New Year." She forced the words past her dry lips and stepped onto the porch.

He turned to go then hesitated. "I'm on duty for the next four days. If you need anything, anything at all, just call the station."

"Thank you, Mr. Sanders." Was he flirting with her? It had been so long she'd forgotten the signs.

She just wanted him to go away. Between the painful memories and her bizarre hallucination, Valium tempted her more right now than a strapping firefighter.

He finally left and she rushed into the cabin. With a sigh of relief, she leaned against the door. It hadn't happened. It couldn't have happened. How could it have happened?

As much as Charlotte tried to dismiss the incident as a stress-related hallucination, she *knew* it was real. She had touched the man, felt him press her into the ground, felt the pull of whatever he drained from her body.

A simple, rational explanation eluded her, dancing on the fringes of her consciousness like a mischievous sprite. But one thing was certain – it hadn't been her imagination.

Charlotte staggered across the room, her legs wobbling beneath her. Had someone gotten their holidays mixed up? This felt like Halloween not New Year's Eve.

"I wanted something to keep my mind off the past," she whispered to the shadows. "I just didn't expect the distraction to be so bizarre."

She shrugged out of her coat and kicked off her much-abused slippers. Grasping the back of the small sofa, she closed her eyes. A shadowy image of the man formed within her mind. She hadn't been able to see him clearly. Even the memory sent little shivers through her body. He'd been strong yet utterly vulnerable. Whatever he'd drawn from her body left her weak and tired.

Where had he gone?

Where had he come from?

Why was he here?

Shaking away the useless speculation, she turned toward the bathroom. More than enough excitement for one night. She was going to take a shower and go to bed.

Warm water cascaded down her body, melting the tension from her muscles if not her mind. What was happening to her? First the coffee cup and then the man. She couldn't rationally explain either one and her analytical mind demanded understanding.

Ceramic could crack after a period of time, but that mug had spontaneously shattered.

She turned toward the spray, rubbing her face as the water slicked her hair back.

This was the anniversary of that horrible night. Everyone had advised her to stay busy, keep her mind occupied and not to be alone. She chuckled. She had never been good at taking advice. She was far more adept at giving it.

Scrubbing her hair with shampoo, she continued to analyze the bizarre events. The thunderstorm was strange but Colorado was known for rapidly changing weather.

But the man...how could she explain the man?

With a frustrated jerk, Charlotte turned off the water and snatched back the shower curtain. Steam rolled out, instantly fogging the mirror hanging over the sink. She grabbed a towel and dried off then donned the terrycloth robe hanging on the back of the door.

She dragged a wide-tooth comb through her hair and wiped the mirror with her towel. Her gaze lifted to the mirror and she dropped the comb. Paralyzed by fear and disbelief, she couldn't even make a sound. The woman in the mirror had strange, swirling eyes. Her features were the same but her eyes...

Charlotte snapped her eyes shut and a shuddering gasp left her lungs. She was hallucinating! None of this was real. She needed to call her grief counselor or – Ghostbusters?

She managed a shaky laugh. Okay, that was better. Very slowly, she raised her face and found her own frightened blue gaze reflected back from the mirror. She opened the door and wiped the mirror more thoroughly.

It had been a trick of the mist. Smoke still clouded her vision. There were any number of explanations for...

But how did she explain the man?



Hurling the towel into the bathtub, she walked from the room less relaxed than she had been before the shower. She stepped into her bedroom and the door slammed shut behind her. A scream caught in her throat, sounding more like a strangled yelp. Tugging and twisting did nothing. The doorknob wouldn't budge.

Sparks danced across the floor and encompassed the shapeless mound lying at the foot of her bed. Turning slowly to face it, she pressed her back against the door. The mound undulated and expanded. Small flashes, like arcs of electricity, broke out all over its surface.

An arm suddenly thrust out, the fist tightly clenched. She gasped, her gaze desperately searching for options.

Escape?

A weapon?

What in God's name was that thing? The mass lay between her and the window. She was trapped. Other shapes formed and rippled. A head, a leg, a torso, but the shapes soon shifted, becoming part of the mass again.

A crack of thunder echoed in the room. Charlotte covered her ears with her hands, bracing her feet against the shaking floor. The mound began to glow, illuminated from the inside until the entire room pulsed with light and energy.

There was no way she was waiting around to see what emerged from this cocoon!

She dove for the bed. Scrambling across the mattress, she bound to her feet on the other side. She kept the mass in her peripheral vision but focused on the window.

In one sustained motion, a tall, broad-shouldered body arose from the mound. Or more accurately, the mound *became* the body.

Charlotte gasped and yanked the curtains aside. She tried to move the latch, but her hands shook so badly she couldn't work the lock.

She could see his reflection in the glass. Long black hair cascaded all around him as he stalked toward her. Moonlight offered a glimpse of his features before he stepped into her shadow.

Warm fingers curved around her upper arms. She cried out. The contact produced a subtle shock like static only hot. She clung to the wooden frame as he dragged her away from the window. He turned her to face him but she immediately backed away.

She bumped against the wall. "Take whatever you want. Just don't hurt me."

His hands still circled her arms and she raised her gaze. Moonlight from the window allowed her to study his face for the first time. Silky black hair framed features so perfect she could hardly breathe. A strong, straight nose divided the lean, angular plane of his face. Hard, hollow cheekbones and ink-black brows drew attention to his strangely beautiful eyes.

A startling combination of gray, blue and black, the entire surface of his eyes swirled behind his lashes like smoke. There were no pupils, no rings of color, only an ever-changing blending of hues.

She had seen eyes like his before. Staring back at her from the mirror!

He said several words in a slow, even tone. Charlotte tried to calm herself, to control her breathing, to accept that this was real.

Something soft and warm brushed against her arms and sneaked under the edge of her bathrobe to touch the bare skin of her upper chest. She glanced down and screamed. Like long, silky tentacles – he could control the movement of his hair!

His hands framed her face and he spoke again. She pushed against his chest, desperate to free herself. Terror burned away the fragile remnants of her rationality.

“Don’t touch me. *What are you?* Let me go!”

Feeling a gentle penetration into her mind, she yelled for help. She thrashed and kicked, pounding her fists against his chest. The subtle tingling intensified. She arched away from him, throwing her head back and squeezing her eyes shut against the invasion. He was in her mind. He was inside her! He was...

Tal Aune barely caught the woman before she hit the floor. Lifting her into his arms, he groaned. His entire body protested the exertion. Curse the ghosts of the night moon, he was weak as a babe. What had interrupted the spatial transmission? He must have a complete energy transference or what little ground he’d gained with their liplink would be lost.

He moved to the sleeping station and laid the female down. He hadn’t really looked at her before. She wasn’t as distasteful as some Earth females he’d seen. Her skin appeared healthy and smooth. The arrangement of her features was acceptable but her hair... He lifted a lock and shook his head. The color was a nice warm brown with a touch of gold, but the strands would barely reach her shoulders. Was she being punished for some offense? Surely this abomination was not intentional.

The most efficient way of replenishing his energy was to join his body to hers, but if she happened to rouse while he was inside her, he knew she wouldn’t be pleased. He chuckled at the galactic understatement. Judging from the struggle she launched when he caressed her with his hair, he could imagine the resistance he’d encounter should he join with her. Besides, he had never joined with one native to Earth. Human. They were called humans. It was possible that energy transference couldn’t be accomplished in such a manner.

She would have to be naked. There was no avoiding that. He couldn’t absorb energy with any sort of barrier between his skin and hers – and he was in desperate need of energy.

He hadn’t meant to overload her senses but humans were so fragile. And her irrational resistance had only complicated the matter. She’d reacted as if he meant to erase her mind, not perform a simple scan.

He leaned forward and his hand brushed across her foot. Her toes were ice-cold. Again he chuckled, amazed by the helplessness of humans. They couldn’t even control their body temperature.

Unknotting the belt at her waist, he parted her garment and paused, surprised by her appeal. She had beautiful breasts, high and round. They would easily fill his palms. Without her clothing, the female was downright interesting.

Tal felt his hair flutter and swirl around his torso. This was ridiculous. He must garner energy from this woman and then figure out what had gone wrong.

Shifting out of his clothing, he crawled onto the sleeping station and pulled the little human into his arms.

Charlotte snuggled into the warmth enveloping her. She splayed her fingers to better absorb the heat and curled her toes. Her skin tingled and her mind swam within a sensual haze. She was aware of the sensations, yet coherent thought was just beyond her grasp. Her face was buried against something warm and solid. Long arms encircled her back, molding her body against another body—a hard, heated body. Her legs tangled with other legs—muscular, masculine legs. Pressing her breasts more firmly against the solid wall of muscle in front of her, she arched into the heat. It felt strange. It felt wonderful. But it felt wrong.

There was no man in her life. No lover to keep her warm.

She had just begun to sort through the confusion when his mouth touched hers. Gently, he pressed his lips over hers, caressing and coaxing her. She parted her lips, responding instinctively to the velvety slide of his mouth. The tip of his tongue touched hers and she groaned. It had been so long since she reveled in the intimacy of a deep, passionate kiss. She offered her mouth and accepted his tongue.

Her hands clutched his broad back and her legs moved against his until her sex made contact with one thick thigh. Aching heat flared within her, making her wild. She arched and undulated, her hands tangling in his long hair—impossibly long hair.

Charlotte dragged her mouth away from his and forced her eyes to open. His hot, seeking mouth moved to her throat. She didn't need to see his face to know who held her. His embrace was strong, demanding, and his silky hair was stroking her entire body all at once. It was the most erotic thing she'd ever felt. Like silk fringe or the fur of a Persian cat, the strands moved over her skin, circling her limbs and caressing her flesh.

She couldn't think, couldn't struggle. Heat and liquid desire rolled through her body. She tried to disentangle herself from the silken web, but he only rolled with her, dragging her beneath him.

His weight pressed her into the bed and his face hovered above hers. She stared up into his otherworldly eyes, panting and rigid. He was a stranger to her. She didn't even know his name.

He wasn't human!

He spoke in a hushed, tender tone, but his words were as alien as his eyes. She could still feel his hair wrapped around her, clinging to her, caressing her. "What do you want from me?" Her voice broke and tears gathered behind her lashes.

He spoke again and she closed her eyes. He was trying to soothe her but his eyes, combined with their sexual position, terrified her. His warm palms skimmed up and down along the sides of her body and his hair continued to slide against her skin. Charlotte fought against the stimulation. She couldn't let herself be seduced. But, boy, did it feel good!

This couldn't be happening. Why was this happening?

"I will not hurt you."

She gasped and opened her eyes. His words were oddly accented, but clearly English. "Who are you?" she asked. "Why were you kissing me?"

"I must have more of what I took from you on the mountain." He spoke slowly, as if searching for each word. "This will not harm you but it will restore me to health. Do you understand? My levels are low—no, not just low. I am dangerously weak. If I do not have more energy, my essence will disperse."

“What you were doing a minute ago is different than what you did on the mountain. On the mountain you only...” She gasped and squirmed as she realized just how much of his warm skin was rubbing against hers. “Why the hell am I naked?”

“Do you have a mate?”

“If this exchange involves something I would ordinarily do with my mate, forget about it.”

He shifted his weight, touching her face with his fingertips. “A full-body joining would afford me the highest concentration of energy but it is not necessary.”

“Glad to hear it because I’m not doing *that* with you.”

He chuckled and nuzzled the side of her neck. Charlotte tried to push him away. He moved again, rolling them onto their sides, facing each other.

“May I touch you?” he whispered near her ear.

Charlotte’s head began to spin. “Touch me how? What exactly is necessary for this exchange?”

“I must give you pleasure.”

Did he mean...surely, he didn’t mean she had to have an... “If I refuse to allow this? Will you simply take what you need?”

“The exchange is tainted when it is forced. As weak as I am, it would do me no good. I need this desperately and it must be soon or it will be too late.”

She trembled. Purple smudges shadowed his eyes and deep lines bracketed his mouth. His breathing grew labored and her heart lurched into her throat. He meant every word. If she didn’t allow him to touch her, he would die. Could she really be so selfish?

“I have so many questions. Once you’re restored, will you answer my –”

Taking her phrasing as consent, he cut off her words with a quick, urgent kiss. One arm slipped beneath her neck and his hand moved to her hip, pulling her more tightly against him.

This isn’t sexual. It’s medicinal.

She tried to relax, to accept the warm pressure of his mouth. Fear kept her stiff and unresponsive. He deepened the contact, coaxing her lips apart, but he refused to penetrate her mouth. He seemed to want her to come to him. Tentatively, Charlotte touched his tongue with hers.

He groaned, the desperation returning full force. Slanting his mouth over hers, he took possession. His lips molded and moved, his tongue traced and stroked and finally delved deep. She arched into his embrace and returned his kiss with an eagerness she didn’t fully understand. She wanted to taste him and wanted him to taste her. She needed to touch him, needed to feel his hands moving across her skin.

Tingling sensations erupted all over her body. She could feel it happening again as it had on the mountain. He was gathering something within her, only it was different this time, more acute, more powerful. She was trapped by his arms and tangled in his hair. Her breasts swelled and her nipples tightened painfully while the sensations coalesced. Scalding heat radiated out from her feminine core until even her toes felt hot. Consumed by the heat, she surrendered to the storm.

He reared up onto his knees, dragging her with him. His hands were everywhere, sliding under the tantalizing curtain of his hair. He cupped her breast. Heat seared her sensitive nipple. Sliding along her spine, skimming her hip and belly, his touch tantalized and built the pressure. He pressed her to his chest and slipped one hand between her thighs.

Charlotte cried out sharply, frightened by the intensity of her feelings. Demanding need pulsed through her, electrifying her senses. He parted her folds and stroked her, his touch gentle yet sure. She trembled, clinging to his arms. Circling her clit, he commanded her body's surrender.

Pleasure burst within her, sizzling along every nerve ending and triggering the powerful pulsation of her muscles.

A draining, sucking sensation siphoned her strength in one violent withdrawal.

She screamed, fighting just to remain conscious. His arms tightened and his body shook. A low, ragged groan escaped him as he collapsed onto his side.

His arms released her but his hair was still tangled around her. She trembled, her lungs desperate for air, her muscles burning. Her body ached, her mind reeled and she collapsed across his chest.

"You said it wouldn't harm me," she whispered, and slipped into the void.

## Chapter Three

Charlotte awoke slowly, feeling muddled and abused. Why was she so weak and why... Her fingers encountered something warm and smooth and her thoughts trailed away.

Awareness crashed over her with shocking clarity. She lay entwined with the alien, naked, tangled in his hair. Her shoulder was tucked under his arm and her leg was bent, nearly circling his waist. His hand held her knee, lightly securing her leg in its intimate position.

"I know you're awake," he said softly. "I can feel the tension in your body."

She started to sit but thought better of it. Her bathrobe was spread beneath them. His hair caressed her naked body, leaving tingles in the wake of each silky strand. "Are you...healed?"

He chuckled. "Nearly so and I thank you. It's quite likely you saved my life last night."

He rolled, reversing their positions. She stared up at him silently as she took mental inventory of the situation. She had to get out of here. Which meant she had to get dressed and to her car. Would he let her drive away with a friendly wave goodbye? Somehow, she didn't think so.

"Will you please let me up?" She didn't trust the way her body reacted to this man.

"If you like."

"I'd like it best if you'd just leave. If you're honestly grateful for what I did, that's how you can repay me."

His smile caught her by surprise. The flash of white teeth and intensity of his extraordinary eyes made her stomach clench and her breath catch in her throat. He ran his fingertip down her nose, tapping it against the tip. "Is life ever that simple?"

"Certainly not mine."

"I'll turn my back as you dress. You seem uncomfortable with your nudity."

"I'm uncomfortable with..." She started an indignant explanation then bit back the harsh words. Caution was a wiser course until she knew more about this...person. "Thank you."

She scurried off the bed and yanked the top drawer of her dresser open. Tugging on the first pair of panties her fingers touched, she found the matching bra and ventured a glance in the mirror. He stood on the other side of her bed, fully dressed, watching her.

"You said you'd turn your back," she reminded, struggling to work the front clasp on her bra.

"I did turn my back."

He smiled – no, that uneven curving of his lips could only be described as a smirk. His hair flowed over his shoulders and wound itself into a neat coil. He wore the same elongated vest that bared his arms and chest, serving no apparent purpose. His pants were loose, nearly shapeless, bound by a wide band at his waist and tucked into fawn-colored boots.

"Are you finished dressing?" he asked.

Glancing down, she realized she hadn't even finished fastening her bra. "Hardly." She returned her attention to the task, refusing to ask how he'd managed to dress completely in

the time it took her to pull on her panties. "How are you able to speak my language?" Before he could answer, she turned around and asked, "What's your name?"

"Tal Aune."

"Talon? Like the claw of a bird?"

His hair tightened in response to something in the question and he turned to the window. "I am Tal, second son of the House of Aune. How shall I address you?"

She slid the closet open and pulled on a pair of jeans. "My name is Charlotte Layton. Where did you come from?" Finding a soft, baggy sweater, she wiggled into it as she waited for his explanation.

"I don't know if I can make you understand. Much of my world can't be explained in your language."

Charlotte didn't believe him. How could the answer be that complicated? His attention stayed focused out the window.

She glanced at the door. Last night, she hadn't been able to open it. Would it open now? Could she grab her coat, her boots, and make it to her car before he stopped her? Probably not. Still she wasn't going to follow him around like an obedient puppy.

"Who are you?" she asked softly as she sidestepped toward the door. He didn't answer. She took another step. "Where's your world?" No answer. "How did you get here? Do you have a ship or something?"

Reaching out as quietly as she could, Charlotte tried the knob. It remained immobile within her grasp. The knob itself had no locking mechanism. What had he done to it?

"The handle is fused. I will release it in a moment."

Had he read her thoughts or simply realized what she was doing? "What do you want?"

"I want your promise that you will not attempt to escape until I am able to determine what went wrong with the spatial transportation."

That got her attention. She turned toward him, struck again by how...interesting she found his appearance. His face held no real expression and the swirling of his eyes nearly stopped. She buried her hands in the pockets of her jeans and continued to study him.

In the sunlight, his skin had a subtle pearlescence the moon hadn't revealed and she could see thin blue streaks scattered through his hair. Not highlights – individual strands of his hair were cobalt blue.

"Spatial transportation?" she echoed. "Like wormholes or something?"

"Wormholes are a naturally occurring phenomena, unpredictable and generally unstable. The portals I mentioned are intentionally created and controlled."

"I see," she muttered, though she didn't see at all. "And you can create one of these portals?"

He crossed his arms over his chest. The muscular ripple of his torso made Charlotte itch to touch.

"The portal is incidental. I must determine what happened to my companions. That will be impossible if I spend all my time chasing after you."

"So your proposal is that I trust everything you tell me and – what? Twiddle my thumbs until you –"

A sharp gasp cut her argument short. He suddenly stood in front of her though she hadn't seen him move. His hands pressed against the wall on either side of her shoulders. As he leaned in, his spicy scent surrounded her, filled her head and made her almost giddy.

"I understand sarcasm, Charlotte," he whispered into her ear. "I don't have time to entertain your temper. People I care about are on that ship. Your choice is simple. Offer me whatever vow a human will honor or I will put you in stasis so you no longer hinder me."

She wasn't sure how stasis was accomplished in his world but it didn't sound pleasant. Her mind reeled from the things she'd seen him do so far. Was it wise to test him? "That isn't a choice. It's a threat. How long do you anticipate this...investigation taking and what does it entail?"

He stepped back, his gaze moving over her features. "How is information communicated on this world? If something of significance happens, how is the general populous notified?"

She was almost afraid to ask. "You mean like the crash of a spaceship?"

He nodded.

"There was more than one ship? Was it your ship that started the fire on the mountain? Were you the only person in your —"

"I'm a Master-level Mage. I don't require a vessel for interdimensional transportation. I was stabilizing the conduit for the others."

He sounded affronted but Charlotte was still confused. "You created the portal for them? Were *they* in some sort of ship?"

"Yes. If Trey's ship is in orbit as it should be, your world will never know. If there was a serious malfunction —"

"Who is Trey?"

"My brother."

"Don't you have some sort of communicator?" She bit her lip to keep from laughing. She suddenly felt like an escapee from a Star Trek convention.

"I am a Master-level Mage."

"And I have a law degree." She sighed. "Look, I didn't ask for your résumé. If Trey's ship crashed in or around Aspen, it would definitely make the news. Unless of course, the government managed to cover it up."

"And how is this news accessed?"

Tal watched her walk to the door and gesture expectantly toward the latch. He commanded the metal to reshape and waited for the acrid smell, confirming its compliance, before he nodded for her to try again.

She pulled her fingers back with a sharp gasp and shook her hand. "That's hot."

"My apologies." Reaching around her, he opened the door. "I forget the limitations of humans."

Indignation pulsed from her in little bursts as he followed her into the outer room. Her shoulders squared and she impatiently shoved her hair off her brow. He shouldn't provoke her. It wasn't wise. But her reactions fascinated him. Her odd, sky-colored eyes blazed and the skin above her sculpted cheekbones blossomed with color.

"Your flesh is impervious to heat, I suppose?"



"I can adjust my body temperature to compensate."

"Like a reptile." She shot back.

"No, reptiles are susceptible to their environment even more so than..." He took a deep breath and smiled. "Why are we arguing?"

"Because you say *human* like it's a disease."

He really did have more important things to do than goad the female. She might even be able to assist him, if he stopped antagonizing her. "Would you please access the news and see if anything of significance has been reported?"

"Wouldn't that be a refreshing change," she muttered, and moved to the small table beside a cushioned bench covered in tanned animal hide. How barbaric. She picked up a small, thin box and pushed a button, which activated a much larger box. As the picture came into focus, he realized it was some sort of audio-video monitor. The design had been so unusual he hadn't recognized its purpose. She continued pushing buttons on the controller, changing the picture on the screen.

What should he tell her?

How much did she really need to know?

If Trey were lost and Vee... The thought was too painful to complete. Dez dar Joon had cost him so much already. Tal would surrender nothing more!

His gaze moved back to the woman. She was completely unaware, innocent – helpless. Could she even comprehend an evil such as Joon?

Joon had traveled through space and time to find her. The thought sent chills down Tal's back. He could imagine how this little human would react to such a revelation.

Apparently, she found what she desired for she stopped changing the image on the screen. Tal took advantage of her distraction and sent out a seeker pulse. If she noticed what he was doing, he had no doubt she'd try to escape. He had to decrease the efficiency of his other senses to power a long-range pulse. Hopefully, her search for information would keep her occupied. The doors were fused and he had immobilized her conveyance so she wouldn't get far. Still, he didn't trust her.

No one responded to his mental call. He reached farther, intensifying the power level again and again. He felt nothing. Awareness faded as he poured more energy into each pulse. The room grew hazy, out of focus. Sound became an indistinguishable rumble. Still he pushed on, reaching farther, desperately searching for the people he loved.

Charlotte flipped off the television and tossed the remote on the couch. Nothing. There was nothing on the news about an alien spaceship crashing in Colorado or anywhere else. Had good old Uncle Sam pulled another Roswell?

"How far away should we be considering?" When he didn't answer, she glanced over her shoulder, and whispered, "This just gets better and better."

He hung suspended in the air about six inches off the floor. His arms extended away from his sides and his hair fanned out like a cape. Bursts of light pulsed from his body, expanding until they disappeared. His eyes remained open but they now glowed with colorless light.

Shocked and fascinated, Charlotte wasted precious moments staring at him. Clearly he was unaware of his surroundings. She couldn't just stand there and wait for him to emerge from...whatever this was.

He'd demanded her vow, but she hadn't actually promised a thing. It wouldn't be dishonorable for her to take advantage of this opportunity. His powers were obviously restored. He could take care of himself. Quickly tugging on her boots, she snatched her coat from the back of the chair and tiptoed to the front door. It didn't surprise her to find the handle "fused" but she groaned all the same.

The front wall of the living room housed a massive picture window but functional windows were situated to either side. She tried the lock on the nearest window and nearly cried when she was able to rotate the latch. She pushed the pane up and reached for the screen.

Glancing once at Tal, Charlotte pulled on her coat and grabbed her purse. This wasn't a betrayal. He could use the cabin for as long as he liked as long as it took for him to... She wouldn't say anything about what she'd seen. This wasn't a betrayal.

*Thank you, God. Thank you, God. Thank you, God.* She repeated the words in a silent litany as she stepped through the tall, narrow window and ran across the yard toward her car.

\* \* \*

A faint, Mystic signal responded to Tal's seeker pulse and his entire being exhaled with relief. Vee. If Vee still existed, then likely the ship had survived as well. He formed Trey's image and transmitted it to Vee. Soothing warmth and a sense of wellbeing responded to the inquiry. Trey was alive. All was well.

Tal nearly ended the link when he sensed one final image approaching. He saw a mountain peak with a distinct shape. Why Vee wanted him to go to this place, Tal didn't know. Their tenuous connection only allowed them to communicate basic impressions not specific thoughts.

Transmitting his understanding of the request, he felt Vee add a sense of urgency. Something was wrong. Tal responded again and then severed the psychic connection. He came out of the trance with a grunt. His legs buckled and his palms met the floorboards with a painful slap. Panting and shaking his head, he struggled to clear the last of the psychic haze.

They were alive. Joon had failed to collapse the vortex entirely. Hopefully the effort was costing him dearly. Tal lifted his head and coiled his hair. Rolling his shoulders, he hefted himself to his feet and felt a cold draft brush his back. He turned and cursed. His hair snapped like a whip, expressing his frustration.

The female had crawled out the window.

Unbelievable!

With an impatient wave of his hand, Tal reshaped the latch and yanked the door open. Her conveyance hadn't moved but she was nowhere in sight.

Curse the ghosts of the night moon, why was she being so difficult? Everything he did on this world drained his energy. How was he ever going to Summon the Storm? He sent out

another seeker pulse and located his wayward companion. The moment he had her back in the cabin, he would tell her in explicit detail what was at stake and the sort of fate awaiting should Joon find her.

Shifting his shape to her location, he firmly closed his arms around her as she crashed into his chest. She cried out but Tal conjured a gag and swept her up in his arms. Wiggling and kicking, she struggled against his hold and protested frantically behind the gag. Tal ignored it all. He was finished indulging her useless antics. He opened a transport conduit and emerged in the main room of her cabin.

Halfway through the spinning vortex, Charlotte stopped struggling. Fear shouldered aside her indignation and she wrapped her arms around his neck. Every imaginable color twirled and spun in dizzying patterns. A roar like gale-force winds drowned out every thought and all she could do was hang on and experience the awesome spectacle.

He stepped out into her living room and Charlotte released her pent-up breath. Could he do that any time he wanted?

I'm a Master-level Mage. I don't require a vessel for interdimensional transportation. His words echoed back to her. No wonder he had been insulted by her assumption.

As he lowered her to the couch, her purse slid off her shoulder and landed on the cushion beside her. He snapped out several words she didn't understand. Suddenly, her entire body felt weighted. She struggled merely to keep her head up.

"Has it not occurred to you to wonder what brought *aliens* to Earth?"

Seething behind the gag, she glared at him. She *had* wondered. She had *asked* him, but he refused to answer any of her questions!

"My companions and I are pursuing a man named Dez dar Joon."

She shook her head and tried to form words, making it as obvious as she could that she wanted him to remove the gag. The show of defiance exhausted her. She stopped fighting the invisible pull and her head sagged against the back of the couch.

Slowly, the gag disintegrated and the pressure lessened. She took a deep breath and sat up. "What...did he do?"

"He has yet to do anything on this world."

He paused ominously.

"What do you expect him to do?"

"No, Charlotte. The question is, why did Dez dar Joon come to Earth?"

Her eyes narrowed at his patronizing tone, but she resisted sarcasm's familiar call. "Why did Dez dar Joon come to Earth?"

"He is searching for a woman."

"There aren't any women on... I'm sorry. Please, don't put the gag back on. Why is Dez der Joon searching –"

"Dez *dar* Joon. Dez, head of the House of Joon. And again, that is not the correct question. The question is, who is this woman?"

"Who is Dez *dar* Joon searching for?"

"You."

"Why would the head of the House of Joon be searching for me?"

He released her entirely and crossed his arms over his chest. "Joon is a Master-level Mage in everything but name."

"I don't know what that means and it doesn't explain why you believe he's looking for me."

"He has not earned the title but he has a skill-set similar to my own."

"Is he dangerous?"

Tal laughed harsh and scornful. "Am I?"

"You didn't answer my question." She bit out each word, clenching her fists to keep from shaking him.

He just stared at her, nostrils flared, lips compressed. "I need your assistance. I will exchange the information you want for the information I need."

"What information do you need?"

"Give me your hand." He held out his own expectantly.

"Why?"

"I'm not going to hurt you."

She was not as certain of that as she had been earlier but she extended her arm and placed her hand in his.

"Close your eyes."

"Why?"

"Because this will be less startling if your eyes are closed," he answered impatiently.

Hesitantly, she closed her eyes.

"Where is this place?"

The image of a mountain peak gradually formed within Charlotte's mind. "That looks like Pyramid Peak. It could be Maroon Bells... No, it's definitely Pyramid Peak." She opened her eyes and pulled her hand out of his light grasp.

"Take me to Pyramid Peak."

Charlotte laughed, moving farther away from him. "I can't create one of those vortex things. Pyramid Peak is over fourteen thousand feet up and this is January."

"We will not stay long."

"I don't think you understand. I have a friend who's an avid climber but I can't—"

"Can you take me to a place where Pyramid Peak is visible?"

He had threatened to put her in some sort of stasis. She had no doubt now he could do that and a lot worse. It really did make more sense to cooperate with him. "Why is Dez dar Joon looking for me?"

"We aren't certain."

"Oh, what a stinking cop-out," she flared. "This is supposed to be an exchange. Knock me out—I don't care. Find Pyramid Peak on your own. Go walking around Aspen looking like that and see how far you get."

One corner of his mouth curved in a mischievous smile and a ripple passed from his toes to the top of his head. His appearance was swept away, replaced by the exact likeness of James Miller, a local business owner.

Charlotte gasped softly and walked around him in a wide circle. An advertisement for Miller's Bistro had been on TV right before she switched it off.

"You're a shapeshifter," she murmured, feeling foolish stating the obvious.

"No, I am an Ontarian. Being able to change my natural shape is a Mystic ability, not the definition of who I am."

The cocoon. He must have gotten stuck in between forms. She shuddered, remembering the undulating mass.

"How far will I get in Aspen in this shape?" he asked when she continued to stare at him.

Shaking away her shock, she pointed out, "James Miller would know where Pyramid Peak is."

"Then I will shift to another form." He exhaled impatiently and stalked toward her. "Something is wrong, Charlotte. I don't know what, but I must get to Pyramid Peak. If I can see it, I can transport myself to the location. Will you help me or not?"

Swallowing awkwardly, Charlotte pushed her fingers through her hair. "What did you do to my car? I couldn't turn the ignition."

"I can reshape it. Is your conveyance necessary to reach this place?"

"Yes. Is everyone on your world able to do this?"

"Does everyone on Earth have the same abilities?" he sneered.

"It was a reasonable question, you arrogant jerk."

"Something is wrong. I cannot make myself any clearer. Will you help me?"

Her heart fluttered as she debated her options. "Will you let me go after I take you there?"

"It depends what I learn once we reach our destination."

All that nonsense about her being Joon's target was doubtless to gain her cooperation. Still, what choice did she have? If she refused to help Tal, he'd put her in stasis and set out on his own.

"People will probably see us. Can you keep that basic shape but change the hair, maybe make it darker and a little longer?" He shifted effortlessly and Charlotte shivered. "You're good at that. Sharpen up your cheekbones. Make them more like your own."

He quickly complied. "May we go?"

"You need a coat."

"I can adjust—"

"You will draw attention to yourself if you aren't wearing a coat and gloves."

He formed a jacket identical to hers. "No. This is a woman's coat. Make it shorter and gathered at the waist. Now, lose the hood. Most men wear knitted caps that conform to their heads. Wait, I have one."

She rummaged through the box on the top shelf of the coat closet and found a stocking cap. He pulled it on and she folded it up to form a small cuff. Tucking his hair behind his ears and his ears under the hat, she decided Tal made one handsome human. Trying to disguise her laughter, Charlotte found her gloves.

"Why are you laughing?"

"I just thought you looked nice as a human but didn't think you'd appreciate the observation."

"This is not my appearance. It is a minor variation of the man on the monitor," he said stiffly.

"Good point. Make yourself some of these and let's go."

Tal looked at the hand protectors she held and shaped similar coverings over his hands. Her brow furrowed and she asked, "Can you take them off or are they actually part of your hands?"

"All of my garments are part of me. I cannot remove them as you do. I simply reshape myself without them. I can give you a more in-depth demonstration later if you like."

The provocation snapped her back to attention as he had intended. She shoved her hands into her coverings but turned toward the padded bench.

"Are we departing?"

She rolled her eyes in an odd expression he had no trouble interpreting as impatience. "I need my keys." She rummaged through her bag and retrieved a ring bearing several small, jagged pieces of metal. After swinging the pouch onto her shoulder, she motioned toward the door.

This was the complication with the rapid infusion of languages. All of the words were in his brain. It just took time to connect the words with their meanings.

She led him to the conveyance and he shifted through the nearest door. Her eyes widened and she emitted a soft gasp. She was not used to someone with his abilities. He must attempt to curtail their use until she had time to adjust. She opened the door and slid in behind the navigation controls. Lowering the shoulder bag to the floor behind her seat by its long strap, she inserted one of the pieces of metal. *Keys*, he corrected.

When she attempted to rotate the mechanism with no success, Tal realized he had not reshaped the device. "My apologies," he muttered. "Proceed."

The conveyance made a mechanical growl and she shifted several levers, one deactivating a cacophony of sound he suspected had been Earth music.

"How close do I need to get you?" she asked while she maneuvered the vehicle away from her dwelling.

"If the vehicle is meant to travel in that direction, why are the seats orientated to..."

She paused to readjust the levers and the conveyance began to travel in the opposite direction.

"It's either back out or back in. My drive is too narrow to turn around in. I find it easier to back out. Have no fear, Tal of the House of Aune. The vehicle operates the majority of the time in the same direction the seats face."

He suspected her levity covered discomfort or fear. He hadn't earned her trust as she had yet to earn his. This was bound to be a strained partnership for some time to come.

"How close do you need to be?" she asked again.

"I just need to see it. If I have never been to a location, I must compile visual coordinates."

"Well, then we can probably avoid the resorts. There's a scenic overlook where I can park long enough for you to transport yourself. Can you do it from inside the car or will you need to get out?"

He didn't comment. She wouldn't like his answer and he didn't relish another argument. She pulled the vehicle into the midst of other vehicles on a wider roadway. If he made her promise to wait until he returned, she'd drive off in the conveyance one instant after his form disappeared. He wasn't a fool.

They hadn't gone far when she pulled the conveyance onto a wide space at the roadside. Crystals of frozen moisture danced on currents of air. Tal watched their lazy descent while she rearranged the levers yet again. Ah, the crystals accumulated to form the mounds of white.

"It's called snow," she said.

"It's beautiful," he admitted.

She made a noncommittal sound and leaned forward toward the transparent plate in front of them. "That group of points is called Maroon Bells. The sharper one, more by itself is Pyramid Peak. The image you put in my head looked more like Pyramid Peak to me."

"I agree. Please turn off the conveyance. Let's make the final determination from out there."

She searched his face with obvious suspicion but she did as he asked. He remembered to open the door instead of shifting his shape through it. She lifted her hood, casting her features in shadow, and joined him in front of the vehicle. As she repeated the explanation, gesturing with her glove-covered hand, he suddenly turned and wrapped her firmly in his arms.

## Chapter Four

Charlotte arched away from Tal, shoving against his chest with all her strength. The low rumble surrounding her rapidly escalated to a deafening roar. She covered her ears with her hands and screamed every obscenity she knew directly into his face.

A kaleidoscope of colors twirled and streaked, pulling them through the fabric of space. Charlotte felt his arms slip and then she was falling. She panicked, grasping at air as she frantically searched for him. The colors blinded her, their intensity nauseating.

Don't leave me! Tal...

Stinging bits of snow pelted Charlotte's face as she stumbled out of the transport conduit. She cried out, pulled her hood forward and retreated into the protection of her coat.

In a quick, smooth series of movements, Tal released his borrowed shape and formed a thick cloak large enough to wrap around them both. She encircled his torso with her arms and pressed her cold face into the hollow of his throat. His hair covered her exposed skin, protecting her everywhere the cloak did not. Violent shivers shook her and she moved closer, molding herself more tightly to his heat.

She felt him shudder and fidget, and then he began to speak rapidly in his musical native language. Why did she need to be here for this? He didn't trust her enough to leave her alone and she didn't blame him. If fate presented another opportunity, she'd most likely run.

Tal continued to talk.

She clutched his back, trying to keep her teeth from chattering. His chest expanded sharply and he rose to his feet. Pulling her tightly against his chest, he stepped back into the vortex. She cried out. Even knowing what to expect, the spinning sensation disconcerted her.

When they emerged next to the car, he crawled into the backseat, cradling her in his arms. Head spinning, stomach tight, she waited for the vertigo to abate.

His fingers brushed her forehead. Soothing warmth penetrated her skin. She sighed and let her head loll against his shoulder. "What was that about?" Her cheek rested against warm, smooth skin. He had shifted away the cloak and wore the long, open vest again. "Was it really necessary for you to take me...never mind. Why was it so important that you go there?"

"One of my companions, Vee, is ill. We communicated briefly in your dwelling but then we lost contact. Trey's ship sustained damage when Joon attempted to collapse the vortex. Trey was able to transmit a signal but only to a specific location and only strong enough to reach the top of that mountain peak. He should be able to send down assistance soon."

"What sort of assistance?" The warm cradle of his arms was way too comfortable. She should get up and sit beside him at least.

"Two members of Trey's crew can pass as humans. That was one of the reasons he chose them for this mission."

"They're shapeshifters?"



"No. Their skin tone and hair color are acceptable variations of those found on Earth. Vee is a shapeshifter, but as I said, he is too weak to..."

She heard the worry in his tone and pushed away from his chest so she could see his face. "Can you help Vee?"

"Vee's illness has to do with energy. The malady I suffered when you first found me is the same ailment afflicting Vee."

"Can't anyone on the ship give Vee energy?"

"They've done what they can. Apprehending Joon must take priority over Vee's weakness. Now it's even more important that I capture Joon quickly."

Was this Vee Tal's lover? She couldn't remember if anything Tal said indicated Vee's gender. Charlotte's chest tightened and she returned her head to his shoulder. "Do you need to join your body with Vee's?"

Tal chuckled. "Vee is my mentor. He is ancient and he is male. I am not attracted to other men. There are many ways of transferring energy. Sexual release is just one of them."

She sat up again and glared at him. "Why didn't you explain that to me last night?"

"It is the *only* way that does not require some skill on the part of the donor." He paused. "Was it really so traumatic? I know I gave you pleasure."

Her hand trembled as she tucked a lock of tousled hair behind her ear. How could she hope to make him understand? She might find him fascinating and exciting and undeniably attractive, but he terrified her too.

"It wouldn't matter if you came from another city instead of another planet, I don't know you," she whispered. "That sort of intimacy is generally shared with someone you know very well and care about."

"All humans abide by this restrictive standard?"

She squirmed in his lap, obviously uncomfortable with the topic. "No. But I do."

"I'm grateful you allowed me to touch you. I don't take your sacrifice lightly."

If there had been any hint of mockery in his tone or expression, she might have slapped him, but she heard only gratitude. "Will it be necessary for you to...touch me again?" A heated tingle crept along her spine. She was such a hypocrite.

The corner of his mouth twitched. "That depends on how long it takes me to find Joon."

"How do you intend to look?" she asked, more than ready for a new subject. "Where do you start?" His stormy gaze captivated Charlotte. Her pulse leaped and his spicy scent filled her head.

"Has no man ever touched you as I touched you?" Apparently, he found the other topic more interesting.

"Only one. My husband." She focused on the pain, forcing away her body's ready response to his nearness.

He immediately pushed her off his lap and onto the seat beside him. "I was told...even *you* told me you have no mate." His tone snapped with accusation.

She relaxed a little, relieved by his reaction. "I no longer have a mate. My husband died last year."

"I'm sorry. I know well the pain of losing a loved one." Slowly, he extended his hand and splayed it against her chest, over her heart. He shuddered and gasped. "The pain is still strong. You loved this man deeply. Or was the loss more devastating than just a mate?"

"You can feel my pain?" The thought of sharing the burden, of knowing that someone understood the bone-deep ache, the ever-present desolation, made her tremble.

"Tell me."

She wanted to shove him away, but she needed to tell him more. "They died in a car accident a year ago last night."

"They? Your mate and who else?"

"Stephen, our son." Tears clogged her throat, choking her. Grief squeezed her chest like the ruthless fist of a giant. "They were my whole world," she whispered.

He slipped his hand inside her coat and somehow found bare skin. She automatically grabbed his wrist but he pressed his palm directly over her heart.

The rest came rushing out. "Victor's family didn't want us together. He was too old for me, he was...he was too good for me, but he loved me. He loved me. And I was a good wife. I made him happy. We made each other happy."

Tal pulled her against him, sandwiching his hand between their bodies.

"Release it to me," he coaxed. "Turn loose of your pain and I will disperse it."

Was it possible?

She let go of his wrist and wrapped her arms around his back, pressing herself against him. His intoxicating scent enveloped her and his hair brushed softly against her cheek.

"Let go. Let me help you."

Squeezing her eyes shut, Charlotte concentrated on the ravaged emptiness deep within her being. She pictured it, separating it from the rest of her soul. Then she cast it toward Tal with a nervous laugh.

He whispered softly, words she couldn't understand, didn't need to understand. His hair surrounded her, stroking her gently, soothing her. Prickly sensations shot through her chest, concentrating beneath his palm. Charlotte moved restlessly. What was he doing? She hadn't expected a physical reaction for emotional pain.

"Tal," she whispered, trying to push him away.

"Relax. We're almost there."

His hand moved in a circular motion and he bent his head nearer to her chest. He said one phrase over and over, like an incantation or a mantra. Light radiated from his hand, sending warmth spiraling through her body.

Sweet, soothing heat pervaded her entire being and she sagged against his chest. Her head dropped back and she felt...peaceful.

She snuggled into his embrace, letting the last of her tension flow out of her tingling body. He brushed her hair away from her face and she rubbed her cheek against his fingers, smiling sleepily. She was completely relaxed for the first time in months. His smoke-colored eyes swirled and he returned her smile.

*He is so beautiful.* She didn't speak the words out loud and prayed he couldn't read them in her mind.

"Thank you," she whispered, and closed her eyes.

Tal looked down at the woman curled against his chest and shook his head. He didn't know how to operate the vehicle. He had no choice but to rouse her. But she looked so peaceful.

So beautiful.

How could he find a human beautiful?

His wandering gaze focused on her lips. He knew their texture, their soft resilience as his mouth moved over and against them. He wanted to taste them again, to kiss her until they were both breathless and needy.

Closing his eyes, he tried to push away the inappropriate desire, but his mind wouldn't cooperate with his will. He saw himself lowering the device securing the front of her coat. He pictured his hand shifting into a blade, slitting her sweater and the straps binding her breasts. He would capture her startled gasp with his open mouth and lay her back across the seat.

Would she struggle or welcome his embrace? She had responded without hesitation during the energy transfer. The image wavered. The cramped confines of her vehicle wouldn't suffice for what he wanted for them. He needed room to stretch and arch and thrust.

It was hopeless.

He hadn't allowed himself to join their bodies during the energy exchange. He trembled with the need to sink into her feminine heat, to watch her surrender to the passion carefully banked within her being.

If he woke her gently, caressed and kissed –

Now was not the time!

His tardy conscious finally barged into his fantasy. He focused his befuddled mind on Vee and Joon. He had no time to seduce a stranger. Regardless of how tempting he found her.

"Charlotte." He brushed her cheek with the back of his fingers. "You must awaken. I can't operate this conveyance." She stroked her hand across his chest and squeezed his shoulder. Tal groaned. "Charlotte, please wake up."

Her thick lashes fluttered before her eyes opened. Tal wanted to touch them with his tongue. He wanted to touch all sorts of places with his tongue.

"You are more effective than..." Her words trailed away as she noticed his hair. "Why is your hair all flighty? Static electricity?"

"Something like that." He pictured her naked on her sleeping station with his "flighty" hair caressing her entire body. "Are you awake enough to operate the vehicle?"

Apparently fascinated, she tugged off the covering and raised her hand. His hair curled around it, sliding between her fingers in a silken caress. Tal shivered. Impatiently, he took the entire misbehaving length and tossed it over his shoulders. Finally, he was able to command it into a coil.

"You can't control it when you're – distracted, can you?" she asked, her smile warm and inviting.

“Obviously, you are awake enough for our departure.” He shifted into the front seat, not bothering with the door.

Charlotte laughed. He was seriously turned-on. What had he been doing while she snoozed? Her coat was still zipped. Her bra still fastened. Surely, he hadn't gotten...like that just looking at her face. Her features were pretty on a good day, ordinary without makeup. She had nice eyes and a curvy figure. What had gotten him all revved up?

She opened the driver's door and slipped in behind the wheel. His posture was tense, his expression positively arctic. Uncertainty tingled down her spine. He'd located his friends and there was nothing she could do to help him find Joon.

Unless she really was Joon's target.

Yeah, right. Aliens traveled here from another planet looking for you. With a frustrated sigh, she started the car. “What now?”

“Return us to your dwelling,” he ground out.

“Am I free to go once I do?”

“No. I might have need of you.”

Images erupted in her mind, naked skin and long strands of silky black hair. Heat pulsed through her apprehension. “Look. I didn't mean to embarrass you.”

“I'm not embarrassed.”

“I didn't mean to make you angry.” She tried again.

Without warning, he pounced on her. His hands found her upper arms and dragged her across the console and back into his lap. She yelped as her hip hit the molded plastic, but she landed safely, her legs draped over her own seat.

“I haven't been with a woman for a very long time,” he said, his voice rough and urgent. “Holding you, feeling your soft body pressed against me, stimulates my senses. I have been trying to keep my hands off you, to stop myself from doing this.”

His mouth claimed hers. He shoved his fingers into her hair, guiding her head to a more comfortable angle. The initial aggression gave way to persuasion and – seduction. He teased the seam of her lips with slow sweeps of his tongue. She groaned and opened for him, inviting a deeper exploration.

She raised her arms to circle his neck and felt his hair curl around her fingers. She tugged off her other glove. Strands of his silky hair encircled those fingers too and she shivered. The subtle clicking of her coat's zipper warned of his intent, but she couldn't stop kissing him.

Did she really want to stop him?

His warm fingers played against her ribs, hovering there, waiting to see if she would protest. When she didn't, he cupped her breast. Charlotte moaned into his mouth and he returned the sound with his spicy breath.

The heat of his palm sank right through the lacy material of her bra. It wasn't enough. She wanted to be naked. She wanted to feel his hands and his mouth and his hair all over her tingling skin. Squirming against his palm, she felt her nipple tighten and ache. Oh, she wanted his mouth there, sucking, firm and hot.

A distinct throb erupted deep in her body. She pressed her thighs together, wishing they had more room. Was that spicy scent an aphrodisiac? Some sort of alien pheromone?

He pushed her sweater up and captured her nipple through the fabric of her bra. It still wasn't enough. Impatiently, she snapped open the clasp with one hand and he gladly did the rest. His fingers stroked her breast while his mouth feasted upon its sensitive crest.

Her head bumped against the window. They needed a bed—badly. He continued to suck while his hand skimmed her belly and cupped her sex through her jeans. Charlotte cried out. Why hadn't he started this while they were still in the backseat?

He drew firmly on her nipple. She arched her back, pressing him against her, lost in the urgency consuming both of them.

Suddenly his head snapped up, his eyes wide, his features contorted with pain.

"Tal," she cried.

He shook, his head falling back against the seat. "He—is—here." He forced each word out with great effort.

She framed his face with her hands, fear clawing through the remains of her passion. "Who? Joon? What should we do?"

For several terrifying moments, he just shook, his jaw clenched, his eyes squeezed shut. "He's not trying to mask his presence," he finally said, his voice hoarse and strained. "He's either very weak or he thinks I am."

She waited until he relaxed and opened his eyes before she crawled back into her seat. Reaching under her sweater to fasten her bra, she tugged her clothing back into place. "What just happened? Is it always so painful to sense him?"

"No. He often goes to great lengths to change his energy pattern, making it difficult to detect him." He released a deep, shaky breath. "I felt as if his pattern slammed into me. I don't think he did it intentionally."

"What would cause his signal to intensify like that?" Turning the car around, she headed back toward her cabin. Okay, so there really was a Joon. That didn't mean his presence here had anything to do with her.

She continued to watch him out of the corner of her eye. The experience had clearly left him shaken. Well, she felt a little shaken too. Was lust a valid reason for getting involved in an interplanetary manhunt?

"Any number of things can cause a mage to lose control." He offered her a smile and a sidelong glance.

Now that their desire had cooled, she felt foolish. She was nearly thirty years old and she'd been making out in the front seat of a car. Adults didn't do things like that. Certainly not rational adults with law degrees!

"So why are *you* chasing Dez dar Joon? Are you a law enforcement officer?"

"I am a Master-level Mage."

"I know that." She rephrased the question. "What gives you the authority to apprehend him? Or is this personal?"

"Code regulator," he said offhandedly.

"What?"

"I believe the Ontarian equivalent of law enforcement officer is code regulator."

Even the sudden shock of Joon's signal hadn't dispersed Tal's desire completely. If she'd pull this infernal contraption over, he'd be willing to rut with her in the snow. It didn't make sense. Why did he respond to her so powerfully?

"I'm not a code regulator," he went on, forcing himself to think about something other than her lush, responsive breasts. "Trey has that authority, but only a shapeshifter can sense another shapeshifter. I'm assisting my brother." The situation was far more complicated than that. Still everything he said was true.

"Ontarian. Is that the name of your planet?"

"I have not told you the name of my homeworld?"

She laughed. "You haven't told me much of anything."

"That is clearly an exaggeration." He smiled. "Ontariese is the name of my homeworld. I am Ontarian."

"But you are not a code regulator. Your brother Trey is and he also commands the ship you were concerned about. So how do Master-level Mages spend their time when they're not helping code regulators sense shapeshifters?"

"That depends on the mage."

She made a growling sound and hit the navigation wheel with her open palm. "You are the most exasperating man on this – or any – planet. Can you ever just give a straight answer to a simple question?"

His smile broadened. Why did he find her frustration charming? "Yours are not simple questions."

"What do you do when you're not chasing Joon all over the galaxy? Simple enough?"

"Many Ontarians have abilities humans would find extraordinary. When these abilities first manifest, it is reported to the Conservatory. It is my responsibility to visit the homes of these children and assess their potential. The ones I deem worthy are invited to the Choosing."

"You're like a football scout, a recruiter," she said.

He didn't understand the reference, but she seemed pleased with the comparison.

"What happens at the Choosing?"

"The mages who are available and willing choose an apprentice."

"Do you have an apprentice?"

His body tensed and he looked beyond the transparent plate in front of him. "My search for Joon has kept me from many things."

"You said you didn't know why this guy is looking for me. Why do you believe I'm his target?"

They had arrived at her dwelling. Tal pivoted to face her as she tucked the keys into the small pouch concealed in the front of her coat.

"That is definitely not a simple question."

"I'm capable of comprehending fairly complicated concepts, but you have to start answering my questions. I'm really very smart – for a human."

He chuckled. "Shall we enter your dwelling before I begin?"

"And have you change your mind between here and the door? No way." She reached beneath her and pulled on something that allowed her to move the seat back away from the navigation wheel. "Do you know why he's searching for me – *if* I am this woman?"

"We are unsure of his motivation."

"Who is *we*?"

"Vee and I. Vee is my mentor."

She nodded. "And he is the one suffering from energy deprivation. What is his role in the search for Dez dar Joon?"

"Vee oversees the entire Conservatory. He is also a member of the Symposium."

"The Symposium," she murmured.

Tal sighed. "My world is complicated."

"The Conservatory is the training facility for people with paranormal abilities. You haven't actually said so, but it sounds like Master-level Mage is the highest level of training attainable. Dez dar Joon must have dropped out of the training program somewhere along the line because you said he hasn't earned the title. If Vee is head master, I presume he is a Master-level Mage and more. You've never mentioned Trey as having any paranormal abilities. Is he a plain-Jane Ontarian?"

She displayed her ability to comprehend Ontarian complexities quite skillfully. Tal nodded, acknowledging her accuracy. "Trey has no Mystic abilities, but he is the first son of the Royal House of Aune."

"*Royal* House of Aune?" The words burst from her and she made a soft, nervous sound. "You never mentioned the royal part before. Are you an Ontarian prince?"

"Prince is an Earth term and my family is only acknowledged as royal by one of the two sects." He sighed. "I suppose the simple answer is yes."

"Kiss a toad and find yourself..." She dissolved into laughter.

He watched her regain composure, annoyed by her amusement.

"I'm freezing. Let's go inside and you can tell me about the two sects and the Symposium."

Tal couldn't help but feel she was amusing herself at his expense. She would explain about kissing toads before he offered any more information.

He reached the elevated platform spanning the front of her dwelling before he realized she had lagged behind. He heard the mechanical growl of a conveyance. It sounded like Charlotte's vehicle only deeper.

She stood beside her vehicle, clutching her shoulder bag to her chest with both hands. Her gaze was fixed on the transport making its way up the narrow roadway. Tal shifted back into his Earth form, uncertain what she would do. Surely she wouldn't attempt escape after all he had told her.

Her head turned toward him and their gazes locked. Tal slowly shook his head. He saw her decision in her eyes an instant before she set her body in motion.

Revealing his presence would endanger his mission. It was a risk he would not take – and she knew it.

*I'm sorry.* She mouthed the words then got in the vehicle with the intruder.

## Chapter Five

Sunlight gleamed off Rod Sanders' wavy blond hair and his wide blue eyes stared back at her curiously. He looked like the all-American boy next door but Charlotte was far too anxious to fully appreciate his virile appeal.

"Hi there," she said with an overly friendly smile while she climbed into the truck. "Get me the hell away from him!"

Rod glanced in Tal's direction, his eyes narrowing suspiciously. "Who is he? What has he done?"

"Just drive!"

Slamming the truck into reverse, Rod backed down the driveway without another word.

Her heart thudded wildly. Wasn't Tal going to make any attempt to stop her?

He couldn't risk further exposure to humans. She answered her own question. He had no choice but to let her go.

"Has he harmed you?"

Why did Rod suddenly sound so formal? She looked at him but his eyes were fixed on the road ahead.

Hanging around with an alien is making you paranoid.

She took a deep breath and tried to ease the tension coiling in her belly but she couldn't make herself relax.

What was she going to do? Would Tal just watch her until she was alone and then transport her back to the cabin? Could she really get away from someone with his power? She would just have to make sure she was never alone.

"Do you need medical treatment?" Rod asked. There was that formality again. "Who was that man?"

"No medical treatment is necessary," she teased, exaggerating his tense tone, but he didn't respond to her humor. "He's an ex-boyfriend. He heard about the fire and drove up to make sure I was okay. Then he proceeded to remind me why he is my *ex*-boyfriend." Plausible, shouldn't lead to too many more questions.

"Are your parents still alive?"

Her head snapped toward him. *What?* She certainly hadn't expected that one. "Why would you care?"

He still didn't look at her and fear knotted Charlotte's abdomen. "What were you doing at my cabin just now? I'm thankful for the ride, mind you, but what brought you by?"

"I was looking for you."

The corner of his mouth quirked and Charlotte went cold. It couldn't be... But she'd seen Tal take on someone else's form. This wasn't Rod!

"Do your parents yet live?"

"What difference could that possibly make to you?" Could he sense her fear? How long would it take him to realize she knew? "Look, Rod, just drop me at Sardy Field. I'm not in the mood for anyone's games."



"I must verify my information," he said tersely. "Just answer a few questions and you will come to no harm."

They came to a fork in the road and he slowed the truck to a stop. She released her seat belt and frantically pulled on the door handle. Nothing happened. With a little yelp, she tried the window button. Useless!

"I have disabled the controls," he said casually.

Rubbing her sweaty palms against her jeans, Charlotte tried to think. *Don't panic. You have to remain calm.*

He turned off Highway 82 and drove deeper into the mountains.

"What do you want with me?" Everything Tal told her surged through her memory, mocking her and terrifying her.

"Answer my question."

"No, my parents aren't alive." She offered no more information.

"When did they die? How did they die?"

How should she answer? What did he want to hear? What did he intend to do to her? Fear choked her. She could hardly breathe much less speak.

"I'll make this even easier. Were they your natural parents or were you adopted?"

He couldn't know. How could he possibly know? "What difference does it make? They are all dead now."

"This is not about them. It's about you."

He looked at her and Charlotte gasped. His eyes were now a swirling mass of green and blue. "You're one of them," she cried, yanking on the handle again.

Jerking the truck to the side of the road, he jammed it into park and grabbed her arm. "That was Tal Aune, was it not? I cannot believe he is still alive."

Charlotte's mind reeled. This had to be Joon and the only way out of the truck was over or through him. She shuddered, fighting back tears. There was no way that would work. She had to think of something else.

What did her parents have to do with Tal? None of it made sense. She had to get away from these creatures. She had to get away!

"You better open this door," she said urgently.

"We will speak first."

"Open the door."

"When did you—"

"I'm going to throw up, vomit, be sick. Open the damn door!" She covered her mouth with her hand and began to gag.

\* \* \*

Tal stormed about Charlotte's dwelling in impotent fury. He had to gain control of his emotions or he would be no use to anyone.

Welcome back, little brother. Trey's voice sounded inside his head. Vee told me to try the comlink again. He said he was sensing some very strong emotions that might not bode well for your companion.

*The female has fled – again,* Tal admitted begrudgingly.

If you need advice on how to hold on to a woman –

Don't start with me. Tal cut him off. I will find Charlotte but others are involved now. Can you dispatch Dro Tar Nex and Al Varellien? I seem to have my hands full just dealing with Charlotte.

Trey's laughter made Tal clench his fists. He could have at least closed the audiocom before he indulged his amusement.

Al is already on the ground, securing a headquarters in case this takes longer than we anticipated. I've locked on to your signal. I'll send Dro Tar directly to you.

The link closed and Tal took a deep breath. The little human was in danger whether she acknowledged the fact or not. They had been charged with her safety. And he intended to keep her safe – with or without her cooperation!

\* \* \*

The lock popped up with a distinct click and Charlotte threw the truck door wide. Her boots hit ice and she cried out, skidding toward the ditch beside the road. She quickly grabbed the slender trunk of an aspen to prevent herself from skidding over the edge.

Glancing over her shoulder, she fought the need to run. Joon watched every move she made. She bent from the waist, coughing and spitting as loudly as she could. After a moment, she looked under the truck, waiting for his feet to lower to the pavement.

He slammed the driver's door and walked around the truck. Patience. She counted each step, forcing herself to wait until he reached the tailgate then she spun and dove for the cab. His hand closed around her ankle and Charlotte screamed.

Landing on her stomach half in and half out of the truck, she kicked wildly, clawing at the leather seat, trying to get inside.

He flipped her onto her back and pinned her down with the weight of his body. She thrashed and bucked but her feet dangled off the ground and he was too close to kick. He easily caught her flying fists, securing them above her head.

"Look at me," he ordered.

She turned her face away.

He held both her hands in one hurtful fist and dragged her face toward his. "Open your eyes."

"Get away from me!"

"If you are not who I think you are, I will let you go."

"I'm not. I promise. I'm no one important." She hated the terror revealed by her shrill tone.

"Just look at me," he coaxed.

She stubbornly scrunched her eyes even tighter. They could read minds. They could control... They could...

Her mind spun off into chaos and she renewed her struggles. Thrashing wildly, she reared up and bit his shoulder until she tasted blood. He howled, shoving away from her. She immediately brought up her knee hard between his legs.

His raw, angry wail echoed in her ears, but she didn't pause. She ran along the road, her arms and legs pumping frantically. Tears cooled her heated cheeks. Each sobbing breath made her head spin.

You're hyperventilating.

She couldn't stop but she had nowhere to go!

A scream, part frustration and part fear, built within her. Where could she hide? Why were they looking for her?

Where the hell was Tal?

She slammed into him so forcefully it knocked her backward. He'd materialized out of nowhere. His hands caught her upper arms, steadying her for a second before he stepped in front of her.

Get a grip. She forced her chaotic mind to focus. The cavalry is here. You led him right to Joon. Now Tal will arrest him and they'll both get their butts off your planet.

Hope and fear chased each other through her body, drying her mouth, making her tremble. Moving half a step to the side, Charlotte studied the other man. Had he taken over the identity of a firefighter? Had there ever been a firefighter or had it been Joon all along?

The men began to argue as they faced off like gunfighters. She wished she could understand what they were saying. What had Joon done? What did he want with her?

She felt a sharp ping deep inside her brain and suddenly she could understand their words. The language still sounded alien to her ears but somewhere between her inner ear and her brain, their words were being translated into English.

"You had no authorization to Summon the Storm," Tal said. She could only see his back but the charge sounded serious. "I have been sanctioned by the Mystics to return you to Ontariese by whatever means necessary."

Joon laughed. "And what 'means' do you believe will give you power over me? Vee himself cannot control me. Do you really believe you can?"

Tal's body stiffened and the coil of his hair tightened. She wanted to help him, to support him, but she knew anything she did would only distract him. This was way out of her league.

Joon's shape rippled, such a subtle movement, she wondered if she'd imagined it. But Tal dove for him, toppling the other man to the pavement.

The men rolled across the snowy asphalt, landing in the dirty ridge left behind by the plows. Inches beyond the insubstantial mound lay a deep ravine. She started toward them but stopped herself. *How are you going to help him, you fool?*

She could see no trace of the firefighter now. Long white hair tangled with black and she couldn't distinguish between their flailing limbs. Tal pinned Joon to the ground, his forearm across Joon's throat.

Joon began to sink into the pavement and Charlotte gasped. He looked as if he were melting. Quickly encircling his wrists with Joon's white hair, Tal tugged him back to the surface.

A siren wailed in the distance but she couldn't take her eyes off the men. Tal dragged Joon to his feet and spun a web around him, a transparent, gently fluxing grid. She watched Tal's movements, spellbound by his grace and speed.

Joon struggled against the grid for a moment then stood perfectly still.

She had her first unobstructed view of Dez dar Joon. Like Tal, his skin was pale and smooth, but unlike Tal, hatred and malice twisted his angular features, making them appear sharp and harsh. Dirt and debris now decorated his long white hair. The color of his tunic and loose-legged trousers perfectly matched his turquoise eyes.

"If I did not know better, I would think you planned this, *seyati*," Joon muttered, putting special emphasis on the word. Why hadn't her mysterious auto-translator provided the English equivalent?

"You lost the right to speak that word when you were banished," Tal panted. The bright winter sun harshly accented his ashen pallor.

Joon turned his turquoise gaze toward Charlotte and she felt a sharp stab in her brain. She yelped and staggered back, closing her eyes as his mocking laughter filled her head.

"Protect her if you can, *seyati*. You have won only this round."

Even through her closed lids, she could see the fluctuating light. The ground beneath her trembled and the wind roared in her ears. A sharp crack of thunder swallowed Tal's shout. She rubbed her eyes, trying to focus.

Dez dar Joon was gone.

She barely had time to register that fact when she noticed the squad car speeding toward them.

"Shit!" She ran for the opposite side of the road. The embankment was not as steep here. Hopefully, they could lose the cops in the trees. Glancing back, she skittered to a halt. Tal stood in the middle of the street, calmly watching the car approach.

"We have to go," she called out. "There is no way I can explain you!"

"There is no need."

"Why is that?"

"This code regulator is a member of Trey's crew."

She stayed at the edge of the pavement, ready to bolt if he was mistaken.

"Come on, you guys, get a move on," the female driver called from the open window without bothering to get out of the car. "There's big trouble brewing. We've got to get you out of here."

She certainly didn't sound Ontarian. The faux officer spoke English without a trace of Tal's accent.

"Girls in front, boy in back," she suggested cheerfully.

They piled into the vehicle and the driver took off at breakneck speed. She pulled the emergency brake and spun the car around before Charlotte could fasten her seat belt.

"Are you sure you're Ontarian?" Charlotte cried.

"Dro Tar Nex. Glad to meet ya," she introduced. "I love this planet!"

Dro Tar floored it, slamming Charlotte back in her seat.

"How long have you been on Earth? You sound like a native." The woman looked entirely human, including her bright blue eyes.

"Contacts," she explained, wiggling her highly arched brows. "My language infusion came directly from the Symposium so it was a little more in-depth than Master Aune's. Besides, Vee infused him, and Vee likes to sound all staunch and ancient."

"Is Vee your mentor also?" Charlotte asked, fascinated by the contrast between Dro Tar and Tal.

"I'm not a Mystic. I work with Commander Aune – that's Tal's brother. He even lets us call him Trey when no one else is around, but Mystics like to keep things formal. Don't you, *Master Aune*?"

"You mentioned there being a problem, a need for our immediate departure," he prompted.

Her demeanor changed immediately. She held the steering wheel with both hands and forced her mobile mouth into a stoic line. "Yes, sir. They found Rod Sanders' body a couple hours ago. I just heard an air unit report the location of his truck so my fellow men in blue are going to be crawling all over this area in nothing flat."

"Then there really was a Rod Sanders? I thought maybe Dez dar Joon just created an alter ego." Charlotte glanced out the window. They were almost back to Highway 82.

"No such luck. One of his guys found his body in the Dumpster behind the station. Joon must not have expected to need the shape very long. He did little to cover his tracks."

"Are we going into Aspen?" Charlotte asked.

"Yeah, but it would sure help if..." She paused and then rephrased. "Master Aune, if you could please emulate my uniform, it would decrease the danger of discovery."

"Stop the conveyance so I can study your shape."

Charlotte chuckled. "Men get slapped for saying things like that on Earth."

Dro Tar shot her a conspirator's smile.

Tal and Dro Tar got out and walked to the passenger side of the car. Charlotte felt as if she had front row seats to a special-effects demonstration. Dro Tar turned around in a slow pirouette.

She could barely hear what they were saying but Tal's abilities fascinated her. His basic shape remained the same but his clothing transformed into a neatly pressed uniform. He tried three hairstyles before Dro Tar approved his appearance.

He pulled her door open and she got out. "Does this mean I get to be the bad guy – Officer Aune?"

His jet-black hair gleamed in the sunlight, the top slightly longer than the neatly clipped sides and back. The angular arrangement of his features hadn't changed all that much but his skin now held a warm, golden glow. His eyes appeared human, the irises the same smoky mixture of gray, blue and black.

He smiled and she felt her stomach somersault. He was gorgeous. She wasn't sure if it was the more conventional hairstyle or the perfectly fitted uniform, but Tal made one devastating cop.

"Only if I get to choose when and how to use the handcuffs," he responded to her nearly forgotten question.

She felt her skin burn and knew she was blushing to the roots of her hair.

His soft chuckle played across her senses like sun-warmed fingers.

"Why did you go with him?" he asked, catching her off guard.

Charlotte postponed her answer while he opened the back door and helped her into the backseat of the car. He started to get in after her but Dro Tar made a small noise.

“Up here, Officer Aune,” she said lightly. “That would be a breach of protocol.”

He took the seat Charlotte had just vacated.

“Why did you depart with Dez dar Joon?” Tal asked again. He turned nearly sideways on the front seat, his gaze boring into hers.

The meet and greet was over, back to business.

“Obviously, I didn’t realize it was Joon,” she snapped. “I just needed to...”

“Needed to what?” he persisted.

“Rod Sanders was one of the firefighters who responded the night you arrived. I thought I could trust him. I thought... I promised I wouldn’t do anything to endanger you and I didn’t. I was just going to have Rod take me to the airport so I could book a flight to Denver, but Rod— Oh dear God, *my purse*. My purse is in that truck. They’ll think I... At the very least they’ll think I stole the truck.”

“Can we go back for it?” Tal asked.

Dro Tar listened to the radio for a minute and then shook her head. “Too late. They’re already on-site.”

“What are we going to do? This is terrible. This connects me with a murder and I can’t explain the truth.” Charlotte shook with foreboding.

“I told you that you didn’t comprehend what was going on. I told you the danger would—”

“When did you realize he was an imposter?” Dro Tar cut in, saving Charlotte the trouble of strangling Tal. The last thing she needed right now was a sanctimonious lecture.

“Almost immediately. Once I got in the truck, he started asking me questions about my family. He wanted to know if I was adopted.”

“Were you?” Tal asked.

Charlotte took a deep breath. He didn’t mean to be rude and annoying but apparently tact was not taught on Ontariense. “I was, but what the hell does that have to do with any of this? I’ve had it with you—people. Are you going to tell me what this is about? *Why* is Dez dar Joon looking for me?”

Tal had to look away from her lovely face. Her wide blue eyes stirred feelings in him he wasn’t willing to consider. Anger painted the crest of her cheeks with rosy color but vulnerability shone in the depths of her gaze.

He had to protect her from Joon, but he also needed to understand what Joon wanted with her. Would ignorance keep her safe or would it simply leave her unprepared as she had been at her dwelling?

Before Tal could decide what he deemed best, Dro Tar answered her question.

“We don’t know why he’s looking for you. Even the Symposium couldn’t give us a definitive answer.”

“You don’t know what he wants?” she muttered. “That’s just great. No, that’s perfect.”

“Do you know anything about your biological parents?” Dro Tar went on.

Charlotte sulked back in the seat, folding her arms across her chest. “Not much. My whole life, I’ve had dreams of a woman. I like to think she’s my mother but I’ve never been

able to see her clearly. Dad was never in the picture as far as I know, and Mom relinquished all rights to me shortly after my birth. Probably a teen pregnancy."

"You know this as fact or this is what you've been told?" Tal asked.

She glared at him. He feared that would end her cooperation, but after a pause, she inundated him with information.

"Okay, you want a biography. I'll just spell it out. I had everything I wanted as a child, but by the time I reached my teens, Mom more or less lost interest in her pet project. See, no deep, dark secrets, and the trauma came long after childhood."

The pain he'd dispersed was building within her again. How could he learn about her background, figure out what might be drawing Joon to her, without upsetting her further? There was no help for it. He needed answers.

"How did you meet your life mate?" Tal asked. "Was your joining arranged or are humans allowed to choose their own partners?"

"Arranged marriages haven't existed in America for years. Victor's father and my adopted father were business partners so our families spent a lot of time together. Victor was almost ten years older than I am and my pedigree is questionable at best, so neither set of parents was thrilled with the romance."

Pain radiated from her like heat off a firestone and nothing she said made Joon's motivation any clearer. Tal sighed. "I apologize for delving into issues you find unpleasant."

"Whatever," she muttered, and looked out the window.

She lapsed into sullen silence and Tal fought the urge to comfort her. He had no idea how to go about soothing her, even if he were so inclined, but his need to embrace her, to touch her, irritated him.

"If at first you don't succeed, try, try again," Dro Tar said lightly in Ontarian. She tapped her thumbs against the wheel that controlled the vehicle's direction.

"What, pray tell, does that mean?" Tal muttered.

"We've got Joon's target. All we need to do is wait for him to come after her again."

There was wisdom in Dro Tar's suggestion. There was also *danger* in Dro Tar's suggestion.

"If we fully understood his purpose, we could better anticipate his actions," Tal mused. "Does he want her alive or is his intent murder? There are so many variables."

With her open palm, Charlotte smacked the metal grill separating the seats. "I know you're talking about me but I can't understand you anymore. What happened to my translator?"

"Translator?" he asked in her language.

"When you were arguing with Joon, I could understand you."

He looked at Dro Tar and they said in unison, "Vee."

"Vee must have been translating for you."

"Why did he stop?"

"He is extremely weak," Tal reminded her. "It is probable his levels dropped too low for him to continue the transmission."

"Joon was shocked that you were still alive," Charlotte said. "Did he cause your crash?"

"He attempted to collapse the vortex. How did you get away from him?"

She smiled, proud of her ingenuity. "I pretended to be sick to my stomach so he let me out of the truck."

Dro Tar laughed. "Good thinking."

"He wanted me to look at him. He said if I wasn't who he thought I was, he'd let me go. Any idea what that means?"

"Is it possible she's Ontarian?" Dro Tar asked. "Did you sense anything when you scanned her?"

"I haven't scanned her." His eyes focused on Charlotte's face and she began to squirm. "She seems to have an aversion to such things."

"I don't want you in my head," she confirmed. "Don't even think about it."

Tal turned back to Dro Tar with a shrug. If there was no other choice, he could always scan her while she slept. "Has Al secured the dwelling?"

"Yeah. He had one last errand to run then he'll meet us there." Dro Tar switched to Ontarian. "If we take her to the ship, she'd be safe from Joon. The scanners would detect him no matter what shape he used."

Charlotte was excluded from the conversation again, Tal realized. "We need to draw him out, but I will not allow her to be used without her knowledge."

"So tell her. It's not like she hasn't realized the bad guy is after her."

Tal knew Dro Tar was right, but he debated how best to approach Charlotte. He didn't want to overwhelm her with how embroiled she truly was in Ontarian complications. Still she needed to understand the true scope of her peril.

Charlotte looked around to see where they were. Highway 82 became Hallam Street right after it crossed Castle Creek. They were approaching the elevated bridge that would take them into Aspen.

Their language was odd yet musical. She had already pointed out the rudeness of using it in front of her. They didn't seem to care.

Depression closed in like a thundercloud. At least fear had given her energy. She raised her hood and sank into the warmth of her coat. All she wanted to do right now was curl up in a ball and sleep, escaping the pain and uncertainty that had become her life.

They exchanged several short volleys of conversation before the woman pulled the car into the driveway of a small A-framed house. It looked like a gingerbread house with its steep roof and shingled gables.

Tal opened her door and Charlotte stepped out of the car. A brisk wind blew her hood back from her face but she didn't bother raising it again.

"I have to return the car before shift change so they don't realize I borrowed it," Dro Tar said after letting them in. "Help yourself to whatever you need."

The house had a rustic charm but it was small and sparsely furnished. Charlotte took off her coat and tossed it into a nearby chair then crossed to the burgundy leather loveseat and sat. Tal watched her silently. She suspected whatever he had to say wasn't going to please her.

In one elegant movement, he shifted back to his natural shape and sat in the matching recliner. Charlotte smiled despite her sullen mood. He thought nothing of his abilities.



She no longer found his appearance shocking. The long coil of his hair hung over the chair's arm and brushed the floor. A hint of blue threaded through the raven-black strands. His skin reverted to a smooth alabaster that any princess would envy and dark, slashing brows accented his unusual eyes.

"What are you thinking when you look at me?" he asked softly.

"How very different we are and yet how similar." She held his gaze for a silent moment, feeling like a child who had stayed too long on a merry-go-round. "What am I going to do? I don't even know who's more dangerous to me – the police, Joon or you."

"I can transport you to Trey's ship," he said softly. "You would be safe there."

"But that's not what you want me to do."

"That is not what I *need* you to do. Dez dar Joon is a very dangerous man. We don't yet understand his interest in you, but he has gone to a great deal of trouble to find you."

"You want to use me as bait to catch Joon."

He rested his hands on the arms of the chair and inclined his head in a regal nod. "Yes. Here, you are a challenge to him. The fact that I guard you will heighten his enjoyment."

"Why? Who is Joon to you? He called you *seyati*. What does that mean?"

The question set him in motion. He crossed his legs then uncrossed them, scooted forward then back again. "It is not easily explained. How much do you really want to know?"

Charlotte kicked off her boots and pulled her legs up in front of her. Resting her heels on the edge of the loveseat, she wrapped her arms around her knees. "I want to know everything."

He nodded again and leaned forward, his forearms on his thighs. "For thousands of cycles, Ontariese honored a social structure nearly backward from yours. Female Ontarians have abilities males do not. One of the most significant is the ability to recognize potential and latent powers in a prospective mate. This allowed them to choose mates who complemented and enhanced their own abilities, making us stronger as a people. For this reason, females led each of the great houses."

The wistful catch in his tone tugged at Charlotte's heart. "You said *led*. Is Ontariese no longer matriarchal?"

"E'Lanna dar Aune was the last High Queen of Ontariese. She chose Frim dar Joon as her mate."

"Ah, a family feud," Charlotte said.

"A family feud that rapidly escalated into devastating civil war," he corrected. "After giving her two daughters, Frim decided he no longer wished to bow to the dictates of a woman. He left her and reverted to his family name. He took a second mate, which is against the Ontarian Code of Ethics. When E'Lanna confronted him with his crimes, he swore to destroy the House of Aune, to wipe it from the face of Ontariese. The High Queen was forced to protect her children from their own father. Some believe he was mad. I believe he was evil. All of his descendants took on the name of Joon from that day forth."

"The House of Aune and the House of Joon," Charlotte said thoughtfully. "Are there other *houses*?"

“There are a total of six. When Frim dar Joon launched his campaign to reorder life on Ontariese, each of the six great houses was forced to choose sides. The House of Joon rules the Reformation Sect and the House of Aune heads the Traditionalist Sect.”

“And the two sects have been at war ever since?” No wonder he hated Dez dar Joon.

“For many cycles—which is roughly equivalent to your years—the Traditionalist Sect was much more powerful than the Reformation Sect. We did our best to ignore their radical views and continue on as we had always lived.”

He paused and his gaze drifted off into the distance. Whatever happened next had affected him personally and painfully. Charlotte knew the expression all too well. She didn’t rush him. She knew how that felt too.

“Twenty-five cycles after the Great Conflict began, Fro dar Joon, Frim’s son, declared war on the Traditionalist Sect. Frim had terrorized E’Lanna, but his focused aggression was nothing compared to the chaos his son unleashed.” He swallowed, and when he spoke again, his voice was deeper, softer. “Life was changed in ways you cannot imagine. The peaceful Ontariese that had flourished for eight millennia ceased to exist. The evil ambition of one man...”

“How long has the conflict been going on?” she asked.

“This is cycle eighty-nine of the Great Conflict. Six cycles ago, Shadow Assassins killed my mother and two sisters. In the past fifty cycles, no female bearing the name of Aune has been allowed to live.”

Pity and compassion gripped her heart. She went to him. Kneeling in front of his chair, she captured his hands in hers. He allowed her touch and his gaze caressed her face.

“Do they only target women?” she asked gently, feeling sick inside.

“Women? My sisters were six and nine, hardly women. They kept my mother alive for three weeks before they *allowed* her to die. But yes, the vast majority of their victims are female.”

He took a deep breath. Charlotte felt his fingers tighten against hers and then he rushed on.

“Because the House of Aune is matriarchal, Fro dar Joon knew that slaughtering our women would force us to conform to their reforms. Many joined the Reformation Sect out of fear or some hope that they could end the Great Conflict. Still bowing to their insanity is abandoning everything Ontariese was and could be again. The Traditionalist Sect must defend the ancient ways and the sacred codes.”

He spread his legs and Charlotte moved closer. “How can you defend yourselves against such ruthlessness?” she whispered. The spicy scent that always surrounded him grew stronger. Was it released by emotion?

“Since the onset of the Great Conflict, every female Aune has been hidden, born in secret and forced to use whatever means necessary to conceal their identities.”

“But the House of Joon finds them?”

“It does not seem to matter what we do, Reformation spies are everywhere. And their Shadow Assassins... They’re Mystics recruited because of their skill-set and conditioned to be ruthless, nearly mindless murderers.” He could not speak for a time. “My mother and sisters were the last females with even the faintest of blood ties to the High Queen. With

their deaths, we thought the Reformation Sect had finally accomplished their objective, yet Joon did not seem satisfied."

She sat back on her heels, stunned as she realized what he was implying. "You think I'm one of these...descendants?"

"What I think is not important." His hands closed around her upper arms and he drew her back to her knees, bringing her close against his chest. "This must be what Dez dar Joon believes. It is the only reason he would seek you out. The only reason he would question your parentage."

She licked her lips and stared up into his eyes. "But it isn't possible. How could it be possible? It would mean that I'm – not human."

"You said you had dreams of a woman you believe to be your mother. Can you form her image within your mind?"

"I'll try." She closed her eyes and pictured the woman who had haunted her dreams for as long as she could remember.

His fingers brushed against her temple. "Can you clarify her face?"

Shaking her head, she opened her eyes. "Her face is always in shadow. I've never seen her clearly."

His hand returned to her arm, his thumbs lightly rubbing. "I need to scan you, Charlotte. We need to know."

She stiffened, knowing he was right but dreading the invasion. "I... The night I found you on the mountain, the strangest thing happened. I wiped the mirror and when I looked at my reflection, my eyes were swirling like yours."

"Has it happened since?"

"No. I thought I was seeing things. You had me just a little stressed out."

He smiled and traced the curve of her cheek with his fingertip. "Let me scan you. I'll only touch what you allow me to touch. It shouldn't take me long to determine if you have any spark of Ontarian energy. That's all we need to know."

His hands moved to frame her face and she trembled. She grabbed his wrists and arched away from him. "But you took energy from me. Weren't you able to tell if it was human or Ontarian?"

"Charlotte," he said softly. "I won't hurt you. This is different than what I did before, much easier. When I took energy from you, I was nearly dead. I was too weak to scan you. Just try to relax."

She closed her eyes, waiting for the push, the alien penetration of his mind into hers. His thumbs brushed across her cheeks and his fingers sank into her hair. Her breathing shuddered and she pressed her lips tightly together.

"Relax," he whispered. His lips brushed against the corner of her mouth as he whispered the word again.

"Kiss me," she said, needing a distraction from her fear.

He touched the other corner of her mouth with a light, teasing kiss then gently rubbed his lips across hers. Charlotte tilted her head to the side and parted her lips. His mouth pressed, moved and caressed. She didn't understand the sudden urgency that expanded within her but she wrapped her arms around him and stroked him with her tongue.

She captured his throaty groan in her open mouth and became bolder. Arching into him, she tasted him, fascinated by the texture and the heat of his mouth.

One of his hands moved to splay across the back of her head and his arm circled her waist, pulling her more tightly against him. He kissed her deeply with slow, sensual sweeps of his tongue.

She couldn't think. Her head spun and her senses filled with Tal. She wanted more. She wanted him.

His hand found the hem of her sweater and bunched the material until he found bare skin. Clutching his back, she met each thrust of his tongue eagerly with her own. His hand stroked her back, his kiss devoured her mouth and gradually she felt his touch within her mind.

He was careful, tender, and she opened to him, letting him explore. They continued kissing long after the scan had finished. The intimacy soothed her, feeding her basic need for affection.

Tal drew away, his lips lingering against her skin.

"What did you find?" she asked, breathless and tingly.

"I am not sure," he confessed. He rested back in the chair but took her hands in a loose grip, preventing her from retreating entirely. "You seem human and yet there is something different as well. I cannot explain it but there were gaps, areas that were inaccessible to me."

"Is that unusual? I wasn't blocking you intentionally."

"I know. And yes, it is highly unusual."

"Then could he be right? Am I Ontarian?"

His gaze searched her face before he relented with a frustrated shrug. "I do not know."

She pulled her hands from his and stood. "But Joon must. He knows something we don't or he wouldn't be here."

"That would seem likely."

Her heart pounded and she pushed her fingers through her hair. "If he thinks I'm a descendent, it can only mean one thing. Dez dar Joon means to kill me."

## Chapter Six

Standing at the kitchen window, Charlotte enjoyed the extraordinary view. Beyond the rows of charming Victorian cottages rose Aspen Mountain, ski runs streaking its face like undulating stripes. A sky so blue it seemed to glow provided a backdrop for fluffy white clouds.

“Charlotte.”

She glanced over her shoulder. Tal stood in the archway and her pulse picked up speed. She felt his gaze travel over every inch of her exposed skin. Did he do it intentionally? Was he able to stimulate her nerve endings with just a look?

“Dro Tar will bring you food when she returns. She suggested you enjoy the bathing facilities within her chamber.”

Charlotte hadn't heard a phone ring. “How did she contact you?”

“She contacted Trey and he contacted me. My telepathic abilities require an initial linking. I'm not linked with Dro Tar.”

“I see,” she said, setting down her glass. She didn't understand half of what he said. Or she understood his meaning, she just had no idea how such things were possible.

A long, hot bubble bath suddenly sounded very appealing.

The “bathing facilities” proved to be a large, jetted tub. She carefully locked the bathroom door and turned on the water. A spa-style bathrobe was folded neatly on a shelf in the walk-in closet. She set it beside the tub.

She poured liquid bubble bath under the running water and the soothing scent of lavender filled the air. A glass of wine would have elevated the scenario from pleasant to perfect but she wasn't complaining. She quickly shed her clothes and sank into the sudsy water's warm embrace.

Relaxing against the sloped contour of the tub, she waited for the water to cover the intake valve so she could activate the jets. She pushed her thumb against the stiff button, listened to the rumbling hum then groaned as the water pulsed rhythmically all around her.

She closed her eyes and let the tension seep from every muscle in her body. How could so much stress be packed into less than two days? It felt like a lifetime since the first crash of thunder disrupted her solitude.

Images rolled through her mind as she lazily reviewed the events. She'd felt only fear and pity when she first saw Tal's gaunt face, but his touch sent her senses reeling and tempted her with possibilities. He emanated power and mystery. Yet he could be kind and protective. She wanted to understand him. She wanted to... She didn't know what she wanted. A shapeshifting alien had no place in her well-ordered life.

As if to mock that conclusion, his face solidified within her mind. He smiled and her lips parted of their own volition. She felt the feathery brush of his fingertips against her cheek and gasped. His touch had been tangible, distinct.

She tried to open her eyes but felt disoriented, as if she floated in an endless sea, not a bathtub. The sensations pulled her, drew her deeper into the sensual spell. Her head lolled

against the tub, her arms floating at her sides. Lethargy stole her strength and curiosity overcame her fear.

This wasn't real. It was a vivid fantasy, a continuation of the feelings he had unleashed with his kisses. She felt secure within the illusion, free to explore her own desires.

She concentrated and focused until she saw him clearly. He stood beside the tub, smiling down at her. Without a word, he tugged off his boots and shifted out of his long vest, leaving his chest bare.

He knelt, his smoky gaze boring into hers. Her heartbeat accelerated and she slowly licked her lips. Muscles bunched across his shoulders. His chest and abdomen rippled with intriguing definition. She wanted to touch him, to stroke her hands over each contour of his torso. Still she couldn't move.

"Relax," he whispered. "Let me touch you."

She heard his words, but like the images, his voice was inside her head. His fingers stroked along her jaw and her tongue darted out nervously. This wasn't real. So why could she feel his fingers?

His thumb traced her lower lip and she touched it with the tip of her tongue. She tasted the faint salt of his skin.

This wasn't real.

Leaning over her, he squeezed her shoulders and ran his hands down her arms. She heard a faint splash as his hands sank beneath the surface of the water and felt his knuckles brush the outer swell of her breasts. A shiver racked her body and she felt her nipples gather beneath the bubbles.

This wasn't real.

Fear speared through the sensual lassitude and Charlotte tried to struggle. She couldn't move. She could feel his hands sliding across her flesh but she couldn't move. Panic welled up within her. This wasn't right.

"Stop it," she whispered. "Please, stop."

His features fluctuated subtly. A flash of turquoise flickered through his eyes.

This wasn't real!

This couldn't be real!

But she could still feel his hands. He caressed her neck and dipped again to cup her breast. "Oh yes," he murmured.

Charlotte battled the illusion. She fought the images, screaming and screaming, but she knew the sound was only in her mind.

"I know who you are," she shouted. "I know what you're doing!"

"Do you?" The voice changed and then the image. His features sharpened, his face narrowed. The long strands of his hair faded to white and his eyes turned turquoise. His hands slowly circled her neck and he grinned. "It's really very simple. You come to me tonight or you die here and now. I would prefer to be your mentor, but I cannot allow you to fall into the hands of the Mystics. They have done too much damage already."

His hands tightened around her throat and Charlotte gasped for breath. She felt her airway compress and close.

She couldn't breathe!

In terrified waves of panic, she broadcast her peril. She reached out with every fiber of her being for Tal, for Dro Tar, for any creature in the universe capable of hearing.

The pressure on her throat loosened and Joon brushed her brow with a mocking kiss. "I'll make this even easier. Show me where you are. I'll come to you. Surely that's better than death. I don't want to hurt you."

Someone pounded on the door.

"Show me now!" Joon demanded. "Make your choice."

She felt hands shaking her. And still the illusion remained. She could see Joon, could feel his hands choking her, but in reality, someone shook her body and frantically called her name.

Her body was dragged from the tub and clutched against something warm and solid. Tal's voice called to her from very far away.

"Don't fight *him*. Fight the *illusion*. He can only hurt you if you believe it's real."

She focused on Tal's voice, clung to the hope triggered by his words.

"This isn't real," she whispered, staring directly into Joon's turquoise eyes. "*You* are not real."

The pressure around her throat lessened and she quickly drew in a deep breath.

"I'm real enough to snap your neck," he sneered then his expression softened. "But that's not what I want for us. Show me where you are and I'll protect you forever – or defy me and pay the price." His eyes narrowed and the pressure increased again.

"Charlotte, let me in," Tal insisted. "Accept me into your mind."

She felt the push of Tal's entry but she didn't fight it. She welcomed him, opened eagerly, and he materialized within the illusion.

Tal wrapped his arm around Joon's throat and ordered, "Let her go!"

Joon struggled, rocking forward and jerking back. He twisted his hands but lacked the leverage to snap her neck. Tal plunged his thumb and forefinger into Joon's eyes and Joon screamed.

Joon butted the back of his head against Tal's chest. She heard the crack of bone on bone. Tal continued the pressure against Joon's eyes, but Joon's hands remained locked around her throat.

*This isn't real!* She repeated the words in her mind, forcing herself to accept their truth. Her senses rejected the fact. She could see him. She could feel him—and she couldn't breathe.

Rage threatened Tal's control. He wanted to rip Dez dar Joon's head from his body but that wouldn't help Charlotte. *She* had to force Joon from her mind or she would die.

"Charlotte," Tal said urgently. "Stop fighting him. Relax and your throat will open. He is not really choking you. He has made you believe an illusion."

Her terror-glazed eyes stared up at Joon. She was not listening.

"Charlotte, look at me. Look only at me."

She dragged her gaze away from Joon and looked at Tal directly. He immediately intensified their link. He filled her mind with images, confusing the illusion, weakening its hold. She gasped and sucked in a ragged breath.

"He's not real. He's not here." Tal commanded her attention with his voice. "Look at me, Charlotte. Come back to me."

Tal felt the illusion slipping.

"You're not real," she croaked out, her gaze moving back to Joon.

Tal blocked Joon's sudden mental lunge. He absorbed the energy before it reached her, pain ricocheting through his being. He recoiled from the mental assault, momentarily losing focus. Joon's presence intensified and his smug laughter rang through the illusion.

"You're not real," she said more forcefully. She raised her arms and peeled Joon's hands away from her throat. "Get out of my mind."

Joon muttered a curse and turned on Tal. "You cannot protect her forever, *seyati*. If she steps beyond your grasp for even a moment, I *will* find her."

Tal didn't respond to Joon. The illusion disintegrated, taking Joon's image with it.

Tal sat on the bathroom floor, cradling Charlotte's trembling body against his chest. He stroked her back and rocked her gently. She clung to him, dragging air into her lungs in long, ragged gasps.

Not again! Never again would a Joon harm an Aune. Not while Tal lived and breathed. His body shook with determination and he buried his face in her hair. He had to get her to Vee. Vee would know how to unlock the hidden spaces within her mind. Vee had access to knowledge even Tal didn't understand.

He shifted restlessly, trying to ease her away from him, but her arms clutched his back. He held her for a long time, waiting for her fear to recede and his anger to cool.

"You're safe," he murmured. Her warm body clung to him and Tal groaned. His hair uncoiled and desire sizzled through his blood. "There's nothing to fear."

Her muffled laugh vibrated her breasts against his chest, torturing Tal with their softness. She had apparently forgotten she was warm and naked, fresh from her bath.

"Nothing to fear," she whispered. "If he can strangle me without even touching me, how will I ever be safe?"

Tal knew she was still frightened and he wanted to comfort her, but her heated skin played havoc with his good intentions. She sat up, still on his lap, and spread her fingers against his chest. His heart thumped against her palm and Tal couldn't suppress his need to touch her. He cupped her cheek with his palm and traced her full, lower lip with his thumb.

"I will not leave your side," he promised. "I will link my mind to yours so that—"

"No." She pushed his hand away, her eyes flashing. "I will not be a prisoner in my own life. I don't want anyone in my mind, even to protect me. We have to find him before he tries again."

Tal knew it wasn't that simple but he didn't argue with her. He rested his hand lightly on her shoulder and stubbornly kept his gaze on her flushed face. "We will find him. But I will link with you as well."

A shuddering breath escaped her, drawing his attention to her quivering breasts. Didn't she realize what she was doing to him?



Charlotte noticed the direction of his gaze and the sudden tension in his expression. She scrambled from his lap and snatched up the folded bathrobe. Jamming her arms into the sleeves, she quickly covered her nudity.

"I don't want you in my mind," she said in a hushed, urgent voice. She glanced over her shoulder and found him directly behind her. "I don't want anyone invading..."

He reached for her but she twisted away.

"He cannot hurt you now. You understand what he was doing. That will render him powerless."

"Powerless?" She yanked the belt tight and crossed her arms over her chest. "I'm the one who's powerless."

"But I am not. I can protect you but you must let me."

She bit back a sarcastic retort. It was her willingness to let him do all sorts of things that had allowed Joon into her mind.

"Why didn't you warn me?" she asked, her voice shaky and hoarse.

"You have been so resistant to mind links of any sort that it didn't occur to me that you would let him in."

His words stung like a slap, echoing her self-recrimination. Clutching the front of her robe, she fought back tears. "Let him in? I *allowed* this to happen?"

He approached her slowly. "I'm not saying you're to blame. I'm simply confused about how he constructed the illusion."

She turned away and snatched a towel from the rack. Dropping it to the floor, she used her foot to move it about, soaking up the water.

"Tell me what happened. I need to understand how he did this."

She didn't want to admit she had been entertaining lustful thoughts about him. He had made his feelings about "humans" all too clear. She was beneath him, a necessary nuisance.

His warm hand touched her arm and she started, stubbornly keeping her face averted.

"Why will you not look at me?"

Charlotte took a deep breath and raised her gaze to his face. "He tricked me," she admitted. He continued to stare at her curiously so she rushed on. "I thought he was you. All right? By the time I realized that it was Joon, he had taken control and I couldn't fight him."

She glanced away but his fingers gently curved around her chin, tilting her head until her gaze returned to his. "Why did you allow my image into your mind? Each time I have tried to touch you in that way, you have fought me."

Swallowing past the awkward lump in her throat, she said, "I thought it was a daydream, a...fantasy."

Realization dawned in his expression and she wanted the floor to swallow her whole. Heat spread up her neck to blossom across her cheeks.

"Don't worry. It won't happen again." She shrugged off his touch and rushed from the bathroom.

Cool air washed over her body and she welcomed the violent shiver. Not bothering with the light, she passed through the bedroom and stepped out into the main room of the house.

A striking, red-haired man stood near the recliner and two in dark-blue uniforms flanked the front door. She spun on the ball of her foot, meaning to run back into the bedroom. She collided with Tal.

His arm slipped around her waist and he said, "Apparently, Al was unable to cancel the alert. Come, I will introduce you."

Charlotte stiffened against him, clutching his vest with both hands. She didn't want to be introduced to more aliens. She didn't want to be stalked by a killer. She wanted to close her eyes and make it all go away. She wanted to move to Seattle and study for the bar exam. She wanted...

"Make them leave," she whispered, refusing to turn around.

"They won't hurt you. This is my brother Trey and two of his men."

"Make them leave."

He stroked her hair and pressed her face into the warm hollow where his shoulder met his neck. She made no protest when he swept her up in his arms and carried her back into the bedroom. She was utterly drained.

Tal laid her on the bed and covered her with a quilt. She turned onto her side, facing away from him.

"Trey brought you clothing from the ship," he said softly. "Just in case you change your mind. If not, I will return when the others have departed."

She waited until she heard the door click before she gave in to her tears.

Tal paused on the other side of the closed door and wove a web of protection, dense and dangerous. If Dez dar Joon came anywhere near her, physically or mentally, Tal would know.

"I can feel her turmoil and my Mystic levels are pathetic," Al Varellien said, concern clear in his tense tone.

Tal turned and joined the others. "In the short time since we arrived, Charlotte has learned she may not be human, she's been exposed to beings from another planet and Joon has attempted to take her life."

"That's bound to upset anyone," Trey agreed.

"How's Vee?" Tal asked.

"We're sustaining him but he's basically bedridden. None of us can provide energy in a form concentrated enough to do more than prevent further damage," Trey explained. "The Symposium contacted me when his link blinked out. Needless to say, they're concerned. Dear old Dad has *strongly suggested* we return to Ontariese immediately."

"And abandon Charlotte to Dez dar Joon?" Tal snapped. "I'll not hear of it."

"That's not what he meant," Trey interrupted. "He thinks we should bring her with us. Joon will have no choice but to follow, which alleviates the risk to Earth. Once we're back on Ontariese, the TSC and the Mystics can assist you."

"Their assistance has been so valuable up to this point," Tal said. "Curse the ghosts of the night moon. It will start all over again. Once Dez is ensconced in Fortress Joon, we will have no hope of drawing him out."

"Not true." Trey nodded toward the bedroom door. "You've got something he wants. Do you really think he'll rest while you've got the upper hand?"

"She will not want to go," Tal said thoughtfully. "She has yet to accept much of what I've told her and I'm far from earning her trust."

"It's always easier to beg forgiveness than ask permission," Trey said with a rakish grin.

Closing his eyes, Tal rubbed them with his fingertips. Trey's reckless attitude had led them into trouble more times than Tal cared to remember. He opened his eyes and asked, "Have you been able to track Joon at all?"

"Not a flicker, not a flash. He's invisible to us."

Trey moved to the loveseat and sat. Al and the other two crewmembers were nowhere in sight. Too anxious to sit, Tal paced the room, hands clasped behind his back.

"Do you guys have any idea how he's scrambling his signal?" Trey asked.

"He's shifting the shape of his energy just as he manipulates his physical form. How he acquired this level of control, we don't know. Such a thing has never been done before." Tal shook his head, needing to *do* something. "His power is growing. The illusion he constructed around Charlotte was unbelievably strong."

"What he did was that unusual?" Trey asked. "I've heard of illusionists before."

"This was different. His image resonated with something tainted, something evil."

Trey crossed his legs, tapping the air rhythmically with his foot. "Why do you sound surprised? You've known for years that Joon is evil."

"He has always been ambitious and ruthless, but what I felt in the illusion was darker, somehow twisted."

"More twisted than murder?" Trey challenged.

"There are things more evil than murder," Tal said. "And fates worse than death."

"While we're being morbid," Trey began, flashing a challenging grin. "You do realize the only way we're getting off this planet is if we kill Charlotte Layton?"

Tal started to warn Trey that he was in no mood for his twisted sense of humor but his brother's amber gaze had never looked more serious.

\* \* \*

Argumentative voices jarred Charlotte from sleep. The past two days had been a blur of surreal activities, so waking up in a strange bed didn't surprise her at all. Light streamed in under the door but the bedroom was dark.

She sat up and swung her legs to the floor. The spa robe bunched about her hips and a groan made it no farther than her dry, swollen throat. Why did she feel as if she'd wrestled an alligator when Joon had never actually touched her?

Where was Tal? Were the others still here?

What should she do now? What *could* she do?

The police had evidence connecting her with Rod Sanders' murder and she would never be able to explain the truth. They would lock her up and throw away the key. What a mess.

One painful swallow quickly reminded her that she had bigger problems than the police. Dez dar Joon had been a step ahead of the other Ontarians all along and she was his target. Despite Tal's gallant promises, Joon seemed to have the upper hand.

She flipped on the lamp and glanced around for the clothes Tal mentioned earlier. The design of the underpants was obvious, but the Ontarian equivalent of a bra made no sense so she retrieved her own from the bathroom. The outfit resembled pajamas or hospital scrubs, complete with slip-on, flexible shoes, but fashion was the furthest thing from her mind.

Creeping toward the door, she inched it open, trying to see who was still in the room. She recognized Dro Tar's voice, but she couldn't see anyone in her limited field of vision.

"There's big trouble in Little China. We're really in for a squall," Dro Tar said urgently. "The jig is up. We're busted."

"I know you're enjoying your language infusion," Tal responded impatiently. "But make yourself understood or I'll stop indulging you."

"Mr. and Mrs. Owner-of-this-house are en route even as we speak. We've got to vamoose, make a trail, hit the highway, pack up the Winnebago, take the money and —"

"I understand the concept," Tal interrupted. "Trey isn't finished yet."

"It doesn't matter, Master Aune," she said more seriously. "We can't stay here."

"All right." He was silent for a moment. "I'll send you back to Trey and then I will take Charlotte to the ship. Tell my brother time is of the essence. We must finish up and be on our way."

Finish up and be on our way?

The breath froze in Charlotte's lungs. If they were leaving, did that mean Joon had been apprehended? Was she out of danger? She released the breath in a slow, controlled hiss. Then why would Tal take her to the ship?

I'm not going to any spaceship. I've got plans for my life and they don't include alien abduction!

Even in her mind, the thoughts sounded hysterical. Charlotte needed to think. No, she needed to act.

If Trey was still on Earth, that had to be better than going to his ship. She couldn't figure out her options from outer space. She wasn't without resources. If she lay low for a while, forensic evidence would prove she didn't kill the fireman and she would have her life back.

She was *not* leaving this planet!

Tal opened some sort of portal and Dro Tar moved toward it. *Now or never*. Charlotte threw open the door, sprinted across the room and jumped into the spinning vortex.

Her previous experience should have prepared her for the deafening roar and the ever-changing colors but a scream tore from her throat. She flailed madly, helpless to suppress the instinct. There was no substance, no sense of direction — and no Tal to cling to.

The vortex spat her out onto the frozen earth, but she was too stunned to feel cold. She landed on her hands and knees. Smoke obscured her vision and burned her eyes.

A rock dug into her shin, tearing through the material of her pants and making her flesh bleed. The rough ground scraped her palms but she only glanced at the wounds, feeling nothing. She scrambled to her feet, numb and confused.

Her beloved cabin was on fire. As she looked on in horror, the Ontarians worked to escalate the flames. Had they started this? Had they *intentionally* set her cabin on fire?

Black smoke curled into the twilight sky. Flames, alive and hungry, destroyed her sanctuary, her refuge – the only place she had ever felt truly at home.

A hand touched her shoulder and she jerked away.

“What... Why are they burning down my cabin?” Her voice sounded harsh and raspy.

“It had to be done,” Tal said, stepping up beside her. “It was the only way.”

She couldn’t look at him.

She couldn’t look at any of them.

She couldn’t drag her gaze away from the destruction. The antique lace curtains framing the front windows disintegrated. Long, jagged flames consumed the walls and spread across the roof, encouraged by the brisk night wind. The interior glowed, an obscene bonfire, mocking the precious moments of peace she had found within those walls.

Charlotte sank to her knees, covering her mouth with her hand. A picture hung on the bedroom wall – a portrait of Victor and Stephen, dressed in identical suits. She could almost see heat bubbling the image, flames singeing and curling the edges, devouring the last of her dreams.

A low, mournful wail filled the air. She didn’t realize she’d made the sound until Tal tried to pull her to her feet. She twisted and shoved him away.

“Don’t touch me. Don’t you dare touch me!” She crawled trancelike toward the inferno. “It’s all I have. Everything I have left is...”

Tal caught her around her waist.

“It’s all gone,” she cried, her fingers clawing at his arm.

He pulled her up against him and held her tightly, ignoring her continual tugging and twisting. She didn’t realize what she was doing. Grief and rage radiated off her with staggering intensity. He shielded himself against her anguish and focused on the task at hand.

He hadn’t meant for her to see this. That had never been his intention, but she’d come shooting out of the chamber like a sonic shuttle.

She lunged forward. He pulled her back. She spun and swung at him. He caught her fist.

“Quickly, people!” he called.

It would be tricky to maintain control of Charlotte as well as a transport conduit powerful enough to accommodate all of them. An extremely annoying sound, accompanied by rhythmically flashing lights, reinforced their need for haste.

“Let me take her,” Trey said. “You’ve got to manage the vortex.”

“Watch her hands,” Tal warned. “And her feet,” he added for good measure.

Trey handed a supply pack to Al as they prepared to depart and Charlotte turned on Trey.

“You bastard!” she screamed, throwing herself toward him. Tal captured her arms before she slashed his brother’s face with her nails.

“How could you do this?” she shouted. “How could you –”

"Trey only acted on my order," Tal lied. There would be time to make her understand, but right now, they had to get out of here.

"I hate you," she wailed. "I hate all of you."

She finally dissolved into tears and Tal took full advantage of the lull. He opened the vortex and motioned the others inside. Sweeping her into his arms, he followed behind them and emerged in the lounge on Trey's ship.

"Let me get her settled and I'll come to you," Tal told his brother. His voice sounded as weary as he felt.

Trey nodded. He started for the bridge but glanced over his shoulder at Tal. "Can we even get back without Vee? I didn't think you could stabilize the portal without him."

Tal took a deep breath and shifted Charlotte against his chest. "One calamity at a time."

## Chapter Seven

Tal sat beside Vee's sleeping station and felt his hair twist painfully. The angular arrangement of Vee's features looked gaunt, his pallor deathly. Vee's snow-white hair spread all around him, disorderly and unbound, a sure sign of his weakness.

"I shall be no help to you, Tal Aune," he said softly without opening his eyes. "I fear we may all pay for my recklessness with our lives."

Tal respected this man more than any other. He was glad Vee couldn't see how badly his hands shook as he gathered Vee's ankle-length hair and worked it into a simple braid. "The woman is on board. Our mission was successful." He tried to sound optimistic.

"I do not sense her. Is she already in stasis?"

"Yes." When Vee was stronger, he would explain the details.

"The mission will not be completed until we return and discover the reason Joon pursued her in the first place," Vee reminded him.

Tal tucked the braid under Vee's blanket, hating his helplessness. "You've taught me to be resourceful. You'll see Ontariese again."

Vee opened his eyes, one corner of his mouth curving in a weak smile. "You have a plan?"

"There are only three people in this dimension capable of Summoning the Storm. You are too weak at the moment so that leaves two."

"But how will you get him to..." Vee's eyes drifted shut, too exhausted to go on.

Tal could sense Vee's faint heartbeat but tension still gripped his soul. Vee was far more of a father to him than Roe Aune had ever been. Tal's devotion to his mentor never wavered. He simply refused to lose Vee now.

"My spirit is yet in my body, Tal Aune." Tal detected amusement in Vee's tone and tried to relax. "You must not let my condition distract you. How do you expect to get Joon to assist you? Why would he not kill you instead?"

"This isn't as simple as wanting me dead. His ambitions are more complex. He wants me bested. Until he's proven that he is the better man, this depraved competition must continue. So I will convince him the next round of the competition *must* take place on Ontariese."

Vee made a nondescript sound, assuring Tal he understood.

"With your permission, sir, I'd like to put you in stasis as well. You need to be strong enough to accept the Mystic transfusion once we return to the Conservatory."

"And if your plan fails, you wish me a peaceful death?"

Tal didn't argue. Vee deserved that much at least.

"I will see you once we reach Ontariese." Stubborn authority rang through the directive and Tal smiled.

After casting Vee into stasis, Tal searched for his brother. Trey wasn't on the bridge and he wasn't in the lounge. Tal needed to know if the repairs to Trey's ship had been completed. What he had in mind would need to be set in motion quickly.

Much to his annoyance, he found Trey in Charlotte's room, standing beside her sleeping station.

"She is in stasis and will remain so until I release her," Tal said. "How did you get in here?"

Trey's coppery brows drew together over his expressive amber eyes. "It's my ship."

"Why are you here?" he asked.

"How can she be a descendant?" Trey stood with his hands clasped behind his back, his interest apparently less licentious than Tal had first thought. "She doesn't even look Ontarian."

"I have just as many questions as do you, but the answers await us on Ontariese."

Trey turned from the sleeping station and followed Tal from the room. "How is Vee?"

"In stasis."

Nodding in silent understanding, Trey asked, "So, little brother, without Vee, how do we get home?"

"Simple," Tal said, and smiled. "I go pick a fight."

\* \* \*

Everything was ready. Tal had rehearsed what he would say a hundred times but still his heart pounded and his blood boiled. He had to calm down. Even Dro Tar's best "poker face" wouldn't fool Dez dar Joon.

Emotion can work to your advantage, Vee was fond of saying, but only if you control it.

"All coms are open, little brother." Trey's disembodied voice encouraged. "Just give the word."

Tal stood in the middle of the lounge, every viewport open, dreading what he must do. Drawing Mystic energy into the center of his being, Tal sent out a com pulse. Nothing happened. Digging deeper, he strengthened the pulse and tried again.

Joon's image gradually came into focus. His surroundings remained obscured. His turquoise eyes revealed his anxiety.

What do you want? Joon sneered. I wouldn't bother responding to your call but I'm dumbfounded by your stupidity.

Tal emulated his brother's nonchalance, suddenly thankful for a quality that had annoyed him for cycles. He leaned his hip against the edge of a table and crossed his arms over his chest. *That sounds far more interesting than what I intended to say. Please explain my dumbfounding stupidity.*

*Was the fire an accident?* Joon's face rippled, his fury so acute it nearly caused him to shift.

Drawing strength from his enemy's weakness, Tal smiled. The simple answer is no. The fire was intentional, but it was not what you think.

Joon's turquoise eyes narrowed. *And the detailed answer?*

Charlotte Layton committed suicide.

Joon moved so suddenly his image blurred. Why would she do that? I don't believe you.

Tal laughed. Time to change tactics. Coil the spring and let him go. I don't care what you believe. You obviously didn't know as much about your quarry as you thought you did.



I know more about Charlotte Layton than you will ever know, thanks to her suicide, Joon sneered. What drove her to it, seyati? Did you try to comfort her after I joined her in the bath?

Turning, Tal leaned against the edge of the table and stared out the viewport indifferently. Oh, I comforted her, all right. She allowed me a full-body joining and restored my energy levels. The problem was, she played me for a fool. While I slept away the night, she snuck out the window and returned to her cabin. Apparently, you heard about the fire.

Joon's nostrils flared and his eyes spun. Why would she let you take her body? Why would she—

*Don't I always get them first, seyati?* Tal mocked, sneering the title with obvious loathing.

She let you or you took her? Joon demanded.

I've never had to rape a woman, Dez. Tal let the insult sink in for a moment. This is all beside the point. All I wanted to say is, I have a sample of her DNA. Once the Symposium has analyzed it, I might be interested in exchanging what I learn for what you know.

The Symposium! They are required to remain neutral in all matters of politics, Joon shouted. They are required to share the Wisdom of the Ages freely. You cannot...

Joon's image blinked out and Tal cried, "Now!"

Thunder violently shook the ship as Joon Summoned the Storm. Tal flew across the room, his body slamming into the wall. Pain forked down his arm and across his shoulders. He tuned it out.

Searching, frantically searching, he found the pattern of Joon's energy. Six simultaneous lightning strikes showed him the way. He turned the ship as the interdimensional portal yawned. Trey engaged the thrusters, propelling the ship into the portal before Joon could guess their purpose.

Very clever, Aune!

Tal didn't let Joon's angry words distract him. He poured energy into the portal, maintaining its stability, keeping it intact. His muscles strained, his brain ached, but he had to continue. He had to find the strength. Unable to stand, he slid down along the wall, focusing entirely on the metaphysical exchange.

"There it is." He heard Trey cry. "We're almost out."

Collapsing, Tal released his link with the portal and felt the world spin out of control. Colors swirled before his eyes. His body rolled across the floor. His head hit something especially hard and lights exploded within his vision then he saw nothing at all.

\* \* \*

Charlotte awoke in darkness. A rush of adrenaline swallowed the comfortable silence of sleep. Her entire body came alive, humming with warnings and fear.

Something was wrong!

She held perfectly still, assessing her surroundings. Not a shape or shadow interrupted the velvety blackness spread before her eyes. Blinking repeatedly, she raised a hand before her face. She could discern no movement, nothing.

Don't panic. Not yet. Slowly she sat up and felt for the edge of the bed. Her hand sank wrist-deep into the mattress. She gasped as the surface conformed to the shape of her hand and then gently provided resistance.

She moved her leg and the mattress immediately accommodated her new position. As she swung her legs over the edge of the bed, light flooded the room.

Too stunned to move and not quite afraid enough to scream, Charlotte sat there, trying to accept the reality of her surroundings. She was on Trey Aune's spaceship.

The room was small, the arrangement utilitarian. The adjust-o-bed protruded from one wall and the light source was recessed within the ceiling. Smooth, perhaps metallic, the walls gleamed with an iridescent cast that subtly changed color as she moved.

With one final poke at the changeable surface of the bed, she stood and took a tentative step. The floor, though iridescent like the walls, had a distinct texture.

"You wouldn't want to go slipping and sliding as you zoom through outer space," she muttered.

Her mind was muddled, a jumbled mixture of memories and imagination. But one fact remained inescapable. She'd been kidnapped. The Ontarians had burned her cabin to the ground and Tal had carried her into the portal, indifferent to her pleas.

She moved to one of two doors. The portal slid open silently as she approached, revealing a tiny bathroom. She turned to the other door but it didn't move. There was no button or lever to activate it. The other one had opened automatically, probably triggered by some sort of motion sensor. She waved her arms and moved forward and back but nothing happened.

"Hello," she called out. "Is anyone out there?"

The door slid open and Tal stood in the corridor, looking calm and — at home.

Charlotte stared at him, waiting for a surge of anger. This was the man who had destroyed her life. Why wasn't she contemplating violence? She leaned forward and glanced down the hallway. All she could see was iridescent walls.

"May I enter?" Tal asked.

"May I exit?" she countered. "The door wouldn't open for me."

"Privacy panels are activated by voice command and your voice has yet to be imprinted. It would be best if we speak before you go wandering about the ship."

She continued to stare at him.

"May I come in?" he asked again.

She stepped out of his way and his tall form absorbed the limited space. The door slid closed behind him. She suddenly realized the only place to sit was on the bed. She decided to stand. Tal moved to the bed and uttered an Ontarian phrase. The bed slid into the wall and two chairs slid out.

"Oh, an entire adjust-o-room," she said as he sat.

"Flexibility is crucial on the smaller spacecraft. Dro Tar is programming English phrases into the computer so the ship will recognize your commands."

Charlotte nodded but remained standing.

"Please sit," Tal coaxed.

"You're not going to be here that long."

He stood. "I thought you would be interested in our present location, our destination and your options once we reach Ontariese, but apparently I was wrong."

She glared at him but sat. "Once we reach Ontariese? Then returning to Earth isn't an option?"

"Do you understand why we started the fire?" He reached for her. She leaned back so he returned to his seat.

"It's not hard to figure out. You wanted everyone to think I was dead. Where did you get the body? Did you switch dental records, maybe even plant some DNA? I wasn't asleep that long. How did you accomplish all of that in—"

"Dro Tar has been monitoring your entertainment broadcast programming so we knew what your society would require. My abilities made it possible to facilitate the arrangements in a short period of time."

"You didn't kill someone to—"

"No!" he objected, clearly appalled. "The woman was indigent and her life force had already left her body."

"I still don't care." She crossed her legs, kicking him in the process. "You had no right to do this to *me*. I worked hard for my law degree. I had plans for my life. Everything and everyone I care about is back on Earth. I demand that you take me back."

He leaned forward and his hair coiled, brushing across her calf. Retribution? She shivered.

"It's not that simple. The interdimensional portal that brought us to Earth is extremely hard to control. Even if I attempted to return you, the chances of our arriving anywhere near the same period in time would be—"

She shot to her feet. "The portal allows you to travel through time?" Could he take her to before Victor and Stephen had died? Snippets of every time-travel movie she'd ever seen were suddenly flashing through her mind.

He stood as well. "Using the portal to visit the same geographic location is relatively simple. It is the position in time that presents a challenge."

His hand cupped her cheek and she didn't pull away. Somehow she knew what he would say.

"Temporal adjustments can only be made into the future. No one can change what has already been."

"And if you're dissatisfied with what has already been, it's just too damn bad." She shook her head, too drained to cry but too angry to let it go. "A drunk driver took my husband and son last New Year's Eve. Is this how I get to start every New Year from now on?"

"Charlotte," he started.

"Don't! I'm not interested in anything you have to say right now."

"Joon wouldn't have stopped. He would have hunted you down until he found you. I couldn't protect you on Earth. I couldn't—"

"You did this *for* me?" She laughed, a harsh scathing sound. "You reduced my life to ashes and I'm supposed to thank you?"

"No, Charlotte, I don't expect your thanks. But I want you to believe that there was no other way. What we did was done to protect you." He paused for a long, frustrated breath before he went on. "Joon was in contact with you so I know he imprinted your energy pattern. I had to put you in stasis so your pattern became undetectable."

"Can he detect me now? Will he continue to hunt me once we reach... Wait a minute. How long was I in stasis?"

"Twelve cycles of—days. And I'm shielding your pattern now so Joon still believes you're dead."

Leaning against the wall, Charlotte fiddled with her sleeve. "Why didn't you just shield me from him before? Why all the subterfuge?"

"It's a long story. Suffice it to say, Joon is back within his fortress. He has elaborate shields that prevent us from detecting his activities but they also limit his ability to detect ours. If he were not within Fortress Joon, I would have left you in stasis until we reached the Conservatory."

Her anger fizzled, leaving her weak and restless. So much had happened so quickly, she just wanted to catch her breath.

"I'm truly sorry you were hurt by all of this. I wish there had been some other way."

He took her hand and pressed something into her palm before he turned and left the room.

Confused by his earnest, almost pained tone, she opened her hand and examined the object. Disk-shaped and slightly larger than a quarter, the pendant was solid, yet translucent. A braided chain ran through the intricate eye at the top of the disk and a subtle etching decorated the outer edge.

Charlotte thought it was a sweet gesture until she held it up to loop the chain over her head. Light passed through the disk and her heart slammed against her ribs. Captured within the disk, in three-dimensional detail, was the exact image of Victor and Stephen in their identical suits. She could see the pride in Victor's dark eyes and the mischief in Stephen's expression.

Darting for the door, she remembered too late that she couldn't open it. How had he known? How had... *He's a Master-level Mage*, she thought for the hundredth time. When would she realize what that really meant?

Her hands shook as she put on the pendant, slipping it under her shirt. The disk came to rest over her heart and absorbed her body heat.

Just when she thought she had Tal figured out, he did something unexpected.

"Thank you," she whispered, hoping he would sense her gratitude.

\* \* \*

Dro Tar Nex arrived a short time later to give Charlotte an orientation of the ship.

"Nothing is really too wacky," the other woman said. "The bathroom works like you would expect a bathroom to work, but the mist that comes out of the showerhead is shampoo, conditioner, moisturizer and deodorant all in one. I can't believe you guys have put up with so many separate personal hygiene products for so long."

"You're serious? The shower mist does it all?"

Dro Tar laughed. "No, darlin', you'll need a man for some things but the mist will get you ready for one."

Charlotte scrunched up her face. "That's not a problem. I'm not interested."

"Sure you're not," Dro Tar said airily. "Now, how about makeup? Do you wear cosmetics?"

"When I'm going somewhere. If I'm just lazing around the house, I don't see the point." Charlotte had done an awful lot of homebound activities in the past year. In fact, she preferred avoiding crowds altogether.

"Well, you're going to love this. Have a seat."

Dro Tar pulled a case out of a compartment in the utility room wall and motioned toward the tiny table in Charlotte's cabin with her chin.

"What's in the case?" Dro Tar seemed nice enough but she was still an Ontarian.

"These cosmetics only have to be applied once every lunar cycle. There are parlors in Frontine where they have tints that last a full cycle, but these are pretty cool. Do you trust me?"

Charlotte looked at the assortment of applicators, powders and pastes and shook her head. "No way."

"Look at me," Dro Tar objected. "Do I look like a clown?" Dro Tar's cosmetics were tastefully applied, Charlotte had to admit. "Besides, there's a built-in safety period. If you hate it, scrub it off before it sets."

Dro Tar went to work on Charlotte's face, talking all the while. "So if we hadn't rudely interrupted your life, what would you be doing?"

The casual question caught her off guard. She had been doing everything she could not to think about what she had left behind. "I'd been offered a job in a place called Seattle."

"Home of rain and Starbucks?" Dro Tar supplied without taking her gently swirling hazel gaze off Charlotte's face.

"That's the one."

"You just graduated from university. Does this job have something to do with—"

Charlotte grabbed her wrist and pulled the brush away from the crest of her cheek. "How do you know that? Why does everyone on this ship seem to know so much about me?"

"It was our assignment to find out. Once the Symposium confirmed that you were Joon's target, we did extensive intel. Don't you realize how important you are?" Dro Tar nibbled on the handle of the brush for a second, and then said, "You're the Duchess of York," she tried. "No. Princess Diana."

Charlotte sadly shook her head. "Bad example, Dro Tar, really bad example."

\* \* \*

Charlotte reached a tentative hand out and touched the iridescent wall. She cleared her throat and said, "Red." The wall became the brilliant candy-apple color of high-priced sports

cars and she laughed. She changed the wall to blue then green, amazed that such a simple discovery could be so amusing.

Dro Tar's orientation five days before had unlocked many of the ship's secrets for Charlotte but this was her first opportunity to explore on her own. She glanced around the lounge to make sure it was empty and then turned the wall into a full-length mirror.

Her brown hair looked sleek and shiny, grazing her shoulders in a smooth bob. Subtle shading accented her bright blue eyes and her lashes appeared thick and long. Her cheeks and lips bore a soft rose hue.

"Makeup's not such a bother if you only have to do it once a month," she mumbled as she returned the wall to its iridescent state.

She turned and stopped short, a silly grin frozen on her face. Trey Aune stood barely a step away. She had seen him several times in the past few days but they had never spoken directly. The entire crew seemed to be giving her time to adjust.

"Hello." She forced the word past her tight, dry throat.

He smiled and inclined his head, drawing her attention to his great height and bizarre hair. Al Varellien was nearer to seven feet tall, but Trey's muscular build made him more daunting. He laughed often and his crew seemed anything but intimidated by him. Still Charlotte felt fear tighten within her, compressing her chest.

Disconcerted by his gently swirling amber eyes, Charlotte looked instead at his hair. Combining countless strands of individual colors—red, gold, copper and even orange—his hair flowed to his shoulders in gleaming waves.

"I find your language confusing," he said.

His voice accurately represented his appearance—deep, commanding, masculine. She swallowed. "I'm sorry," she said, not knowing how else to respond.

He smiled again and his eyes brightened, flashing gold like a cat's. "I say this only to warn you that I may sound ass-ish."

Charlotte laughed. His disclaimer was just a bit too eloquent. "I will forgive your ass-iness and do my best to clear up any confusion."

He motioned toward a messy cluster of chairs. "Shall we?"

They sat and she crossed her legs. As the tension within her relaxed, she saw the family resemblance in Trey Aune's features. "Who's older?"

"I thought Earth women were sensitive about their age, but I will reveal mine if you reveal yours."

"I was referring to you and Tal. Are you older than your brother?"

"Older, wiser and better-looking," he boasted playfully.

Charlotte smiled, allowing his charm to soothe her. The last week had been part fantasy vacation and part nightmare. She mourned her own death, even as she rose from the ashes like a phoenix. The pain of her past had never seemed so far away and yet her future had never been more uncertain.

"Your ship is amazing. I'm anxious to see what wonders await me on Ontariese."

He said nothing for a moment while his amber eyes assessed her face. "Ontariese is very different from Earth. There are some things you may find upsetting."

The tension within her returned. "Such as?"

Again he hesitated. "Have you given yourself to my brother?"

Shrinking back into the chair, Charlotte felt her skin burn. "That's none of your business."

"On Ontariese, there are nearly a hundred men for every woman. To make matters worse, more of the women belong to the Reformation Sect. Within the Traditionalist Sect, there are closer to two hundred men for every woman."

She stood and moved behind the chair, feeling somehow protected by the obstacle. "What does this have to do with my relationship with Tal?"

"If you have not chosen Tal, then you will need to choose a companion quickly once we reach Ontariese. It is unwise, even dangerous, for a female to be unclaimed."

"Unclaimed? That sounds rather barbaric."

He used his charismatic smile to take the sting from his words. "The claiming can be barbaric or it can be slow and tender. Which do you prefer?"

"I prefer..." She couldn't think of a glib response so she returned to his earlier comments. "Why are there so few females on Ontariese?"

"What has my brother told you about the House of Joon?"

The door to the lounge slid open and Tal strode into the lounge. His gaze moved from Charlotte's face to his brother and back. What must he think of this cozy scene? And why should she care what he thought?

"Am I interrupting?" he asked stiffly.

"Yes, please leave," Trey responded without pause.

Charlotte coughed to hide her laugh. Trey had an ornery streak, no doubt about it. "No," she countered, "please join us. Your brother was trying to explain why I should 'claim' a man as soon as possible."

Tal crossed the room and Charlotte couldn't take her eyes off him. She loved the inherent grace in his movements. The long coil of his hair swayed and his clothing fanned out behind him. She had purposely avoided him for the past five days, using every excuse imaginable to keep them apart.

He made her feel things she didn't want to, had never felt before, not even with her husband. With Victor, life had been orderly and comfortable. Tal made her want things she didn't understand. Even after everything he'd done, he attracted her, fascinated her.

"I was hoping to speak with Charlotte for a moment." Tal paused beside her chair.

"No, little brother, you were hoping to find her alone so you could kiss her. But you're not the only one with carnal aspirations. There are fourteen other men hoping for a moment alone with our guest."

"You include yourself among that number?" Tal demanded.

"Why are there so few women on Ontariese?" Charlotte asked firmly, interrupting their budding argument.

"Because of Fro dar Joon," Tal said impatiently.

"The man who started the war," she murmured, not understanding the significance.

"Fro dar Joon tried to annihilate every female in the Traditionalist Sect," Tal reminded her.

"She obviously doesn't understand what that means, Tal," his brother said. Trey looked at her and explained. "Charlotte, the great houses are like Earth's ethnic races. Four stayed true to the old ways, but the House of Roumi joined the House of Joon. If all Earth cultures divided until there were only two, then you would have the Ontarian sects."

"Every person on Ontariese belongs to one sect or the other? There are no other social or governmental divisions, only the two sects?" She felt like a schoolgirl failing to grasp what was obvious to the rest of the class.

"Yes," Trey confirmed.

Charlotte grasped the back of the chair, dreading the conclusion looming before her. "Fro dar Joon tried to kill half of the females on the *entire planet*?"

"Fro dar Joon unleashed a virus that wiped out two thirds of all Ontarian females," Tal explained. His hair coiled tightly, revealing his anger. "The vaccination with which he thought to protect Reformation females was only partially effective."

"That is so irrational," Charlotte whispered. Who would end a political conflict by— Flashing images of the Holocaust reminded Charlotte that genocide was not an alien strategy.

"It is ruthless and evil, but it is not without rationality," Trey disagreed. "He originally targeted only the House of Aune, but he knew we were hiding our women so he expanded his target to the entire Traditionalist Sect."

Charlotte stepped in front of the chair and sank onto its seat. Nervously tucking her hair behind her ear, she looked at Tal and said, "When you told me he murdered the descendants of the House of Aune, I thought you meant your family members, your sisters and cousins. I had no idea his evil was so far-reaching."

"I should have made sure you understood the scope of his crime," Tal said softly. "Our worlds are very different. It's hard for me to remember you don't know our ways."

Trey leaned back in his chair, rocking subtly. "That's what we were discussing when you arrived."

She felt sick inside. Who was she to draw the attention of such evil? If The House of Joon had already sacrificed so many, why had they focused their attention on her? Held up against the backdrop of the massacre, her life seemed trivial, insignificant.

"Which particular Ontarian custom were you discussing?" Tal asked, drawing her away from her distressing thoughts.

"The claiming," Trey supplied.

"Declaring a social alliance," Tal suggested. "You make it sound like an uncivilized act."

"It can be uncivilized or it can be—"

"Oh, stop it," Charlotte cut in. "What exactly does declaring a social alliance entail? Trey said it could be dangerous for me to remain—"

"Unclaimed." Trey put in dramatically.

Tal chuckled. "It simply means that you are unavailable to other men."

Something in Tal's expression and the knowing look that passed between the brothers made her ask, "Is a female allowed more than one social alliance?"

Trey grinned. He folded his hands behind his head, displaying his brawny arms to advantage. "You want to explain it or shall I?"



"You will make it sound licentious, regardless of the necessity driving the custom."

"Then you explain it to me." The easy banter between them fascinated her. They obviously cared for each other deeply, but their differing perspectives were just as obvious.

"There's a difference between a life mate and a social alliance. Since the massacre, it has been counterproductive to encourage monogamy."

"Women are encouraged to have more than one husband?" she asked, shocked and yet intrigued. Her mind filled with titillating images of the male version of a harem.

"No. *Husband* is the same as *life mate* and that denotes a permanent joining. A social alliance is temporary. Most last for several months and often result in children. In fact, children are encouraged but —"

"Children are out of the question right now. There is just no way." Both men stared at her silently. Apparently her adamancy was either unusual or insulting. "Can't your planet import females to balance out the ratio? In Earth's history, there were times when the male-to-female ratio in certain regions became out of balance. We found ways of encouraging females from other regions to relocate to the affected areas." Interplanetary mail-order brides? She had to pinch herself to keep from laughing.

"Such programs have been discussed, but the war between the sects must be our first priority," Tal said.

They dodged the question before so she tried again. "Can a woman have a social alliance with more than one man at the same time?"

The brothers glared at each other and even the pinching couldn't keep her from laughing. "I was not contemplating...*that*," she assured them. Imagining maybe...but not seriously contemplating.

"If all the parties involved are agreeable to the arrangement, such things are allowed," Tal admitted. "But generally a woman will end her alliance with one man when she becomes interested in another. For this reason, some alliances last only a matter of days."

"Or as long as it takes this ship to arrive on Ontariese," Trey suggested with a cheeky grin.

Talking about the concept was one thing but she felt uncomfortable with the obvious expectation. "You want me to agree to have sex with one of the men on this ship until we arrive on Ontariese?"

Trey rocked farther back in the chair, balancing on the two back legs. "The men have kept their distance because they thought you'd been claimed by Tal. You haven't gone near him in several days so the crew wants to know if your social alliance with Tal has ended. It has been noted that no man shares your cabin. They want to court you. I have considered the possibility myself."

"Why must I choose anyone? I don't want a lover right now."

"Declaring a social alliance is not the same as agreeing to be a lover," Trey said. "The social alliance only gives the man exclusive right to...persuade you to become his lover."

"I would be inviting him to seduce me."

"Basically," he agreed.

"Just tell them our social alliance has not ended," Tal told his brother.

"This is not your decision to make." Trey looked at her and offered her a teasing smile. "Do you declare a social alliance with Tal Aune?"

"What exactly does it mean if I do?"

"You will have to stop avoiding me," Tal said with a smile nearly as compelling as his brother's.

These Ontarian men knew how to use their charm. Charlotte had never seen Tal flirt before. Her stomach fluttered and her lips tingled.

"Or you could accept my protection." Trey drew her attention to him. "I am infinitely more amusing than my little brother."

This was too much. It had been years since she thought of herself as anything but a safely married woman. Now she was headed for a planet where men outnumbered women two hundred to one. What had she gotten herself into?

She looked at Tal and felt her heart leap at his determined expression. He didn't want Trey near her. He wanted her for himself.

Trey said a social alliance didn't guarantee the man sex, just allowed him to *persuade* her. She could choose whomever she wanted and just make sure they were never alone. Charlotte swallowed hard and anxiously crossed her legs.

"I declare a social alliance with Tal Aune," she said finally.

Trey's chair hit the floor with a sharp snap. "I'll spread the word."

Charlotte waited for Trey to leave before she spoke again. "What happens now?" She felt foolish asking but she could no longer read Tal's expression.

He pulled her to her feet and wrapped her in his arms. His mouth claimed hers. There was no other word for the possessive demand in his kiss. She clung to his back, shocked by the ardor her decision had unleashed.

Panting harshly, he pushed her to arm's length and caressed her face with his smoky gaze. "Tonight, I will show you," he promised. He kissed her forehead and turned toward the door.

"Wait. Where are you going?" she asked in a breathless rush.

"To move my things to your cabin."

## Chapter Eight

Amused by his anxiety, Tal paced the small cabin, waiting for Charlotte to appear. Tal reached out, keeping his presence light to avoid detection, and found her. His gentle probe slammed into a barrier so solid he staggered back a step and shook his head. The cabin door slid open and she entered, her face twisted with anger.

"Stay the hell out of my mind!" She marched across the cabin and sat on the bed. "We've got to get some things straight before this goes any further."

"I know it's not your intention to allow me a full-body joining. My presence here is for the benefit of the crew. Is that why you're upset?"

"My upset goes far beyond whether or not I will *ever* have sex with you," she said, but the shrill urgency had left her voice. "First and foremost, I don't believe it was impossible for you to include me in the decision to stage my death. You *chose* not to." He started to object but she rushed on. "I don't want to argue the point. I know you feel you were justified, but what it cost you is my trust. You had precious little of it to begin with but you're back to square one."

"'First and foremost' indicates a list of contentions. Is it your intention to present them all tonight?"

She laughed and Tal's hair uncoiled, spinning around his arms in a telling flurry.

"Could be a long night. I want your promise that you won't make a decision directly affecting me without asking for my input first."

He hesitated for only a moment. Input did not necessarily sway a decision. He could allow her that much. "Agreed."

She paused. "I never thanked you for the necklace. It's amazing and I appreciate it."

He inclined his head.

"The mind-scan thing works both ways, right? Like when you showed me Pyramid Peak?"

Tal studied her face. Her wide eyes stared back at him expectantly and her chin tilted, hinting at her stubbornness. "Why do you ask?"

"I want to know everything you know about Dez dar Joon."

She had no idea what she suggested. "You know all you need to know. He believes you're a threat and wants you dead. Why would you want to know more?"

"I want to understand my enemy."

He summoned a chair from the floor and tried not to reveal his anxiety. If he were to guide her through his memories, show her what she wanted to see, he would expose far more of himself than he was ready to share. "Your mind is untrained. I don't know if I could control the—"

"I don't believe you. You're a *Master-level Mage*. You can control whatever you choose to control."

"I will tell you anything you wish to know. What do you not understand?"

"You've been in my mind. Don't you trust me to wander through yours?"

He couldn't mistake the challenge flashing in her bright blue eyes. If he hoped to earn her trust, this was where he must start. "It will not be a pleasant journey," he warned.

She scooted to the edge of the bed, bringing her knees almost even with his. "I can handle it."

"Let's hope that's not an idle boast."

Charlotte swallowed hard and tried not to fidget.

"I must enter your mind to establish the link. Then I will guide you into mine."

She folded her hands in her lap and pressed her lips together. This was supposed to be about him opening himself to her. "Can't I just come to you?"

He smiled and she felt her stomach flutter. If he smiled more often, she'd be in serious trouble.

"Do you know how?" he challenged.

"All right, but just establish the link and then —"

"Why are you so afraid of mental connections?"

The question made her pause. "I don't know."

"Another mystery for Vee to investigate. I'll remain in your mind only as long as I must. If you relax and accept my presence, the link can be established more easily."

He reached for her face and she closed her eyes.

"No, look at me. Look into my eyes."

The warmth of his palms framed her face. She met his smoky gaze. The motion sped and she felt the gentle penetration of his mind into hers. She tried to relax, to allow him in, but some instinctual warning made her resist.

"Charlotte," he whispered. "I cannot show you my memories without this link."

She took several deep breaths, but the harder she concentrated, the more her mind rebelled.

A smile tugged at the corners of his mouth. "Shall I kiss you? That seemed to work before."

The hint of smugness in his tone made her stiffen. "That is not why I asked you to do this."

"I didn't say it was."

Before she could protest, he eased her legs apart and knelt on the floor between her thighs. They were fully dressed but she trembled at the intimacy. His arms circled her, drawing her close against him.

"You started this." His warm breath fanned her lips. "If you want more, take it."

His spicy scent filled her nose and his mouth was less than a handbreadth away. Her tongue darted out to wet her lower lip. Why was she afraid? It wasn't as if this were the first time they'd ever kissed.

You care for him already. She didn't want to accept the thought but she couldn't deny it. You're attracted to him. You want the kiss to be more than a distraction.

Slipping her hands inside his vest, she spread her fingers across his warm shoulders. His eyes narrowed while she moved in. She brushed her lips across his, enjoying the tingle resulting from the brief contact.

She felt his fingers rake through her hair and she tilted her head to the side. He didn't rush her, didn't encourage her, just allowed her to take what she wanted. Tension built between them yet he seemed content to let her play.

Pressing her mouth to his, she deepened the kiss. She touched his lips with her tongue and he opened to her. She stroked his tongue with hers and he groaned. His mouth moved, his tongue slid and she lost herself in the spinning haze.

"Charlotte."

She didn't want to stop kissing him, didn't want to lose the comfort of his embrace. He said her name again and she opened her eyes. He moved to sit beside her on the bed.

"I'll start slowly until you become accustomed to the exchange."

"You established a link?" She hadn't felt him in her mind. Apparently, kissing was even more distracting than being kissed.

"Yes. Are you ready?"

She chuckled. "Probably not."

He wrapped his arm around her shoulders and the room fell away. She gasped and clutched his vest.

"Relax. I've got you."

She could still feel the bed beneath her but she could see only darkness. His arm squeezed her in silent reassurance. She moved closer to him, snuggling against his side.

Light flickered in the distance and Charlotte focused on the spot. The blackness parted, folded back like theater curtains.

"Where are we?" she whispered, fighting the nausea rolling through her belly. Concentrating on the light helped but she was glad for his supporting arm.

Tal laughed softly. "We're in your cabin."

"You know what I mean."

"We're nearly there. This is the day I first met Dez dar Joon."

A cavernous chamber appeared within the light. She was drawn into the scene, becoming part of it. High, decorative arches supported the ceiling thirty feet above her head. Beneath her feet spread massive squares of ivory marble. A neat row of boys stood along one wall, shoulder-to-shoulder, arms clasped behind their backs, gazes fixed straight ahead. She saw the scene from the perspective of one of the boys.

"You were children," she said softly. "You were only a boy."

"Look to your right. He's the fourth one down the row."

How could this be Dez dar Joon? The boy Tal indicated looked scared to death. His hair shone softly in the firelight, the rich gold of antique coins, and his wide turquoise eyes were brimming with tears.

"What is this place? Why were you here?"

"This is the Choosing. The Mystics invited us here to be scanned."

"And now you're the one who issues the invitations." That had to make him proud, but he often spoke of his accomplishments with a sad sort of indifference. Had his war with Joon eclipsed everything else in his life?

She turned back to the scene and focused on the frightened blond boy. "You and Dez are both here. Don't the Mystics hold allegiance to one sect or the other?"

"The Conservatory is neutral ground. To violate its neutrality would invite the wrath of all the Mystics."

Reverence filled his tone and Charlotte felt intrusive. This place meant the world to him. She glimpsed his very soul. Still, she wanted to understand, needed to know what she'd be facing.

"You're a Master-level Mage, so I know you were chosen. Was Dez dar Joon?"

"Yes. Vee selected both of us to train personally."

The scene flashed off. She shook her head, surprised by the abrupt change. They sat on her bed again. "Why did he look so frightened? Isn't it an honor to be chosen for apprenticeship?"

"It's a great honor and Vee hadn't chosen an apprentice for many years." His lips compressed for a moment and he glanced away. "Dez had lost his mother five days before. Pell was the only softness he would ever know. I only met her once, but there was such kindness in her eyes. Vee often wondered if we might have saved Dez had Pell dar Joon survived."

"Saved him from what?" she asked.

"From himself."

Memories of the man quickly eroded her pity for the frightened child. Tal offered no more of an explanation, so she asked, "When did he change? Why did he change?"

He pivoted toward her and raised his hands to her face. "Ready for more?" She nodded and he said, "I'll go a bit faster this time so prepare yourself."

She closed her eyes and opened her mind, ignoring the now-familiar urge to resist him. Images inundated her brain, flashes of scenes spanning years. They trained together. They tested each other's skill. They laughed and encouraged one another. They were friends.

Tal stood half hidden in a thick, leafy copse of trees. The clearing he observed lay just beyond some sort of psychic boundary. Joon stood in the clearing, flouting the regulation with his presence.

Charlotte tried to guess his age. Tall and lanky, his golden hair now reached the middle of his back and his features had greatly matured.

"We had passed fourteen Ontarian cycles," Tal answered her unspoken question. "Ontarian cycles are slightly longer than Earth years. Each Ontarian day lasts approximately thirty-six Earth hours."

Tal refocused the transmission and Charlotte felt herself drawn more deeply into his perspective. A sleek, turquoise spaceship landed in the middle of the clearing. Dez stood straight, squaring his shoulders, as a man exited the ship.

Hate burned so brightly in the man's turquoise gaze that she couldn't make out his features. Evil and hostility radiated from him. She felt Tal erect a mental shield.

"Tell me the reports are not true," the man said calmly, his voice terrifying with its soft command. "Tell me my son has not disgraced the House of Joon. Tell me my faith in you has not been misplaced. Tell me I may still call you son."

"Father, I can explain."

She could only see Dez's back, but she felt Tal's heart hammer in reaction to his friend's fear.

"If you must offer an explanation, then there is nothing left to say."

The man turned and Dez grabbed his arm. "But, Father —"

An abrupt backhand ended his sentence. "You wretched weakling." He hit Dez again. "You shame me!" His closed fist knocked Dez to the ground. "You shame us all."

Each ruthless blow made her cringe. Each vicious kick tightened her stomach. The beating hadn't ended when Tal stopped transmitting the memory.

"Dez wouldn't let me interfere. He warned me that to do so would only make it worse for him. I tried to move toward him, but he shot a mental pulse that rendered me unconscious."

"What had he done? Why was his father so angry?"

The muscles in Tal's throat worked as he swallowed awkwardly. "For the first time in our apprenticeship, I had performed better than Dez."

"What? His father beat him because he —"

"Had allowed an Aune to best a Joon. Every failure, regardless of how insignificant was punished..." His voice trailed away. "*Seyati* is similar to brother," Tal explained. "It is a bond only Mystics can truly understand, an affinity of spirit that goes deeper than biological ties."

He didn't give her the opportunity to comment. He touched her face again, resuming the memory transmission. The images passed even more quickly now, making her dizzy, making her shake.

Something dark stirred within Dez dar Joon's turquoise eyes. Camaraderie turned to competition. Friendship to rivalry. Dez manipulated situations, he lied and deceived, he no longer cared about the means, only the victory. Tal mourned their friendship and the innocence left behind.

Light appeared again and Charlotte moved toward it hesitantly. She could sense Tal's pain, the grief and fury surrounding this memory. She stepped into a bedchamber. Her heart pounded in her breast. She heard a breathless moan and expected infidelity. Echoes of Tal's fear amplified her reaction to the scene. She moved as he moved. Saw what he had seen.

Tal snatched back the curtains enclosing the bed. Joon stood across from him, smirking with evil satisfaction. The bruised and broken body of Tal's lover — Flur — sprawled across the bed.

"You're early. But I was finished anyway." He laughed and Tal lunged for him. Joon vanished and Tal collided with the wall.

Charlotte panted harshly and hugged Tal as he released her from the memory. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry," she whispered.

"She was still alive," Tal said in a soft, throaty voice. "He had lured her to my bed using my form. He raped and tortured her, experimenting with the extent of his powers in ways you don't want to imagine. Vee came to me but her injuries were even beyond his ability to mend so we dispersed her energy."

Tal pushed her to arm's length as he went on. "That was when we realized Joon can manipulate energy patterns. You see, he had imprinted the room with my pattern so when the code regulators arrived, they believed I had murdered Flur. I spent four weeks in a detention center before Vee could prove what Joon had done."

"Can they keep you in a cell? Can't you just transport yourself to a different location?"

"There are cages that can contain even a Master-level Mage. Vee will not admit whether or not he can escape the cell, but I suspect he can."

"Joon was never apprehended for what he did to Flur?"

"Punishment is still pending, but he has become a wraith, a phantom. Even Vee cannot isolate his energy pattern anymore."

"How long ago did all this happen? How long have you been chasing him?"

"Those are two different questions. Eight cycles have passed since he murdered Flur and I spent nearly two working with Trey to locate him. It takes twenty cycles to complete an apprenticeship. Vee convinced me that the skills I would learn in the final phase of training might well enable me to find him so I returned to the Conservatory. I completed my training three cycles ago but Joon has yet to pay for his crime."

Charlotte wanted to weep. In her arrogance, she had believed that Tal's only motivation for finding Joon was to prevent him from harming her. "Had you been with Flur long?"

"Not really. We shared affection but Joon knew I didn't love her. He chose to destroy her, even knowing that our alliance was nearly over. The senselessness of what he did is part of why I can't let go." He shook his head. "At least that's what Vee says."

"You admire him very much."

"Vee is part parent, part teacher and part deity." He managed to smile. "There is no one like him in the universe."

Charlotte shifted on the bed, wanting very much to touch Tal. He'd opened himself to her, trusted her. But she'd made her expectations clear. It wouldn't be fair to start something she wasn't ready to finish.

"I know you lost your mother but is your father still alive?" she asked.

He exhaled a long, ragged breath as if to purge himself of the memories. "My father is Prefect Roe Aune, head of the Traditionalist Sect Council. He lives in Frontine, Ontarian's capital city. You will meet him once we know it is safe for you to travel."

"And when will I meet Vee?"

"As soon as the Mystics have seen to his recovery. The Conservatory is our destination."

\* \* \*

Charlotte's heart fluttered within her breast and she could no longer hold back a grin. She was about to set foot on an alien planet! A hatch opened directly in front of her and she felt the floor rumble as the exit ramp extended toward the ground.

Grasping the smooth metal rail, Charlotte started down the ramp. Tall, leafy trees surrounded the ship, but the leaves were more turquoise than green.

An exotic bird soared into the lavender sky and she laughed, unable to contain her exuberance.

"What is that?" she asked, pointing to the round object clearly visible through the trees.

"The day moon," Tal explained as they stepped away from the ship. "Ontariese has two moons. The larger is visible during the day, the smaller at night."

"Are either of them able to sustain life?"

"Yes. The day moon is used as a training facility for our armed forces."



"Where is the Conservatory?" she asked, dragging her gaze back to the small clearing.

"Just over the rise," Trey informed her as he joined them on the ground. "Transports aren't allowed within sight of the complex. They disrupt the balance of energy or something."

"Most Mystics can transport themselves at least a short distance so conventional conveyances are seldom necessary," Tal said.

His arrogance made her feisty. She turned to Trey with a blinding smile. "Are you coming with us?" she asked, enjoying the tension generated by her casual question.

Tal had been a perfect gentleman in the six days it took to complete their journey, not attempting so much as a kiss. Now she understood the old adage *Be careful what you wish for...*

Tal's posture stiffened and his hair coiled. Charlotte's enjoyment increased with each outward sign of his jealousy. At least he hadn't lost interest.

"Would you like me to?" Trey returned her smile.

"No. She would not," Tal responded.

"I didn't ask you."

"Won't your crew miss you?" Charlotte flirted.

"Do you really think I care?"

He stepped toward her but Tal slipped between them, preventing Trey from touching her. "Get back on your ship. Charlotte means nothing by her banter."

Trey crossed his arms over his chest, amber eyes narrowed, legs wide apart. "The conclusion of our flight is a logical transition point. If you had satisfied her, she would not be flirting with me."

Causing a fistfight within minutes of her arrival wasn't the best way to introduce herself to the Mystics. She placed her hands lightly on Tal's shoulders and leaned around him. "I'm sorry, gentlemen. I didn't mean anything by my banter. I enjoyed meeting you, Commander Aune."

Trey's expression remained strained but he inclined his head. "We will meet again," he said, and marched back on to his ship.

They started toward the Conservatory but they didn't get far before Tal turned on her. "There are no harmless flirtations on Ontariese. Men have fought to the death to secure a mate. Women frequently employ armed guards to ensure their safety. Didn't I make it clear—?"

"I'm sorry," she said, touching his upper arm. "You just sounded so smug. I felt you needed to be brought down a notch or two."

"About what did I sound smug?" He shrugged off her hand and started walking.

"Mystics don't need conventional conveyances," she mimicked, exaggerating his superior tone.

He paused and looked at her. "We don't. Why does that make me smug?"

"It wasn't what you said so much as *how* you said it."

Shaking his head, Tal continued walking.

Charlotte paused by a flowering bush. "The colors are so bright. They don't look real." She gingerly touched a florescent-pink bloom.

“Come.”

“What’s your hurry?” Putting her hands on her hips, she glared at him. “Excuse me if I find an alien world interesting. Unlike you, I’ve never seen one before.”

“The Conservatory is neutral ground. You will be safe there.”

She fell into step beside him, the excitement of their arrival diminished by the subtle reminder of Dez dar Joon. The image of his cruel face, twisted with sadistic pleasure as Flur lay dying, flickered to life within her mind.

“You will be safe,” Tal repeated.

She must be broadcasting again. Maybe Vee could teach her how to keep her feelings to herself. They came to the crest of a hill and she paused again. A wide valley spread before them, sharper hills providing a backdrop against the lavender sky. A crystal-blue stream dissected the valley, lined by the Ontarian equivalent of weeping willow trees. Their long, slender branches trailed in the water, providing shade and privacy beneath a leafy canopy.

In the middle of the valley, straddling the stream, rested a stately building. A high, domed center rose from the lower sections that formed a perfect square. She could only see two sides, but the wide-railed gallery appeared to encircle the structure. The thick columns and elaborate sculpting brought to mind the Parthenon or Greek revival mansions of the Deep South.

“It’s beautiful,” she said.

Tal only nodded and headed down the grassy hill.

“I didn’t mean to upset you.”

“Yes, you did.” He turned to face her at the bottom of the slope. “Do you realize the restraint it has taken not to pressure you to share your body with me?”

How was she supposed to answer that? A painful knot formed low in her belly, the same unyielding tension that had gripped her each night as they lay in the same bed, facing in opposite directions.

“I haven’t been with a woman since Flur. Eight cycles, Charlotte. I could have taken you during the energy transfer that first night in your dwelling. Do you realize how badly I wanted you—needed you? I could have convinced you I needed another transfer. I could have seduced you gradually—”

“Why didn’t you?”

His jaw clenched and his hair uncoiled, spreading around her and drawing her gently toward him. “Is that an invitation?”

“Do you want me to come back later?”

She heard the amusement in Dro Tar’s question and felt her face burn. She stepped away from Tal and smothered a groan as his hair stroked across her skin in silken farewell.

“Trey asked me to remind you that your father is waiting for a report,” Dro Tar said.

Tal’s eyes never left Charlotte’s face but a smile curved one corner of his mouth. “I haven’t forgotten, and I’m sure my brother knows it. I’ll see Charlotte safely protected within the Mystic shields and send others back for Vee. Then I’ll report to Prefect Aune.”

\* \* \*

Pausing outside his father's office, Tal transformed his clothing into a formal black suit with a wide belt and gold buttons. Prefect Aune expected every tradition to be observed and Mystic robes were only acceptable at the Conservatory.

Knocking twice upon the door, Tal waited for the correct verbal response.

"Enter."

His father's deep, authoritative voice made Tal smile. Half the world snapped to attention at the sound of that voice. Sitting straight and tall behind his massive desk, Prefect Aune waited for his son's report.

"Trey's transmission indicated the objective was not met," Roe Aune said without preamble.

Tal didn't expect a salutation. His father had been autocratic before the murder of his wife and daughters, but the atrocity had hardened him, destroying all traces of warmth.

Meeting his father's gaze, Tal admitted, "We were unable to apprehend Dez dar Joon but we have the woman."

"Who is she? What's Joon's interest?"

"We just arrived, Father. We were all nearly killed when Joon attempted to collapse the vortex. Vee is still recovering. He has yet to meet her."

Roe's posture relaxed a bit and he folded his hands on the desktop. "Does she have any idea why Joon is looking for her?"

"None whatsoever. She's an enigma."

"Will the Mystic shields conceal her presence? What does Joon know?"

Tal summoned a chair before his father's desk, knowing he would never think to offer one. Courtesy was not his father's concern. He had a well-trained staff to see to such things. "He's back on Ontariese, but what Joon actually knows, I can only guess. It will not take him long to figure out that she's still alive – if he hasn't done so already."

"Is she Ontarian? Could she be a descendant? And if so, why don't we have record of her?"

"Her appearance is entirely human and I was not able to determine otherwise when I scanned her."

His father nodded and pushed back from the desk. "Let me know what you discover."

Tal stood. "Of course."

He had reached the door when his father surprised him by saying, "Be careful, Tal. Knowing what Joon risked to find this woman can only mean she is either important or dangerous."

\* \* \*

Tal stalked toward the row of meditation chambers, intending to check on Vee before he finished the conversation Dro Tar had interrupted. He ached for Charlotte with every fiber of his being. Even his well-trained discipline had its limits.

Why haven't you?

With those three words she sealed her fate. Why hadn't he seduced her? Why hadn't he pressured her? Why hadn't he overwhelmed her? Why hadn't he *taken* her?

The answer to each was the same. Because he was a fool. She wanted him. His patience hadn't endeared him to her, it had frustrated her. Well, his foolishness ended today. He would know every curve and hollow of her silken flesh before the sun banished the night moon from the sky.

Rubbing his face briskly with his hands, Tal forced his thoughts away from the exasperating little human one last time. He nearly collided with Vee as he exited one of the meditation chambers. Quickly stepping back, Tal said, "You appear much improved."

"I feel much improved."

"Good. I'm anxious for you to meet Charlotte."

"You were able to learn nothing new while I was in stasis?" Vee asked.

"No," Tal admitted. They walked out into the training room. "We followed Joon through the vortex but he was able to fling the ship off course as we emerged into Ontarian space. I'm sure that pleased him greatly."

"He has returned to Fortress Joon?"

"Yes."

"Then your plan was successful." Vee offered him a rare smile. "We will not be able to hide her presence indefinitely, but we now have time to determine who she is and why Joon risked interdimensional transportation to locate her."

"My father doesn't see it so," Tal grumbled. "Our mission was a failure in his estimation."

"Prefect Aune can see no shade of gray. But this should be a challenge to you, not a discouragement."

Tal nodded, acknowledging the wisdom in Vee's words. "Are you strong enough to scan Charlotte?"

"Yes. I already summoned her."

Vee motioned toward the arched entrance to the Training Hall.

Charlotte stood there with Mage Gerr. Tal watched the color drain from her face and her mouth gape. He waited for a smile to replace her stunned expression but instead she started screaming.

## Chapter Nine

Charlotte spun on the ball of her foot and ran. Had they been working together all along? If Tal intended to deliver her to Dez dar Joon, why pretend to –

A hand closed around her arm, ending her abrupt departure, and Charlotte screamed again. She tugged frantically against Tal's hold but his fingers wouldn't budge.

"That is *not* Dez dar Joon," he insisted.

Her muddled brain wouldn't accept the simple explanation. She dug her fingernails into his arm and jerked against his grasp. "Let go!"

"Charlotte, look at me." Tal brought her face up and captured her gaze. "That is not Dez dar Joon. Look at him. See for yourself."

Her breath froze in her lungs and the rapid passing of blood roared through her ears. Tal promised to protect her! It wasn't supposed to end like this. His fingers gently guided her face to the side and she looked at the other man.

His long white hair and the sharp arrangement of his features were identical to Joon, but kindness and concern shone from his bright green eyes. Unlike the other Ontarians Charlotte had encountered, his eyes were one solid color, reflective and intense, like precious emeralds.

Gliding slowly toward her, his dove-gray robe rippled around his legs. He was tall and lithe, moving with the same inherent grace she found so fascinating in Tal. He extended the most elegant hand Charlotte had ever seen and waited for her to grasp it before he spoke in softly accented English.

"May Ontariese make you welcome, Shar Lott. I am Vee."

Heat spread up her arm and tension melted from her muscles until she could hardly stand. Tal's arm wrapped around her, a much-needed support at the small of her back.

"I'm honored to meet you." She managed to croak out the words despite the tears burning the back of her throat. She thought Tal had betrayed her. She thought... Shaking away the last of her fear, Charlotte squared her shoulders. "I apologize for my reaction, but except for your eyes, you look just like Dez dar Joon."

Vee released her hand and smiled. "Actually, Dez dar Joon has taken on my appearance but I understand your confusion."

"If someone had warned me," she glared meaningfully at Tal, "my *confusion* could have been avoided."

Vee motioned toward the pillows lining the massive room. "Come."

Charlotte took a step into the training hall and stopped. Though the large squares looked like marble, the floor was springy, like dense foam or rubber. She took another step, testing the resistance with a forward lunge.

"Come," Tal echoed.

"Yes, sir." She mocked him with a smart salute.

Seeing his father certainly hadn't improved Tal's mood.

They reached the cushions and she followed their example as she sat. "If someone hacks off your hair, do you lose your powers?" she asked, making a bland gesture toward Vee's ankle-length braid. She wasn't going to sit here passively while they examined her like a science project.

Tal looked confounded but the older man laughed.

"Our abilities are not linked to our hair as it was with Samson," Vee said.

"Who is Samson?" Tal asked.

"A story recorded in an Earth text called the Bible tells of a man who had unmatched strength so long as he did not sever his hair." He turned back to Charlotte. "As an Ontarian shapeshifter learns to control the movement of their hair, sensation is created within the strands."

"Your hair can feel?" she asked doubtfully.

"Yes," Tal affirmed. "Cutting it causes pain, like injuring a finger or toe. It's also a means of identification."

"If the shapeshifter wishes to be identified," Vee added.

Humility must not be part of a Mystic's training, Charlotte thought with an inward smile.

Vee's hair moved of its own volition to loosely circle his neck. It was not braided in the usual sense. At least twelve partitions had been woven into an intricate pattern. Charlotte had never seen anything like it, so complex and beautiful.

She dragged her gaze back to his glittering eyes. "How many shapeshifters are there on Ontariense?"

"Forty-seven have been invited to the Choosing. Forty-one were chosen."

"Why were the others turned away?" she asked. "Especially if the ability is so rare?"

"Shapeshifting, as with any ability, is bestowed differently upon each person. Some are able to transform only one body part and hold the shift for an instant. For others, the change is effortless and they are able to manifest any shape they choose."

Vee's voice flowed over her, relaxing her muscles, easing her anxiety. Was he doing it intentionally? Could this man affect others with just the sound of his voice?

"Why has Joon chosen to emulate your appearance?" she asked.

"I should have forbade it when he first began, but he seemed only to amuse himself." His lips pressed into a grim line. "I had no idea how violent his ambition would become or how he intended to use his ability."

"Like what he did to Tal after he murdered Flur?" She cringed at how callous the words sounded. She hadn't meant to be so insensitive.

Vee's startled gaze shot to Tal. He seemed surprised Tal had told her.

"Precisely," Vee said, turning back to Charlotte. "Do you know why I have summoned you?"

"Yes. You want to scan me and see if you can figure out why he wants to kill me."

"Murder may not be his intention," Vee said. "Only after he failed to abduct you did he attempt to harm you. Do you know any reason for his actions?"

"I had no idea he existed until Tal crashed into my life." She restlessly shifted on the cushion. "Look, I don't mean to be rude, but I know what you're going to do and I'd just as soon get it over with."

"Tal Aune explained that your mind resists any telepathic connection. Do you understand the necessity of our learning his motivation?"

Pulling her knees up almost to her chest, Charlotte nodded. "I understand, but I can't seem to get my brain to accept the understanding."

Vee moved off his cushion, kneeling in front of Charlotte. "May I touch you?"

She nodded and he extended his hand. His fingers hovered above her skin, moving from her face to the crown of her head in slow, even strokes.

"Close your eyes and try to relax."

Her eyes drifted shut. She felt heat behind her and suspected Tal knelt there, ready to grab her if she started to struggle.

*He will not hurt you. They will not hurt you.* She repeated the sentences, but Vee's hand brushed against her forehead and her hands closed into fists. His palm pressed against her skin and every muscle in her body clenched.

She felt his presence in her mind, light and agile. He moved like a breeze, quick, nonthreatening. Maybe this wouldn't be as bad as she thought. Concentrating on her breathing, she held back the insidious need to fight. Dizziness crept over her and she swayed. Warm hands closed around her shoulders. Tal supported her.

Vee moved deeper. She arched away. Tal pulled her back against his chest, his arm circling her waist.

With firm, steady pressure, Vee advanced. She shook her head, trying to dislodge his hand.

"He will not hurt you, Charlotte. Be calm."

Tal's voice soothed her. She relaxed against him.

Vee's fingers moved across her skin, sinking into her hair. The intensity of his presence increased. Charlotte kept her eyes tightly shut and caught her bottom lip between her teeth. She had to let him do this. They all needed to know why Joon was after her.

"This cannot be," Vee whispered, but he said no more.

Tingling heat built within her mind. Each place he touched grew hot and irritated. She tried to shake him off but his other hand tangled in her hair. Vee drew near and she went wild, kicking and thrashing, tossing her head.

Tal pulled Charlotte's struggling body into his lap. He quickly wrapped his arm over hers. She bucked and arched but Tal held her firmly. This must be done.

Vee began to chant strange, musical syllables Tal did not recognize. Vee leaned in, his forehead resting directly against Charlotte's, his hands on either side of her face. She shuddered and moaned. Her fingernails dug grooves in Tal's forearm. Quickly transforming his skin, he prevented her from doing further damage.

Charlotte suddenly screamed loud and shrill. Tal's gaze flew to Vee but he could only see the top of his head. She writhed, fighting madly. Fear twisted within Tal. Was Vee pushing too hard? Could this be done without causing permanent damage to Charlotte?

Dez's smirking face flashed within Tal's mind, reinforcing his resolve. "Help us, Charlotte," he whispered into her ear. "There is nothing to fear. Let him work."

Should he try to restrain the compulsion? Tal hesitated. Would another presence in her mind compound the terror?

There was no other choice. Slowly, gradually, Tal sank into her mind.

Panic bombarded his senses. She was far beyond rational thought, crazed with the need to evict the intruders from her mind. Tal frantically scanned, searching for the source of the chaos. His pulse raced and the urgency became painful, but he couldn't let anything distract him. He must hurry!

A second compulsion arose within her, darker and more dangerous than the first. Tal trembled as he recognized its purpose. If she couldn't force the intruders out, it would lead her into the safety of insanity.

He gathered energy and saturated the beast with serenity. It howled and writhed. Charlotte's body mirrored its movements. Tal tuned out physical reality and summoned all of his power to the metaphysical plane. He coated the beast with thick, cloying layers of peace, restraining it, binding it.

He could feel Vee now. Sense his urgency and his exhaustion. Tal turned from the compulsion, meaning to offer his energy to Vee, but fear swelled immediately and Charlotte cried out.

Other Mystics slipped silently into the meld. Vee accepted their offered energy and continued the intricate task of dismantling the containment.

Tal whispered encouragements into Charlotte's ear. She trembled and whimpered like a frightened child. Her distress tormented Tal. He had promised to protect her, to keep her safe. He swore that Vee wouldn't hurt her and each moan branded him a liar.

Ripples of energy danced across the metaphysical plane. Tal focused on Vee. Something was happening. He heard Vee gasp and power exploded, knocking him backward. Vee twisted and energy burst with brilliant intensity, hurling Tal out of the meld.

Vee staggered back and slumped onto one of the cushions, panting loudly. "I do not know how it is possible." He dragged in several shuddering breaths. "I thought the gift lost with E'Lanna."

"What gift? What did you see?"

"Shar Lott is a catalyst," Vee said, and then collapsed.

Tal looked down at Charlotte's pale face. She still trembled uncontrollably and her eyes had yet to open. Catalyst? What, by the ghosts of the night moon, was a catalyst?

\* \* \*

Dez dar Joon fell against the back of his chair with an audible groan, panting and disorientated.

"What is wrong with you?" Lilt dar Joon demanded.

Dez ignored the impatience in his brother's tone and tried to focus on his face. Firelight caught in the curly strands of his burnished gold hair. His features stopped this side of pretty and the firmness of his jaw kept them from appearing effeminate. Turquoise eyes were a



legacy from their father. Dez suspected he'd look very much like his brother, if he hadn't taken control of his appearance years before.

"Have you had some sort of seizure?" Lilt asked when Dez didn't respond to his first question. He rose and approached Dez, caution clear in his gaze.

Four years his junior, Lilt had always treated Dez with a combination of fascination and fear.

"I've been a damn fool," he muttered, waving Lilt away.

A violent disturbance in the metaphysical plane had snatched him into a trance moments before. It could only mean one thing. *She* was alive.

Lilt returned to his chair but Dez could feel his gaze searching.

"What happened to you just now?" Lilt asked.

Dez rolled his shoulders, relaxing against the chair's high back. Firestones cast warm light throughout the small chamber. Though the rest of the palace was ostentatious, Dez preferred his private quarters neat and organized.

"It seems accepting my failure was premature. Charlotte is alive."

"How can that be? You said —"

"I know what I said. Obviously, I was deceived."

Taking a moment to savor his velterberry wine, Lilt dared to ask, "Why didn't you sense her presence before now?"

"I underestimated my opponent," Dez grumbled. "It will not happen again. If she is on Ontariese, they have taken her to the Conservatory. The Mystic shields are impenetrable even for me. But she cannot stay there forever."

"What shall you do?"

"Bide my time, see if I can learn what they know and what they only suspect."

"Why won't you tell me what is so important about this woman?"

Lilt sounded petulant and Dez laughed. "Because what you know, they can learn. If she will not join us, this secret will follow Charlotte Layton to the grave."

Feeling somewhat weakened by the disruption, Dez sent Lilt away. He needed an energy transfer and not even his brother knew the true source of his power.

\* \* \*

Pain dragged Charlotte back from the peaceful abyss. Her breath caught on a ragged gasp as she tried to move. Every muscle in her body ached as if it had been cramping for hours.

"Tal?" she whispered without opening her eyes.

"I am here." His warm fingers closed around her hand.

"Did it work? Did Vee figure out what Joon wants?"

"I believe so."

He didn't sound very enthusiastic. Ignoring the pounding in her head, she forced her eyes to open. She lay on a bed in a strange chamber. Tal sat beside her on a chair. Furrows creased his brow, his lips pressed into a thin line and his nostrils flared with each breath he took. Charlotte felt his fingers gently squeeze hers and her heart lurched.

“What’s the matter?”

“You need energy desperately and I’m not sure you can absorb it.” His voice sounded hushed, choked.

I’m dying. Dear God, I’m dying!

“No.” He moved to the bed beside her. “It’s a simple skill. Vee destroyed the shield within your mind so I will teach you.”

She tried to sit but her body trembled in protest. “If it’s so simple, why do you look terrified?”

He didn’t respond to the question. “Try to relax.”

Charlotte laughed. “If I were any more relaxed, I’d be unconscious.”

Stroking her hair away from her face, he smiled, a sad, tender smile that made Charlotte panic all over again. Despite his reassurances, Tal didn’t think she’d survive this.

“Can you visualize the metaphysical plane?”

“Yes,” she answered immediately, but this was no time for bravado. “No. I don’t know what you mean.”

“Close your eyes. It’s easier to form images if your mind is not processing physical signals.”

That made sense. She closed her eyes.

“Form the image of a place, somewhere safe and familiar.”

Her cabin in Aspen immediately materialized within the void. It was her sanctuary from the world, her haven, her refuge – and thanks to Tal, it only existed within her mind.

“Stay focused, Charlotte. You can punish me later.”

He was already in her mind, awaiting her on the *metaphysical plane*.

“Go to the food preparation area. Visualize the hot beverage dispenser.”

She heard the urgency in his voice and moved as quickly as she could. Again he waited for her, a large mug of coffee in his hand. He handed her the mug and motioned toward her mouth.

“Drink the beverage and accept the nourishment into your body.”

The rich aroma of coffee filled her nose and heat radiated from the mug. Nothing she ever imagined had been this realistic. She drank the coffee, but Tal’s image within her mind remained tense and agitated.

“Why isn’t it working?” she asked.

Strength seeped from Charlotte. Her muscles felt weighted; her thoughts became muddled.

“You know this isn’t how it’s done. Your mind won’t accept the representation.”

The image fluctuated, swelling in and out of focus with sickening irregularity. Her life force ebbed even more and she cried out. She was not going to die!

Throwing her arms around his neck, she sealed her mouth over his, just as he had done on the mountain. Her image followed suit, and soon she saw their embrace as well as felt it. His lips pressed to hers, firm and warm. She opened, inviting the exchange. Hot, prickly sensations crept into her body. She opened further, surrendering to her hunger. The tingling intensified. She could see the energy flow in sparkling, skittering waves.

Tal pulled back with a ragged gasp. "Greedy little thing," he murmured, his tone light with amusement.

Charlotte opened her eyes and laughed out loud. "That was unbelievable. Keep your ginseng. I feel incredible."

He laughed too then exhaled loudly.

They sat hip to hip, facing each other. "You're an adept pupil. Vee will be pleased."

"Vee? Where is Vee? What happened before? I only remember bits and pieces."

Charlotte shifted, leaning her back against the smooth headboard. The chamber was not large but it felt spacious after the continual confinement of Trey's ship.

Tal spoke a word she didn't recognize and the room filled with light.

"What are those?" Charlotte crawled over Tal and off the bed. Transparent boxes protruded from the wall at regular intervals, several feet above Charlotte's head. Within each box rested an egg-shaped, translucent rock or perhaps a crystal. Tal's simple command had set the stones to glowing, providing the illumination.

"Firestones. They can provide heat as well as light when it's needed."

"Are they hard to control? Are they used on the entire planet or just by the Mystics? Are they –"

"Charlotte," he said in exasperation. "Your education begins tomorrow."

She smiled. "I'm sorry. I just feel so alive. I can hardly contain it."

"I'm relieved."

He sounded tired. Charlotte walked back to him, studying his face. His expression had relaxed but creases branched out from his mouth and purple shadows circled his eyes. "Are you all right?"

"We nearly lost you."

She stood before him, her knees brushing against his as he sat on the bed. Hesitantly, she traced the stress lines in his skin. She had wanted to touch him for so long, needed him to touch her.

His hands came to rest against her hips and Charlotte fought the urge to topple him backward and climb on board.

"You're broadcasting." A sensual smile curved just the corners of his lips.

"What did Vee find once the shield was lowered?" She continued to follow the contours of his face with her fingertips.

"Vee will have to explain it to you because I don't fully understand."

He parted his legs and pulled her between them, his hands curving around to cup her bottom.

"My education begins tomorrow," she said. "So what should we do with tonight?"

Desire ignited within Tal's gaze at her throaty question. "The image in your mind a moment ago is agreeable to me."

Her tongue darted out to wet her lower lip. She'd never been with anyone but Victor. And even with Victor it had been – tame. Was she betraying Victor's memory by wanting Tal this badly? She would always love Victor, treasure the years they'd spent together, but Tal was here and now, alive and so incredibly exciting.

"Touch me," she whispered. "Please."

Tal transformed his hand into a pair of scissors and snipped the drawstring supporting her uniform bottom. The material obediently pooled around her ankles and she gasped.

"How did you do that?" she cried.

She was still covered to mid-thigh but Tal couldn't resist the temptation of knowing she was naked beneath. He cupped her bottom again and groaned. The heated softness of her flesh invited a much more intimate exploration.

Without explaining the technique, Tal sliced the sash circling her waist and snipped through her undergarments, leaving only the tunic in place. She slipped off her shoes and scooted the pile aside as he reached past her and took a goblet from the small table beside the bed. He'd intended to use the potent beverage to help calm her if she didn't accept the energy exchange. Taking a long sip, he passed the cup to her.

"Drink," he urged.

"What is it?"

Ever suspicious. Tal smiled. "It is called blish. I drank first to assure you it's not harmful."

She drank, her expression turning distant as she worked to identify the taste. "It's nice. Sort of citrusy and spicy. Is it alcoholic?"

"It has properties similar to alcohol."

She glanced away, both hands wrapped around the goblet. "You don't have to get me drunk. I've wanted to jump your bones for days."

He hoped that meant what he thought it did. "Why haven't you?" He repeated the question Dro Tar interrupted hours before.

"I wasn't sure how... I've never had to..."

He took the goblet from her hands and set it aside. She stayed between his thighs but made no move to touch him. Despite her words, Tal had to know she wanted him – really wanted him. The last woman to share his bed paid for the choice with her life.

"Are you thinking about Flur?" she asked.

Her perceptiveness surprised him. Had lowering the shield released other latent abilities? "Yes. She died because she was my lover."

"She died because an evil man chose to experiment with the extent of his power. Besides, Joon already wants me dead, so I have nothing to lose."

"That's not much to commend a relationship."

"Do you want a relationship?" Her voice sounded hushed, tentative. "Or is this just about sex?"

"Any male on Ontariese who is fortunate enough to have a woman tends to become totally devoted to her. I know you declared our social alliance because you were pressured by Trey to do so, but I have wanted to be with you since you allowed me to touch you back on Earth."

Charlotte smiled. This was ridiculous. One of them had to make the first move. "How do Ontarians prevent pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases?"

"Sexually transmitted diseases are very rare. Any healer can easily eradicate the microorganisms."

"And pregnancies?"

"With our current crisis, pregnancies are encouraged not prevented."

Charlotte went cold. She tried to step back. His hands caught her hips, stopping her retreat. "I don't want a baby right now. If abstinence is the only form of contraception on Ontariese, then—"

"I didn't say that. I can control each strand of my hair, Charlotte. Do you think preventing conception is beyond my power?"

"Will you?" she persisted. "Will you make sure I don't get pregnant?"

"For now."

"Not good enough."

"I give my solemn vow that I will not get you pregnant until a child is something we both want."

Still she hesitated. What choice did she have but to trust him? He had done everything in his power to protect her, even if she didn't always agree with his means. Tal wouldn't intentionally hurt her.

She framed his face with her hands and looked directly into his eyes. "Then make love to me."

His hands grasped her bare behind, dragging her against him. Their mouths met in the middle, clinging, parting, consuming.

Charlotte's body ignited like dry tinder. She crawled onto his lap, straddling his hips while he pulled the tunic off over her head. When or how he had banished his clothing, she didn't know or care, but her thighs moved against his lean hips and her breasts and belly rubbed his torso skin to skin.

She delved into his mouth with her tongue, savoring the traces of blish and Tal's unique flavor. He smelled like cinnamon and tasted like spiced apple cider. She could get used to this.

Wrapping her arms around his back, she explored his hard muscles and smooth skin. She didn't want to think about Victor, didn't want anything to distract her from the wonder of discovery, but the comparisons came unbidden. Making love with Victor had been gentle, orderly. Tal made her wild.

Tal pulled back and demanded, "Open your eyes."

Apparently she'd been broadcasting again. She opened her eyes.

"I will not tolerate a ghost in my bed. I want to share my body with you, but if the memory of Victor is still too strong—"

"It isn't." She took off the disk-shaped necklace and placed it on the table beside the bed. "I want this. I want you." She pulled his hand to her breast, escalating the intimacy and allowing him to feel the frantic pounding of her heart.

His hair slid across her skin, tickling and caressing her. He bent to taste her nipple and Charlotte arched her back. His cock jerked against her feminine mound, obviously anxious to proceed. Charlotte grasped his shoulders and spread her thighs, pressing herself more intimately against his erection.

He sucked firmly, moving from one breast to the other and back again. His palms supported her back, allowing her to relax in her arched position and feel the heated throb of his body against hers.

One of his arms suddenly circled her hips and he turned, laying her back across the bed. Her legs still straddled his hips but he slid down along her body and knelt on the floor. Charlotte reached for him, wanting him inside her, needing him to fill the aching void.

His hair caressed her torso, teasing her nipples. She arched and whimpered, knowing what he intended to do. Victor had occasionally used his mouth to give her pleasure but he preferred conventional sex.

Charlotte cried out as Tal's fingers suddenly thrust into her throbbing core.

"Say my name," he commanded.

The unexpected penetration pushed her over the edge. She cried out his name while her body tightened around his fingers.

"Say my name," he whispered as he parted her gently and found the nerve center of her body with the tip of his tongue.

"Tal," she said softly.

His fingers remained inside her and each flick of his tongue made her body pulse and burn. Tension gathered low in her belly, tightening in time to the rhythm of his tongue.

"Tal, please." She tossed her head, her legs shaking.

"Say my name."

"Tal," she cried.

He pulled his hand back, dragging his fingers nearly out of her as he circled her clit over and over. His lips closed around the swollen nub at the same instant he thrust back in and Charlotte screamed. Pleasure exploded inside her, coursing through her, electrifying her nerves and contracting her muscles.

Tal felt her body drench his fingers and grinned against her softness. Giving a woman pleasure was nearly as thrilling as finding release. He stroked her one last time with his tongue then slowly withdrew his fingers, loving the way her core clung as if to prevent his departure.

"Maybe I won't join my body with yours," he whispered. "Maybe I'll touch you and taste you over and over until you must have me inside you or die."

Her throaty laugh rippled through his entire body.

She rose to her elbows, her breasts quivering with each ragged breath. "Is that supposed to frighten me? It's not much of a threat."

He arched his brow and offered her a wicked smile. "Would this be more of a threat?" He mystically stimulated her nipple, creating the sensation of greedy lips and a wet tongue.

Her eyes flew wide and she gasped. "How did you do that?"

He repeated the mental caress, sinking one teasing finger between her silken folds. She clamped her thighs together and shook her head.

"Don't do that."

Fear flickered to life within her gaze and Tal fought back his need to dominate, to claim. "I would never hurt you." Pulling her up until she sat on the edge of the bed, he kissed her brow and pressed her warm body against his. "I didn't mean to frighten you."

He held her tenderly and she relaxed into his embrace. Slowly as his smoky gaze caressed her face, he stood and lowered her back to the bed. Then he moved her legs farther apart and positioned himself at her entrance. She tensed and closed her eyes.

"No. Watch me. Watch me coming into you. Know who takes you. Know who fills you."

She pushed back to her elbows and looked down along their bodies. Tal watched as his shaft sank slowly into her moist center and they groaned in unison. Her heat caressed him, rippled around him, and he could no longer suppress the need to move. She arched into each downward thrust. He drove harder, deeper, dragging her hips to the very edge of the bed. He didn't want to hurt her but it had been so long and it felt so incredibly good.

Hooking her legs over his arms, he spread her thighs wide, filling her completely with each forceful thrust. He shoved back his building climax. It was too soon. This felt too good!

Charlotte cried out and her body grasped his, hurling him toward the stars. Colors burst behind his eyes and his body shook with the force of his release.

For a long moment neither moved. She sprawled before him, flushed and breathless and he felt a fresh wave of desire surge within him.

She remained silent and still, withdrawn rather than replete, so he carefully separated their bodies and joined her on the bed. He lay on his side and gathered her into his arms, holding her tightly. She trembled with what he hoped were little aftershocks of pleasure and he smiled.

"Will you promise me something?" she whispered.

Her voice broke and Tal noticed a tear escape the corner of her eye. "What is it? Why are you crying?"

A ragged sob shook her and Tal cupped her cheek, brushing away her tears with the pad of his thumb. "I can't go through it again," she cried. "You have to promise not to leave me. I couldn't bear it if you died."

He sat and cradled her gently against his chest. "Relax, my love, all is well."

Her hand tangled painfully in his hair. "I know it's irrational but part of me really means it. I don't want to be here without you and there's nothing left for me on Earth. What am I supposed to do if something happens to you? I just... I can't..."

"Charlotte," he said, gently disentangling her fingers from his hair. He waited until she opened her eyes. "There is a way to see that we are never parted, if that is truly what you wish. It's called *The Sah Keeta Narri*. The soul bonding."

"How is it done?" she asked softly, her cheek nuzzling his chest, her hand moving hungrily across his skin.

He caught her wrist, pressing her palm over his heart. Her curiosity triggered a bone-deep ache, but she didn't understand what she was doing to him. Every Mystic longed for the completeness, the unity of body, soul and spirit, found only with *The Sah Keeta Narri*.

But the Great Conflict had made such bondings almost unheard of. If only devotion rather than fear drove her longing. If only... He forced away the useless sentiment.

"It utilizes a simple chant that draws our life forces together and makes them one. I'll teach you the chant, but once completed, it can never be undone. It's not to be entered into without much consideration. We'll not do this tonight."

She released her breath in a shuddering sigh. "'Til death do us part'? You're right. I'm sorry. I didn't expect to be this emotional."

He kissed her brow and tilted her head until their gazes met. "There's no need for your apology. You lost someone you loved very much. It's natural to be afraid."

"Do Ontarians live longer than humans?"

"We do, and Ontarians with Mystic abilities live longer still."

Finally she smiled. "If we did this ritual, would I live forever?"

"I never claimed to be immortal," he protested with a laugh.

"But I would live as long as you live?"

"Maybe I won't teach you the chant after all." He rolled her beneath him. "You seem overly interested in this aspect of the joining."

Her mouth soothed him with a slow, tender kiss. "When and if we perform this ritual, it will be because I want to spend the rest of my life with you and only you."



## Chapter Ten

"Your exercises are increasing your focus. I'm amazed at how quickly you're progressing." Tal motioned Charlotte toward the benches lining the training hall.

They'd just finished their morning routine and she'd only landed on the floor once. She stretched her back and shifted her uniform top. Fashion was definitely not a priority on Ontariese, at least not with the Mystics. She wouldn't know about the rest of the planet. They hadn't allowed her beyond the Mystic shield even once in the five weeks since she arrived.

"Yeah, well, exercising on the metaphysical plane is about as much fun as aerobics," she said.

Tal tilted his head to one side, caressing her face with his gaze. "You're doing very well. I'm proud of you."

She laughed and pushed her damp hair off her forehead. "I wasn't fishing for compliments. When can I visit Dro Tar?"

"Dro Tar departed for Bilarri yesterday."

Charlotte walked to the edge of the training floor and picked up her squeezable tube of water. "Where or what is Bilarri and why did she go there?"

"Bilarri is a planet about six days' journey by conventional starship. It's the only inhabited planet in our neighboring solar system."

Tal was about to say more when Vee spoke from the archway at the other end of the training hall. "Let us away to the exercise yard, Shar Lott. It is my wish to continue your training."

Charlotte fell into step beside Tal. She had corrected Vee's pronunciation of her name numerous times but he continued to separate the syllables. "What's on Bilarri?"

"The Symposium," Vee said, his tone clipped and final.

She decided not to push it. She knew the Symposium was some sort of governing board, but Vee obviously had his reasons for not expounding.

They emerged into the purple twilight. For two hours as dusk faded into night, both moons were visible in the Ontarian sky. Charlotte glanced up at the alien horizon and felt a pang within her chest. Would she ever see Earth again, gaze at a bright blue sky and inhale the fresh, clean scent of pine trees?

"It is possible for you to return to Earth, Shar Lott," Vee said without breaking his stride. "Interdimensional travel is not common but it is possible."

Perhaps she hadn't mastered this broadcasting business after all.

"Tal explained how it works, but everyone on Earth thinks I'm dead. It might be a little awkward if I just showed up one day."

Vee inclined his head. "If it were your wish, you could return to Earth centuries into the future. Would it amuse you to glimpse the progress of your world?"

"Let me accustom myself to this world before I contemplate others," she suggested.

Stepping up to the wide stone railing, Charlotte looked out over the exercise yard. Mystics, in robes similar to Vee's, supervised a group of boys as they engaged in various

activities. The purpose of some of the routines was obvious while she could only guess at others.

A softly scented breeze wafted across her face. She inhaled the sweet fragrance and glanced at the neat flowerbeds lining the gallery. Everything here was orderly and peaceful. Had the rest of the planet really been ravaged by civil war?

Vee joined her at the rail and Tal sat on one of the stone benches behind them. After a longing glance at Tal, she turned her attention to Vee.

"Intensifying the powers of another is only part of a catalyst's capability." Vee spoke softly, as if he were afraid of being overheard. "Such intensification can also be accomplished when two people with the same gift meld. You are able to amplify any gift, which is unusual, but the part of your nature that is truly unique is what makes a catalyst so valuable."

"And that is?"

"Many female Ontarians can sense latent abilities in others, but a catalyst can activate those abilities. Some abilities remain latent indefinitely without the assistance of a catalyst. Others develop far more rapidly after a catalyst has triggered them."

"And how does a catalyst accomplish all this?"

She swallowed awkwardly and grasped the railing to hide the way her hands shook. All her life she'd battled feelings of mediocrity. She never felt good enough, smart enough or rich enough. Now the potential Vee described held her paralyzed.

"There is no reason for your fear," Vee said.

She couldn't suppress a little snort. "Can I give this to someone else? Can the power be exchanged like energy?"

"No. Fate entrusted this gift to you and someone troubled themselves greatly to disguise your true nature."

Tal's arms came around her, resting lightly on the railing on either side of her. Relaxing back against his warmth, she looked out across the exercise yard.

"So why am I here?" she asked.

"The Choosing took place not long ago. Many abilities have yet to develop in boys this young. I want you to scan each child and tell me what is revealed to you."

Indulging a long, ragged sigh, Charlotte turned her gaze on the boy nearest the gallery. "The boy in red is telepathic, telekinetic and..." She blinked several times and leaned closer to the railing. "I sense a sort of receptiveness. He seems to be in tune with forces others cannot sense."

Vee smiled. "Very good. Now scan the others."

One by one, she identified the abilities of each of the new recruits. Vee accepted her assessments and encouraged her to intensify her scan each time she hesitated.

She came to a fair-haired boy on the far side of the yard and chuckled. "Oh, you've got yourself a firestarter."

"Where?" Vee asked.

He moved closer, his robes lightly brushing her legs. Had she found her first latent ability?

"The blond boy in the turquoise tunic and black pants." She pointed him out.

"His mentor has not yet discovered this gift. Is the talent known to the boy?" Vee asked.

"I don't think so."

The mentor working with the boy suddenly looked up and nodded toward Vee. Without question or hesitation, the boy started across the yard.

"Lor is a pyrokin?" Tal sounded aghast. His hands left the railing and he stalked back to the stone bench.

Vee's emerald gaze followed his agitated movements. "Is it not better that we teach him to control such a power than to allow him to experiment with it on his own?"

"If Charlotte does not activate the ability, who is to say it will ever manifest?" Tal snapped.

As the men argued, Charlotte noticed that activity in the practice yard all but stopped. The boys tried to gain the attention of their mentors then exchanged confused expressions with each other.

She felt heat spread across her skin and realized the Mystics were staring at her – every one of them male. "Are there no female Mystics?"

Tal slipped his arm around her waist again and pulled her snugly against his side. "There are only three at the Conservatory."

"Do they need to know that you're mine?"

Even Vee chuckled at her wording.

"It might be wise," Tal agreed.

Charlotte turned, wrapped her arms around Tal's neck and kissed him thoroughly on the mouth. When she glanced back at the practice yard, the routines had resumed as if nothing had happened.

It took Charlotte a moment longer to recapture her nonchalant façade. Holding Tal, "claiming" him publicly, had thrilled and aroused her. She had never dreamed a simple kiss could be so stimulating. She wanted to drag him to her room and continue the "claiming" in far more intimate ways. Forcing away the lurid thoughts, she steered her reluctant mind back to the task at hand.

Standing at the foot of the stairs leading to the gallery, the blond boy hesitated, obviously unsure if he should join them. He looked about six or seven and his wide, guileless eyes perfectly matched his turquoise tunic. Vee motioned him forward.

The boy closed the distance between them and stopped in front of Vee, respectfully bowing his head. "How may I serve you, Head Master Vee?"

The Symposium's lessons, combined with Tal's mind-to-mind transfers, allowed Charlotte to understand the boy's words.

"This is Mistress Shar Lott. She shall work with you for a short time. You need not fear her but I expect you to offer her the same respect and obedience you grant the other Mystics."

The *other* Mystics? Charlotte gulped. When had she become a Mystic?

The boy turned to her and bowed his head.

Understanding a language and speaking it were two different things. Still she had to start some time. Kneeling before the boy, she raised his face until their eyes met. Thick, sooty lashes framed his eyes, an ever-changing marbling of green and blue. He smiled hesitantly, a sudden flush coloring his cheeks.

"Your name is Lor?" she asked carefully.

"Yes, mistress."

Apparently, he was able to understand her. "Well, Lor, shall we play a game?"

"Mage Rin has us play games, but he says that every game must have a purpose and every player must play to win."

"I know a better place for this game," Tal said.

Charlotte nodded and they set off along the gallery. Tal walked beside Vee, which left Lor with Charlotte. Her heart nearly leapt from her chest when Lor slipped his hand into hers and offered a nervous little smile. She carefully closed her fingers around his hand, ignoring the aching familiarity.

It had been a year since she felt a child's hand in hers. The trust, the promise and the potential in Lor's innocent face tore at her heart. She refused to think about the cruel injustice of such innocence snuffed out, never to be fully realized. She couldn't change the past but she could rise above the ashes.

Tal led them to a small chamber. Charlotte couldn't tell if it was a pantry or some sort of pharmacy. Vee took a wide stone dish from one shelf and placed a firestone in it. Setting the dish on the floor, he stepped back.

Maybe this wasn't such a good idea. Why had Tal become so agitated by the prospect of Lor's abilities?

Each apprentice is closely supervised. Continue. Vee's voice sounded within her mind.

She motioned Lor toward the dish. "Have you ever ignited a firestone?"

"No, mistress. None of us can do that."

"Well, it is dangerous and it must only be done if you are with one of the Mystics. Do you understand me?"

"Yes, mistress."

"The game is simple. Pretend you're cold and you need the firestone to warm you."

Lor glanced at Vee, his forehead creased, his eyes narrowed. "But if I'm cold, I heat my blood."

"Pretend Mistress Shar Lott is cold," Vee suggested.

"All right."

He closed his eyes and Charlotte smiled. At least she wasn't the only novice who made that mistake. She kept her eyes open while she sank into his mind, visualizing a closed door. As gently as she could, she eased the door open.

Energy burst out, shaking Lor's entire body. The firestone exploded in blazing shards and everyone dove for cover. Flames erupted all over the room. The wooden shelves, the heavy curtains, even two thick tomes began to burn.

Lor clung to Charlotte, whispering apologies.

"It's all right. This is not your fault," she told the frightened boy.

Vee raised his hands and smothered the flames in one direction. Tal did the same in the other.

"See, nothing to fear," Charlotte said.

Lor stepped back and stood up straight, his eyes enormous in his pale face. "I'm sorry, Head Master Vee. Please don't send me home. I'll do better. I'll try harder. I will not..." His chin quivered and his eyes filled with tears but he stubbornly blinked them back.

"This was *not* your fault," Charlotte said firmly as much for the men as for the child.

"There was no fault in your actions, Lor," Vee said. "Ask Mage Rin to come to me. It would appear pyrokinesis must be added to your training."

The boy darted from the room. Charlotte suspected he was losing the battle with his tears.

"What happened?" she asked.

"Apparently, it will work better if the person is not using their power when you activate it," Tal said, his troubled gaze lingering on the spot where the boy had been.

\* \* \*

Tal's hair slid across Charlotte's naked back, curling around her thighs and tickling her bottom. She giggled and started to turn over.

"Lie still." He eased her down to her stomach and continued the teasing massage.

"On Earth, you could have made a fortune doing this. I've never felt anything so heavenly." A strand sneaked between her thighs and her breath hitched. "Now you'd get arrested if you charged money for that."

"I only care that it pleases you."

Smiling dreamily, she rested her chin on her folded hands and enjoyed the sensuous caress. "Tell me about Lor." His hair hesitated against her skin.

"Why do you ask?"

"I sensed a certain animosity in your reaction to the boy. Is he a pain in the butt or —"

"His name is Lor dar Joon. I cannot think of the Earthish term. His father is brother to Dez."

"Nephew," she provided quietly. "Dez is Lor's uncle."

"Yes."

"Has there been any sign of instability in Lor?"

"He would not be here if there were."

His warm hands wandered up the inside of her thighs, gently moving her legs apart.

"I thought you wanted me to relax." She glanced over her shoulder and found him kneeling between her legs.

"Are you not relaxed?"

"I was until you...adjusted our position."

"I have been contemplating our position."

She chuckled, more than ready to play. "Have you now? Is there a particular position you've been contemplating?"

His hands clasped her hips and pulled her up to her knees. The silken caress of his hair never stopped but his hands joined in. He stroked her hips and sides, cupped her breasts, then pressed his body against her back.

"I can't touch you like this," she protested.

"Is it not enough to be touched by me?"

She trembled. "More than enough."

"Then revel in my caresses. Accept the pleasure I give you."

His knees nudged her legs wide as he rubbed her rounded behind. His fingers curved inward, gently teasing her folds. "You are so soft," he whispered. "All of you."

He seemed fascinated by her bottom, stroking her skin and squeezing the resilient flesh. His fingers delved into the deep crease between her cheeks and Charlotte moaned. She had never thought of her backside as particularly sexy but this was downright erotic. He traced her crease, eased between her thighs and skimmed her feminine slit.

"So soft." He teased her, carefully avoiding her sensitive clit, which focused her attention on the emptiness building between her thighs.

"Please. I want you inside me. I *need* you there."

"Here?" He rimmed her, tormented her.

Charlotte panted, stunned by the demanding pulsation he encouraged with his lightest touch. "Yes. Please!"

The blunt head of his shaft nudged her entrance. She pushed back against him urgently. He chuckled and grasped her hips. "Stay still. Feel me."

Resting her forehead on her folded arms, she closed her eyes and obeyed. His hair moved against her breasts, his hands gently squeezed her hips and his shaft sank into her heat. Deeper and deeper he pushed until his hips cradled her bottom.

He leaned over her then, moving his hands to her breasts. Instinctively, she tightened her inner muscles around his hardened shaft. He groaned. She did it again, smiling when he repeated the throaty sound.

Dragging his hips back, he pulled nearly out. She braced for his first real thrust, tingling with anticipation. He sank back in at the same leisurely pace, frustrating her with his patience.

She arched and squirmed, finally grabbing a handful of his hair. "Move, damn it. Stop teasing me."

He laughed, a warm, rumbling sound that played havoc with her overstimulated senses. "But I like teasing you. I love the way your body flutters around me and the sound you make deep in your throat."

One of his hands left her breast, descended along her body and settled between her thighs. His fingers gently stroked her delicate folds, already stretched tight to accept him. He pulled back and thrust deep.

"Yes!"

His middle finger found her clit and feathered caresses across it, making her wild. She arched and bucked, driving her hips up into each downward thrust.

Harder, faster, she needed more. He thrust his full length into her and she shattered. Her core clasped him with violent spasms, unable to hold back her release.

Panting harshly, Charlotte trembled as the pleasure receded. He was still hard inside her. She had just experienced the most powerful orgasm of her life and it hadn't even triggered his.

Her disappointment was short-lived as he rolled them to their sides, still buried deep within her. Extending one of his arms beneath her neck, he reached for her hand and interlaced their fingers.

He guided her leg up and back, hooking her foot in the bend of his knee. His hand glided across her torso, demonstrating the advantage of this position. From her breasts to juncture of her thighs and back, he created tingling sensations. He worked her nipples into tight, aching buds then stroked her other bud with skillful persistence.

She trembled. "I'm going to...come again if you don't stop teasing me."

"I want to feel your pleasure."

"You already did."

"Do it again."

He pressed against her aching clit and she surrendered to the spasms of pleasure coursing through her. Again and again he stroked her, dragging every last shuddering contraction from her body before he moved his hand.

Tal adjusted their position again, rolling to his back and pushing her upright. She sat on his lap, undeniably aware of his thick length impaling her.

"I still can't touch you like this," she pointed out, looking back at him.

"No, but you can *take* me."

He lifted her hips with his hands, showing her what he meant. Arching backward, she braced her hands against the bed and slid up and down on his shaft. The angle was different and she controlled each tantalizing stroke, a combination that soon had her gasping.

Flexing her legs and rocking her hips, she took him deeper, harder. He moved with her, into her, but didn't try to assume control. Tension coiled, heat flared, and each downward thrust made him moan. She tightened around him, caressing his length as she increased the tempo of her movements.

His fingers dug into her hips and he thrust hard, his body shaking as he released his seed.

Trembling on the verge of another orgasm, she started to relax in defeat when his hair wrapped around her. Brushing her nipples and stimulating her skin, the unexpected caress pushed her over the edge.

He supported her until the last tingling spasm faded away. Then he eased her back across his chest and rolled them again to their sides. His body nestled against her back, his palm gently cupping her breast.

"Any other positions you've been contemplating?" she asked in a sleepy whisper.

"They are more easily demonstrated than described."

\* \* \*

Pushing back from the library table to cross her legs, Charlotte read the Ontarian Code of Ethics for the third time. So simple and yet so profound. If a world, any world, actually adhered to such a standard, it would be Utopia.

Tal walked into the room and Charlotte smiled. For the past two months, they'd worked each day to hone her skills as a catalyst and spent each night in each other's arms.

"What are you doing?" He slipped onto the chair across the table from her, his gaze softly caressing her face.

"When was the last time you read the Ontarian Code of Ethics?"

"I don't need to read it. Memorizing the Code of Ethics is part of the education of every Ontarian child."

She tapped her finger against the document Vee had translated for her. "In the Traditionalist Sect and the Reformation Sect?"

"I don't know how *they* educate their children."

She let his bitterness slide. One issue at a time. "I was astonished by the wisdom in this document then I remembered what Vee said the rest of these books contain."

"Clarifications of the code," Tal said thoughtfully.

"Yes. It's tragic."

"If you agree with the codes, why are you saddened by them?"

"Because of this." She motioned to the floor-to-ceiling shelves of books surrounding them. "Hundreds of thousands of *Clarifications*. Individual interpretations of universal ethics. I find it tragic that something so pure, so rudimentary, would need to be clarified."

"Is it different on Earth?"

The defensive edge to his tone made Charlotte look at him closely. She shook her head. "No. If anything, it's worse. I just finished reading this one. The Ontarian Standards."

He pushed back from the table and crossed his arms over his chest. Why was he taking this so personally?

"You find it objectionable?"

"Well..." She hesitated. If she spoke her mind, he would no doubt disagree. But what sort of future awaited them if they couldn't be honest with each another? "The entire thing is represented as a massive Clarification of the second code."

"I shall offer my power to the greater good."

She nodded, fiddling with the smooth cover of the thick document. "Right. Then it lists pages and pages of Standards for everything from admission into certain schools, to prerequisites for employment, to compatibility for prospective life mates."

"All of which are *necessary* to further the greater good."

Her brow arched in silent challenge. "And everyone abides by these Standards?"

"Of course. Some of them were established hundreds of years ago. They are time-honored traditions."

"I see," she muttered. Okay, she was about to make him really angry, but she'd never been able to stomach hypocrisy. "According to the Standards, I'm unsuitable for the study of and an eventual career in what you call code management."

"You're a catalyst. That is the only *career* you will ever need."

Charlotte shoved her chair back and stood. "I *want* to study law. Code management sounds very much like what I was going to do on Earth."

"It's out of the question."

"Oh really? Some hundred-year-old Standard says that only Ontarians with photographic memories are suitable for code management, and I'm just supposed to accept it?"



"Each Standard has been tested for its validity."

"How does one contest the validity of a Standard?"

He leaned forward, resting his forearms on the table. "What is this really about? Why are you attacking the Standards?"

Her laugh was harsh and short. "I just read this nonsense. I haven't had time to devise an ulterior motive."

His eyes darkened. "The Standards are not nonsense. Millions died protecting the sacred traditions. My mother and sisters were murdered because we will not bow to the Reformation Sect."

Fury radiated off him, startling Charlotte. Tal had never lost control of his emotions before. She started to apologize but stopped. Why should she apologize for her beliefs? The Ontarian Standards were antiquated relics of a time long past. She didn't want to fight with him but she wasn't willing to be a doormat.

"Have any of the Standards been revised in your lifetime?"

"No," he admitted stiffly. "It would compromise the integrity of the traditions."

"Have any of the Standards been revised since...the massacre?"

He scooted to the edge of the chair, his lips compressed, his hair tightly coiled. "You know the answer. Why are you provoking me?"

"I'm not trying to provoke you. I'm trying to understand the world you dragged me to." She grasped the curved back of the chair in front of her. "How did the massacre change life on Ontariese?"

"The changes were countless, the pain never-ending."

"What were some *specific* changes that took place as a result of – what happened?"

"How can you ask me that?" He crossed his arms over his chest and glared at her. "What do you want to hear? We took drastic measures to protect ourselves. We organized an army and transformed the leisure colony on the day moon into the City of Tears, a brutal outpost for the training of soldiers. We focused our technology and our Mystic abilities on defense.

"We consolidated our cities and rationed our resources. We basically reordered our society within the structure of the sacred traditions. We encouraged – no, we campaigned – for their women to join our sect. Some became so desperate they stole women away. We created the social alliance and –"

"With all of these changes, it never occurred to you to revisit the Standards and other precedent-setting litigation?"

"The Standards are a vital part of the sacred traditions. They have been honored since time began."

"They also create ranks and distinctions that rival feudalism."

Charlotte shook her head. How could such an enlightened being be so narrow-minded? He probably didn't understand her reference and she was too agitated to explain. She tried one last attempt at reason.

"Just because something has always been done a certain way doesn't mean that's the best and only way it can be done."

He rose slowly, his features freezing into an expressionless mask. "That is the governing philosophy of the *Reformation Sect*."

Without another word, Tal stormed from the room.

\* \* \*

“Daddy! Daddy, I have missed you!”

Lilt dar Joon swung his son up into a firm embrace but his gaze shot to his brother. Dez lounged in the doorway, a smug smile curving his thin lips.

“This is a surprise,” Lilt said to Lor. “Mage Rin told me you wouldn’t be allowed to leave the Conservatory until after the next Choosing.”

“Uncle Dez sneaked me away,” Lor said in a conspirator’s whisper. “I was meditating in the sacred caves, beyond the Mystic shields surrounding the Conservatory, so Mage Rin doesn’t know.”

“And will Mage Rin not be angry when he discovers you have been ‘sneaked away’?” He directed this question to his brother with his eyes.

“Mage Rin will never know,” Dez said. “I created the illusion of an obedient apprentice deep in meditation and I will have him back before anyone is the wiser.”

Lilt struggled to keep his tone even. He didn’t want Lor to sense the fury boiling within him. “You agreed to leave Lor out of this. You will *not* use my son. I will not stand for it!”

“No,” Dez drawled. He strolled across the room and sank into a chair near Lilt’s desk. Draping his leg over the chair’s arm, he smirked at Lilt. “I agreed that I would do nothing to harm your son or to compromise his success at the Conservatory.”

“And disregarding the orders of the Mystics will not compromise his success?” Lilt challenged.

“Only if they find out, which they will not, if I get him back quickly. So stop arguing with me and listen – for a change.”

Lilt lowered his son to the floor, cringing when the boy ran to Dez. Lor’s affection for his uncle frightened Lilt. Ambition drove Dez like a hurricane, destroying everything in its path. Lilt had no intention of allowing his son to be caught up in the storm.

“Why is he here?” Lilt demanded.

“Lor, tell your father what you told me.”

Lor turned to face him, leaning casually against Dez’s leg. “I can make firestones burn,” he announced proudly.

“Really? Mage Rin taught you this?”

“Not Mage Rin. It was the mistress.”

“Mistress?” He looked at Dez. “Is there a female Mystic?”

“There is now.”

“How did you know about this? I didn’t think you could penetrate the shields surrounding the Conservatory.”

Dez lowered his leg to the floor and idly stroked Lor’s blond curls. “I can’t. I sensed Lor’s presence beyond the shields and decided to speak with him. What he told me was so interesting, I brought him here.”

“You must take him back. I don’t want his training compromised. If they realize you’ve contacted him, they may not allow him back within the shields.”

“They cannot penalize Lor because of me. It would violate their precious Code of Ethics. So long as the boy does nothing wrong, he will be fine.”

“Take him back,” Lilt ordered.

Dez’s eyes narrowed and fear suffused Lilt’s entire body. What was his brother thinking? Dez was planning something – no, plotting something. He took a step forward but Dez stood and turned toward the door.

“Come, Lor,” Dez grumbled. “We must return to the Conservatory.”

## Chapter Eleven

The day moon hovered on the horizon, framed by turquoise trees. Only slightly larger than its sister, the day moon orbited closer to Ontariese, making it appear twice the size of the dead night moon.

Charlotte leaned against the gallery's railing. Her fingers absently stroked the smooth, cool stone. A gentle haze softened the purple sky but the tranquil setting didn't soothe her. "Do they allow women in the City of Tears?"

Vee chuckled. "Joining the armed forces will not protect you from Tal Aune's wrath."

She glanced at the Mystic standing beside her at the rail. "Do I need protection from Tal's wrath? I just thought he would never speak to me again."

"Mystics strive for objectivity in all things. But this is the one area of training in which Tal Aune has been tantamount to a failure. He feels passionately about the principles on which the Traditionalist Sect was founded."

"So passionately that opposing ideas can't even be considered?" She turned to face Vee, resting her hip against the rail. "The truth is, I haven't even formed a concrete opinion yet. The Code of Ethics is one of the most moving documents I've ever read, but the Ontarian Standards is one of the most foolish. I need more information. I need time to study the history, to understand the cultural context and social evolution."

"Give Tal Aune time to regain control of his emotions and then explain this to him. There were legitimate reasons for the implementation of the Standards. And no one is more qualified to detail the evolution of the sects than Tal. Whether or not those reasons are still valid is a question for the TSC."

"What's the TSC?" she asked softly, heaving a heavy sigh.

"The Traditionalist Sect Council. They are similar to America's Supreme Court."

She shifted again, leaning her bottom against the rail and glancing down along the gallery. "Then there is a process for contesting established Standards, for making changes to the codes?"

"It is the Clarifications that can be changed, not the actual ethics, but yes, such a process exists."

"Well, that's a relief. Tal made it sound like the traditions had been written in stone by the hand of God."

She suddenly envisioned Charlton Heston cowering against the mountainside as a fiery finger carved the Ten Commandments. Charlotte let the rest of her tension melt away.

If there was opportunity for change, then there was hope. She would listen to Tal's explanations and see which of the Clarifications she found intolerable. She would analyze them in context and –

"You already think like a code manager," Vee said, giving her shoulder a gentle nudge.

Forever broadcasting! "Sorry. I've been tied in knots since he walked out on me."

"That sounds rather dramatic," Vee teased. "He walked out of the library."

She smiled. Vee had a meeting with Dro Tar in Frontine, the capital city, that morning. Charlotte had pestered him to go along but he refused, insisting she wasn't safe beyond the shields. "When did you get back?"

"While you were arguing with Tal."

"What did Dro Tar have to say? Why did she go to Bilarri? Is she part of the Symposium?" She prepared herself for his sidestep. He had certainly not wanted to divulge Dro Tar's purpose earlier.

She felt Vee slip gently into her mind.

The Symposium has reason to believe Dez dar Joon can monitor even telepathic communications. I needed to give a full reporting but could not risk being gone so long or having my transmission intercepted.

Charlotte focused, found the link Vee had formed and intentionally sent her thoughts directly to him for the first time.

Is Joon able to monitor us now? Besides, what did Dro Tar tell the Symposium that Joon doesn't already know? He seems to be two steps ahead of us on this one.

The Mystic shield protects us as long as we speak mind to mind. Which you are doing beautifully by the way. The Symposium is combing the Wisdom of the Ages for anything that might help us stop Dez dar Joon.

Wisdom of the Ages? What is that?

It is the primary purpose of the Symposium to protect and manage the Wisdom of the Ages. We collect information from all over the galaxy. We study and store it so it may be accessed by anyone needing information.

Charlotte laughed softly. You're the intergalactic Internet!

Vee smiled. "It is a fair assessment. But our search engines are far more intuitive."

"That's a major upgrade, believe me." She tucked her hair behind her ear and her thoughts returned to Tal. "How long will it take him to cool off?"

"It is hard to say. His responses to you have been rather unpredictable."

Charlotte had no idea if that was good or bad. Vee stared at her as if he meant to say something. This was not the first time she'd seen that conflicted expression in his emerald eyes.

"Is something wrong?"

"No." He stared out over the exercise yard. "It is a Mystic's responsibility to use their powers for the greater good, Shar Lott. Tal Aune would have you believe you owe allegiance to the Traditionalist Sect, but this is one of the few things upon which he and I disagree. You owe allegiance to no one and to everyone. You are first and foremost an Ontarian, secondly a Mystic – beyond that, you must decide for yourself."

Before she could respond, he kissed her cheek and walked back into the cool recesses of the training hall.

With a heavy sigh, Charlotte turned back to the peaceful scene. A temperate breeze brushed her face, bringing with it the faint scent of some alien flower.

*So, what do you want to do with your life?* She chuckled. At least she had more options on Ontariese. She intended to dedicate herself to her training but she wasn't willing to give up on the code manager idea just yet.

Charlotte Layton was stubborn on any planet.

The breeze suddenly stilled. Not a voice, not a bird, not the echo of a footstep disturbed the silence. She didn't breathe. The stillness trapped her, paralyzed her. This felt wrong.

A twig snapped in the distance, releasing the spell. She pressed a hand to her chest, laughing at the ridiculous pounding of her heart. Singing erupted from somewhere inside the building and she shook away the odd foreboding.

What to do about Tal? Their argument doubtlessly compounded his reluctance to trust her. He had lost so much to the Reformation Sect and her initial reaction to his society's structure was to agree with the enemy. What a tangle!

"Greetings, Mistress Charlotte."

Lor's mentor approached her, a friendly smile on his face. She felt the hairs on the back of her neck bristle and took a step backward. Though she had worked with the boy several times in the past week, she had never spoken directly with his mentor.

"I am Mage Rin," he said pleasantly.

She inclined her head. "What can I do for you?"

"I have a few questions about young Lor's training. You see, I have never worked with a pyrokin before and I thought you might –"

"Master Vee would be a much better person to ask. I'm still in training myself." Restlessness coursed through her, demanding a reaction. "Why don't we see if we can find him?" She started toward the archway.

His hand closed around her upper arm and Charlotte bit back a scream. What was the matter with her? This was sacred ground. She was safe within the Mystic shields.

Rin's gaze darted away, his fingers moving subtly against her arm. "I must confess my deception. I'm using Lor as an excuse to speak with you."

The caressing quality in his voice released fear's chokehold and Charlotte felt laughter bubble up within her. He was flirting with her! She cleared her throat. "I'll save us both an awkward conversation. I have a social alliance with Master Tal."

His eyes narrowed, his fingers tightening against her arm. "Why doesn't that surprise me?"

She tugged against his grasp. What a jerk.

"Let go," she ordered.

Rin extended his other hand and a brilliant, spinning vortex opened beside him. The low rumble of distant thunder rapidly built to a deafening roar. Charlotte screamed, frantically yanking against his hold.

He didn't bother to shapeshift but Charlotte knew who held her. "Help! He's here! Help me!" she shouted both verbally and telepathically.

Joon dragged her toward the vortex and Charlotte went wild. Kicking and screaming, she lashed out with her free arm. He sent an incapacitating pulse toward her mind but she raised a shield and deflected the burst of energy.

"They've taught you a trick or two," Joon muttered.

He grabbed her and tossed her over his shoulder – with unbelievable ease. Charlotte's second scream died as his shoulder slammed into her belly.

The vortex groaned and then blinked out. Charlotte laughed. "They found you, dirtbag."

He dumped her on the floor, not releasing his hold on her arm. She kicked up at him but he deflected each strike with his foot as his shape transitioned. Holding an artificial form apparently taxed his energy.

In one fluid movement, he pulled her to her feet and wrapped his hair around her neck. The coil tightened until she could hardly breathe then maintained a constant pressure. Stars danced before her eyes. She tugged against the coil, fighting for air. Joon grabbed her arm and headed across the exercise yard. Charlotte stumbled along beside him.

She heard shouts from the gallery while pulses of energy exploded around them. Oxygen deprivation blurred the edges of her vision and muddled her thinking. She had to do something! She couldn't let him take her beyond the shields.

Digging her fingers into his hair didn't even slow him down. Tugging against the coil only increased the pressure on her throat.

He stopped running and she sank to her knees. His hair remained firmly around her throat. He spread his arms and began chanting. The cadence of his voice changed, became more urgent, more aggressive.

The pressure of his hair increased in time to his frustration. Did he realize he was choking her? The question followed her into unconsciousness.

\* \* \*

Trapped within a containment field, Charlotte watched Dez dar Joon pace in front of her. His energy levels were depleted. That was all she'd been able to determine before he raised an impenetrable shield around his mind.

His long white hair swung rhythmically as he walked, his dove-gray robe rippled with fluid grace. Unless his gaze was on her, it was impossible to distinguish him from Vee. She shivered and shifted her weight from one foot to the other.

The barren room consisted of four stone walls and a door. No furniture of any kind. He couldn't mean to keep her for long, at least not in this cell. But if he meant to kill her, she'd be dead.

"What is this about?" she asked. "Why am I here?"

She felt his mental probe before he turned to face her. Quickly reinforcing her shields, she struggled against his aggression. His gaze glowed bright turquoise, his features tense and determined. Charlotte held firm, finding strength in her accomplishments.

He broke off suddenly, grunting and shaking his head. "I'm weaker than I thought."

Or I'm more powerful.

His gaze snapped back to hers and Charlotte smiled.

"You've worked with Vee for less than a cycle of the moons. I'm not intimidated."

Well, she sure as hell was, but her enemy couldn't know that. "Why am I here?" she asked again, doing her best to sound bored.

His eyes narrowed but he didn't respond.

"What do you want with me?" It was more a demand than a question. Charlotte was through playing games. If this was her day to die, so be it. She would *not* entertain this beast one instant longer.

“You really don’t know, do you?” He sounded genuinely confused. “How is it possible that Vee released your gifts without realizing who you are?”

His convoluted reply made her falter. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

Joon laughed. “Not as powerful as you thought?”

He stepped closer and the containment field closed in. Her skin prickled and the air around her sizzled. She held perfectly still.

He studied her, examined her, but her shields kept him out of her mind. “Every Mystic can erect a shield and your telepathy is barely audible. What is your gift? What are your abilities?”

Charlotte felt her eyes widen but she quickly hid her surprise. Didn’t he know what she was? Tal and Vee believed her gift was the reason Joon pursued her. If he didn’t know she was a catalyst, then why –

“You’re a catalyst?” Joon took a step back, shock clear in his expression. “How is that possible? Catalysts have been extinct since...” He started laughing.

The sound grated against her nerves. Would she ever stop broadcasting?

None of this made sense.

The containment field dropped and she took a deep breath. He no longer perceived her as a threat. Catalysts could only intensify the abilities of others. They generally had no significant powers of their own.

“Oh, this is better than I ever imagined. My powers magnified by a catalyst! I will be –”

“You will be dead or I will. Tal will come for me and I will *never* use my abilities to help you.”

Suddenly he grabbed her. Charlotte didn’t have time to retreat. His arms banded her, forcing her to acknowledge the strength evident in his form. “We are taught that energy transfers cannot be forced.”

His eyes gleamed with ambition and lust. The blood drained from her face. It took no imagination to see where this led.

“It’s a lie,” he whispered, his mouth a hairsbreadth from hers. “Not only can I take what I want but the pleasure is unbelievable – at least for me.”

The subtle ringing in her ears built in time to her terror. He meant to rape her and drain energy from her body.

“Oh, I mean to do much more than that. While I’m inside you, I’ll form a bond, a connection that will allow me to access your gift without your cooperation. It may take more than once, but I don’t mind.”

Fear opened her mind to him but his lust offered her an opening as well. Ignoring his words, she scanned his mind. Charlotte recoiled in horror then forced herself to maintain the link, searching for any weakness.

Evil crawled across her skin like a blanket of insects. The putrid scent of rotting flesh filled her nose. She gagged and shuddered then pressed on. Her feet sank ankle-deep in mud and oozing gore.

Energy was tainted when it was taken by force. Tal had told her that. Now she witnessed the result. Years of tainted energy had corrupted and twisted Dez dar Joon.

With a groan, Joon broke away, panting harshly.



She sank to her knees, her ragged breath echoing his. Why had he stopped? She crossed her arms over her chest, hugging herself tightly.

"I suppose our joining must wait a bit longer," he whispered, his voice thin and shaky. He shifted through the door, leaving her alone in the barren cell.

\* \* \*

A faint, bleak presence reached out to Charlotte from the darkness surrounding her cell. The female voice sounded tentative and hopeless.

Why has he brought you here?

*Why was she still alive?* was probably a better question, but Charlotte kept that thought to herself. *Who are you? Where are you?*

Pushing against the cold stone floor, Charlotte managed to sit up. Her throat burned. The muscles and tendons in her neck protested at the smallest movement. She carefully swallowed and groaned at the pain. The filth of Joon's mind had left its taint within her own. Still she was alive and unmolested. For now.

*How badly are you injured?* the unseen woman asked.

I'll survive. There is nothing in this room but me so I don't think he intends to keep me here for long.

Cutting through the Mystic shields and then transporting with you here drastically depleted his energy. He's rejuvenating. We have a little while. Once he's conscious again, he won't allow us to communicate.

*Where are you?* Charlotte identified the link within her mind and traced it back to the source. The woman was in a cell similar to hers, farther down the stone corridor. *For that matter, where am I?*

The detention level of Fortress Joon.

Charlotte walked to the heavy wooden door. It was securely locked, as she knew it would be, but she had to try. No windows, no furniture, just a large firestone recessed in the ceiling kept Charlotte from feeling as if she'd been buried alive.

I don't understand why you're here. The woman went on. He promised if we cooperated, he wouldn't involve anyone else.

Before Charlotte could question her meaning, a second voice entered the meld.

Can't you sense her power? I've never felt anything like it. Who are you?

My name is Charlotte and this is getting confusing. Who spoke to me first?

Acarra spoke first. I'm E'Duri. What are you, Charlotte? The rhythm of your energy is strange.

Were these women prisoners as well? What had they promised to cooperate with? Charlotte's head swarmed with questions. Could these women help her escape? Would they? Did they really have time for lengthy explanations?

How many of you are down here? Charlotte asked. How long will it take for Joon to rejuvenate?

There are only six of us left but he promised –

You're a fool to believe anything he says, E'Duri interrupted Acarra. Can you help us escape?

Charlotte was hoping *they* could help *her*! Charlotte's spirits plummeted but she carefully shielded her fear from the other women. *You said detention level. Does that mean there are guards and barriers?*

Plenty of both, E'Duri informed her. We can get out of the cells and frequently do when the guards aren't paying attention, but there are both physical and Mystic safeguards to keep us in the fortress.

How long will he be unconscious? Charlotte asked. E'Duri named a measure of time that was approximately two hours. Can you come to my cell? Unlike you, I'm not able to walk through walls.

A few minutes later, the wooden door groaned as a dark-haired woman pushed it inward. "Only Cin can walk through walls, but Torul can manipulate locks."

Charlotte recognized E'Duri's voice and smiled at her visitor. The last woman to enter was being supported by two of her friends. Each woman was young and each was in a various stage of pregnancy. The woman hardly able to walk was closest to delivery. "Did Joon—"

A sharp gasp interrupted Charlotte's question. "Look at her," Acarra said in a soft, urgent voice. She was a slight, blonde woman, her pregnancy just beginning to show.

E'Duri commanded the firestone to brighten and her expression filled with shock and confusion. "I didn't think she was real."

"I knew she was," Acarra stressed. "I told you she was. I know the difference between dreams and visions."

"What are you talking about?" Charlotte asked.

"I've seen your face. I've... Oh, E'Duri, do you think I led him to her?"

Charlotte rubbed her forehead vigorously. "I don't understand any of this and we don't have time for details. Why is Joon keeping you down here?"

E'Duri gazed at her suspiciously. "It isn't about carnal pleasure, I assure you. Somewhere along the way he discovered the most concentrated source of energy is found in a gestating woman."

The casual explanation drove Charlotte back a step. She tasted bile in the back of her throat and swallowed convulsively. Heat infused her body until a violent shiver evicted the heat.

Dez dar Joon impregnated these women for an energy source! And E'Duri said they were the only ones left. How many had died? How many women? How many unborn children?

Her hand trembling, Charlotte motioned toward the girl more unconscious than not. "Is she ill?"

"No. She was weakened by the energy transfer." E'Duri had apparently lost patience with Charlotte's curiosity. She moved closer, her brown gaze intense. "Your face appeared in Acarra's vision and Dez went wild. He knew something, sensed something that Acarra didn't understand."

Acarra fidgeted. "I'm sorry. I didn't—"

"You can't control your visions and you've already paid the price for having them," E'Duri said. She turned back to Charlotte. "When he joins his body to ours, he sees what we see and knows what we know. He took Acarra over and over so he could explore the images in her vision."

"We don't have time for this," Acarra insisted.

"Who are you?" E'Duri demanded. "Why has he brought you here?"

"I'm a catalyst," Charlotte said, and E'Duri rudely pushed into her mind. Allowing the invasion, Charlotte revealed herself to the other woman. "Why would I lie?"

"It's impossible," E'Duri said softly. "Catalysts are extinct. The gift was lost during the Great Massacre."

Charlotte felt other minds scanning her and knew it was the fastest way to dispel their doubts. "I can't explain it but I *am* a catalyst."

"Whatever. Can we get the hell out of here?" E'Duri muttered.

Acarra smiled at Charlotte, hope clear in her soft gray eyes. "Yes, I think we finally *can*," Acarra said.

\* \* \*

Tal Aune opened the door to his private chamber with an impatient wave of his hand, expecting Mage Gerr.

"Thank you for..." His sentence trailed away as Lor stepped through the doorway. "I told you to stay in your room."

Lor lowered his head. Tal had to strain to hear his tentative words.

"They say I did this. They say I killed the mistress. They say..."

Lor dissolved into tears. Tal gathered his festering resentment and pushed away the need to comfort the boy. Lor was the personification of the Reformation Sect, second in line to head the House of Joon.

But he was also a frightened child.

"You did nothing wrong, Lor. I told you that."

"But I did."

Lor raised his head and Tal clenched his teeth. Luminous turquoise eyes stared up at him, filled with pain and regret. Tal felt a fist compress his heart and he opened his arms to the boy.

Grasping Tal around the waist, the boy buried his face against Tal's abdomen. Every sob, every shudder, passed from Lor into Tal.

Memories flashed to life. A similar face. Identical eyes.

It was so long ago but Tal still longed for what they'd lost. Their friendship—their innocence. He sank to his knees and eased the boy back, looking at him face-to-face. "You did nothing wrong." Conviction strengthened the phrase this time, and Lor swiped his hands across his eyes. "Mistress Charlotte is not dead. Head Master Vee linked with her before Dez took her through the vortex."

"But he will hurt her. He will... Why does he hate her so? Why would he do this?"

Tal smiled, touched by Lor's compassion. "Even now the Mystics surround the fortress. We will get Mistress Charlotte back."

Lor's chin quivered and his lips pursed as he fought a new wave of tears. "Will you kill Uncle Dez?"

Moisture deserted his throat and Tal found it hard to breathe. How could he look Lor in the eyes and admit what he had planned for Dez dar Joon?

"Your uncle has done very bad things and bad things must be punished."

The boy seemed to consider this for a moment then said, "He is nice to me—but he scares me too."

Tal rose. "I have to go. You *must* remain in your room this time."

"I will. I promise."

\* \* \*

Charlotte lagged behind a little more with each step. They clearly expected a hero and she'd forgotten to pack her cape. How could she possibly save these women when her hands trembled so badly she had to hide them behind her back and she felt as if she were going to throw up?

As they raced through the corridors of Fortress Joon, Charlotte scanned the captives for latent abilities. She'd been told the rest of the palace was opulent and comfortable, but the detention level felt like a medieval nightmare.

Her foot slid on something slimy. She didn't pause to investigate the substance. Each captive had psychic abilities. Still she was unsure if they would be enough. E'Duri sensed the guards and Acarra telepathically transmitted Charlotte's orders, minimizing the risk of discovery.

"Stop!" Torul cried in a soft, urgent voice as the small group rounded a corner.

Charlotte skittered to a halt and E'Duri bumped into her back. "What is it?"

Torul pressed a hand to her chest, gulping in air. "There's a Mystic trap. Don't move."

Soft, golden light emanated from Torul, spreading down the corridor and revealing a dense shadow Charlotte hadn't seen before.

"Can you disarm it or whatever?" she asked.

Torul studied the trap from several angles and then shook her head. "It's intricate—and vicious. Anyone who touches it is held there until Joon releases them. I can only guess at the exact nature of the containment, but knowing Joon, it's unbreakable and painful."

Charlotte looked at each woman in turn. They all shook their heads, understanding her silent question. No one knew how to bypass the trap.

"There has to be a way," she muttered. "How much farther do we have to go?"

"Not far," E'Duri said. "Just beyond that archway is a door leading outside."

Doubtlessly that's why Joon chose this spot for his most daunting safeguard. *Okay, think!* She turned back to the women and scanned each one again, searching for latent abilities, anything that would help. Telepathy was useless. Knowing the trap was there had kept them from falling into it, but they needed to get *beyond* it.

She focused on Cin. The youngest woman looked frail and wan. Charlotte felt mad flutters in her stomach. There was something hidden within her.

Stepping closer, Charlotte said, "You're the one who can pass through walls?"

Cin nodded.

"There is something hidden inside you."

Cin laughed nervously and patted her protruding belly. "It's not hiding very well."

"I'm going to dig a little deeper. If I hurt you, let me know." Charlotte framed Cin's face with her hands and probed the shapeless insinuation.

"Hurry, the guards are not far off," E'Duri warned.

*It was so simple!* Charlotte laughed.

"I'm glad you find this amusing. Apparently you haven't spent as much time with—"

Ignoring E'Duri's outburst, Charlotte cut in. "Cin, you're a portal. Not only can you pass through matter, but matter can pass through you."

"Fascinating. How does that help us?" E'Duri sniped.

Charlotte knew fear was making E'Duri difficult so again she ignored her. The solution might be simple but it was anything but easy.

"Okay, who's the strongest shielder?" Charlotte asked.

"I am." Acarra raised her hand.

Focusing again on the Mystic trap, Charlotte found its only weakness. A six-inch gap between the shadow and the wall. "Acarra, can you see the trap?"

Torul sent out a second pulse of light.

"I can now. What do you want me to do?"

"Form the strongest shield you've ever made in your life between the shadow and the wall."

"Then what?" E'Duri piped in again.

Suppressing an urge to smack her, Charlotte outlined her plan. "Acarra will create a barrier with her shield while Cin allows us to pass through the wall and emerge on the other side of the trap."

"I've never done that before," Cin cried. "I don't know how!"

"I'll help you," Charlotte assured, amazed at how confident she sounded when inside she was shaking. "Acarra, start on the shield. I need to expand Cin's abilities."

Hurry! They had to hurry. The guards were getting closer. Charlotte could feel E'Duri's terror increasing.

She returned to Cin's mind, finding the aberration more easily now. The locked door had worked with Lor so she used the image again. Easing the door open, she heard Cin's gasp and felt the violent tremor that shook the younger woman.

"Oh! I can feel it. I understand," Cin whispered.

"I'll help you stabilize the portal but we've got to move now," Charlotte urged.

They inched closer to the trap, Torul ensuring that they could all see it. Acarra's shield solidified. Charlotte took Cin's hand and squeezed it. "You can do this. *We* can do this."

Tears brightened Cin's eyes but somehow she managed to contain them. She stepped into position, her shoulder flush with Acarra's shield.

"Okay," Charlotte said softly. "Open the portal."

Cin's eyes all but took over her face. Her chin trembled and her mouth compressed but gradually she became transparent.

"By the ghosts of the night moon, I don't believe it," E'Duri murmured.

They didn't have time for awe. Charlotte catalyzed the portal until a good portion of the wall was transparent as well. "Acarra first," she said. "Make sure you maintain the shield!"

Acarra rushed through the portal, holding her arms tightly against her sides. Cin gasped and Charlotte poured more energy into the portal. One by one, the captives passed through, emerging safely on the other side.

"Follow me out," Charlotte told Cin, knowing the girl was unable to speak in her present state. Charlotte paused to fortify the portal with a final surge of energy then stepped through the gateway herself.

A long, tense moment followed as they waited for Cin to release the portal and free herself from the wall.

"Go on," Charlotte ordered. "I'll make sure she's safe."

Reluctantly, the others turned down the final passage. Once beyond the fortress, Acarra would be able to cloak their presence until they could contact the Mystics.

With a startled gasp, Cin finally separated herself from the wall. "That was – different," she panted out.

"You were amazing. Now we have to go."

Awareness ripped through Charlotte, driving the breath from her lungs in one painful whoosh. "Run," she gasped. "Run!"

Cin hesitated but Charlotte gave her a little shove. They rounded the final corner, Cin several steps ahead. Cin rushed through the door, stubbornly holding it open. Charlotte heard the roar of a transport conduit building directly behind her.

"Go!" she shouted. Anguish tore a cry from her throat.

She watched horror unfurl in Cin's eyes and knew the vortex had opened. She dove for the door but a hurtful fist tangled in her hair.

\* \* \*

Tal felt Charlotte's anguish ripple across the metaphysical plane. Like a beacon drawing the Mystics, her emotions guided them to her exact location. With a concentrated burst of energy, the Mystics ruptured the shields surrounding Fortress Joon.

Tal rushed across the side yard toward the massive fortress. A woman, heavy with child, struggled to keep an iron-banded door open. Tal could sense Charlotte's presence on the other side of the door. He ran.

Shouts and the low rumble of a transport conduit emitted from inside the building. Lightning flashed. The woman screamed. Noticing him, she stepped aside, hurrying him through the doorway.

Joon held Charlotte around the waist, one hand tangled in her hair. Kicking his legs and clawing at his arms, five women worked frantically to free her from Joon's grasp. The fiend tried to subdue them with his hair, whipping at them with sharp cracks and wrapping it around offending limbs, but he couldn't deflect their blows without releasing Charlotte.

Like the woman at the door, each of these women was with child. Filaments of energy connected Joon and the women. Tal didn't understand what he sensed but the connection was unmistakable. Was this the reason for Joon's restraint? He could easily incapacitate them with a thought. But not without pain and damage.

Tal recognized the growing intensity in Joon's turquoise gaze. He was near the end of his tolerance. If they continued their assault, he would retaliate Mystically, despite whatever concern was holding him back.

Quickly collapsing the vortex, Tal shouted, "Out, all of you."

Joon's softly glowing gaze clashed with his. Tal waited for the women to retreat before he continued the confrontation. Gently touching Charlotte's mind, he found her frightened but coherent.

*Kill him!* she ordered.

Definitely coherent.

The corridor quickly filled with Mystics. Vee stood at his right, countless others surrounding them. They became a physical and Mystic barrier preventing Joon's escape.

"Release her," Tal demanded.

"Or what?" Joon taunted as his brilliant turquoise gaze moved from one Mystic to the next, assessing the situation.

"Or die," Tal responded.

Joon laughed. "I overestimated you, *seyati*. I thought you'd be ready for my next move by now but clearly you're not. Play with her awhile longer. I'll be in touch."

The force of Joon's shove sent Charlotte slamming into Tal. He stumbled back and watched in helpless horror as Joon shifted out of sight.

"Find him," Vee ordered.

This was Fortress Joon, Dez's personal playground. Did they really stand a chance of trapping the rabbit in his own warren? The only alternative was retreat and that was unthinkable. They couldn't squander this opportunity.

Vee organized the Mystics with sharp mental commands and shielded directives so Tal turned his attention to Charlotte. She clutched his robes, her body trembling, her face buried against his throat. Sweeping her into his arms, he opened a vortex and transported with her to his private chamber.

He set her on his bed. She immediately sprang to her feet.

"I can still smell him. I can see his mind." She tore off her tunic. "I have to get his smell off my skin." She rid herself of the rest of her clothing by the time she found his utility room. Not bothering to close the privacy panel, she stood beneath the mist, frantically scrubbing herself.

"Charlotte." Tal approached cautiously, not wanting to escalate her upset.

She continued scrubbing, oblivious to his presence.

"Charlotte, try to calm down."

A low, anguished moan escaped her just before her legs collapsed. Tal shifted out of his clothing and caught her. He lowered them to the warm, softly giving floor of the shower stall, cradling Charlotte in his arms like a child. Increasing the mist to a steady stream, Tal let it flow over them, caressing them.

She wept and clutched his shoulders, tangling one hand in his hair.

He stroked her back and did his best to ignore the slick slide of her naked flesh against his. Long minutes passed while she released her pent-up emotions. The clutching of her hands gradually relaxed and her sobs subsided.

“Do you ever run out of hot water?” she murmured against his throat.

“The liquid isn’t water, and in its natural state, it’s warm, so the heat will continue until I turn off the spray.”

She pushed away from him far enough to see his face. “Will Vee find him?”

He wanted to lie, to convince her that it was over, that she was safe. “It’s possible. Fortress Joon has been searched before but not with so great a force.”

“You’ve tried to find him before and failed?” she cried, her throat working awkwardly. “Even the Mystics are powerless against this creature?”

“We’re not powerless. But we don’t understand the source of his power. He has accomplished things we thought impossible.”

Her body stiffened against him and fury ignited within her eyes. “If that’s all it will take to best him, consider it done. He’s been sucking the life out of pregnant women.”



## Chapter Twelve

“Can you tell me what happened?”

Tal’s voice wrapped around her, a velvety persuasion, but Charlotte shook her head. “Not tonight. I don’t want to talk about it. I don’t want to think about it. For just tonight I want to pretend it never happened.”

He smiled and handed her a bright red mug. “I think you’re entitled to a few hours of rest. But I must know one thing – is there any possibility there are other captives?”

“I don’t think so.” She shuddered, wrapping both hands around the mug. “The women themselves told me they’re the only ones. He’ll waste no time replacing them, but until he does, his powers will be limited, restrained.”

He nodded.

She inhaled the tangy scent of blish and absorbed the mug’s warmth with her hands. He’d found her a fluffy robe and shifted back into his clothing. Her hair clung in damp tendrils to her neck while his flowed smoothly around his shoulders and down his back. Shapeshifting definitely had its advantages.

His room was much larger than hers and more interestingly decorated. The pattern along the ceiling reminded Charlotte of the tribal tattoos so popular on Earth. The same nearly geometric pattern had been carved into the furniture. At a glance, it looked like wood, but she had learned that appearances could be deceiving on Ontariese.

Dragging her meandering thoughts back to the present, she said, “I know reality will return tomorrow. I know there’s still a lot to explain. I know there are things we need to resolve but –”

“Not tonight.”

Nodding her agreement, she took a long sip of blish and let the spicy-sweet taste roll across her tongue. She was growing fond of the warm beverage.

“Are you hungry?” His sensual smile hinted at other appetites. “Transferring energy is still new to you. You may require conventional sustenance for some time yet.”

Watching him over the rim of the mug, she flirted. “I usually get hungry – after.”

“After?” He started toward her. “I like the sound of that.”

“We have a social alliance, after all. Doesn’t that obligate you to take care of me?”

He chuckled, sending his hair flying over his shoulders with a thought. “It obligates us to take care of each other.”

His hair continued to flutter and flow. Charlotte set down her mug and stood, burying one hand in the flurry of ebony strands. “I love it when you lose control of your hair.” The soft tendrils wrapped around her wrist and stroked her forearm.

“There are a number of things I cannot control when I’m near you.”

“Let’s go outside,” she suggested as tingles spread up her arm then sank into her belly. “I want to make love under the stars and feel the breeze across my skin as you make me all sweaty.”

He laughed again. "You have the most unusual way of expressing yourself. This is your night. I'm yours to command."

He opened a vortex with the wave of his hand and Charlotte shuddered. "Can't we just walk outside?"

"There's nothing to fear." He stroked her face with the back of his fingers. "Joon is weak and you've liberated his power source."

She wrapped her arms around Tal's waist and buried her face against his throat. The floor disintegrated beneath her feet. She clutched him, shaking. With her eyes tightly shut, she couldn't see the rapid spinning of the transport conduit or the sizzling streaks of lightning that sped them on their way, but she could hear the roar. Nothing could block out the roar.

Suddenly, Tal's body jarred and thick grass tickled her bare feet. The vortex closed behind them and Charlotte exhaled.

"Has the vortex always frightened you or does it make you think of him?" Tal asked when she didn't release her hold on his body.

"A little of both, I guess. I don't even like to fly in airplanes."

She raised her head, trying to smile, but he wasn't convinced by her effort. His fingers stroked her cheek, tenderness apparent in every move he made.

"I want to make love to you. I will make love to you, but I must understand why his shadow still haunts you. We arrived as quickly as possible. Did he hurt you? Did he have time—"

"No, it isn't that." She swallowed and glanced away from the compassion in his eyes. "I looked into his mind. I saw him as he really is and I can't seem to get... No matter how hard I try, he's still there. I'll explain it all tomorrow, but I can't think about it now. I need to feel safe and protected. I need..."

He lowered his mouth as her words trailed away. His lips pressed and slid, caressing her gently. "I apologize. I'll say nothing more tonight."

She arched an eyebrow at that. "Nothing at all?"

"If you like. This night is for your pleasure."

Words any woman loved to hear.

She turned to inspect their surroundings, inhaling the verdant air while her eyes swept the secluded valley.

"Oh, this is amazing," she whispered the praise. Anything louder would have been an affront. High cliff walls painted mauve by the gathering twilight surrounded the grassy glen in which they stood. Twin waterfalls crashed into a pool from at least a hundred feet above. The force of the water hitting the pool churned up frothy white spray and random scatterings of miniature rainbows. Reflecting the violet tint of the Ontarian sky, each rainbow displayed a deeper range of color than Charlotte had ever seen.

"The light is nearly gone. During the day, the rainbows are countless."

"On Earth, this wouldn't be enough sunlight to produce even one. At times, I forget I'm actually on another planet." She dragged her gaze away from the falls. "How did you find this place? Is it only accessible to those who can teleport?"

"Vee brought me here. It was his private haven. He said the rushing of the falls helped him think. He refuses to explain what happened but unhappy memories are associated with it now."

"No one else knows?"

He shook his head. Gesturing to the setting, he asked, "Does it please you?"

Rugged cliffs encircled the glen completely, only a wedge-shaped crevice at one end allowed the water to escape. They were alone. No possibility of interruption or distractions.

"It pleases me very much."

"What else would please you? You have only to speak the word. I can be anyone—anything—you want me to be."

An undeniable tingle swept through her. Victor had discouraged her imagination. He told her couples who resorted to sexual fantasies were well on their way to infidelity.

"I don't know. Your natural form is pretty exotic for me."

"Then what about someone less exotic?"

His form changed and Charlotte's eyes flew open wide. Johnny Depp stood before her, a smirk curving one corner of his mouth.

"The periodical in your cabin pronounced this man the sexiest man alive."

She laughed nervously. This could be interesting. "They give the award to a different man every year. He's got fabulous eyes but he's a little too pretty for me." His shape changed again. Charlotte faced a perfect likeness of Trey Aune. "If I'd wanted your brother, I'd be with him. He has a nice body but I prefer tall, dark and mysterious."

Clearly enjoying the game, Tal shifted into a creature more cat than man. Though he stood upright, fur covered his entire body and she even spotted a tail as he stalked toward her.

"No way. I'm not nearly ready for interspecies mating."

He growled softly as he chose the next shape.

Michael Pierce, the "baddest" boy in her high school, complete with perpetual sneer and black leather jacket. Charlotte's chuckle ended in a shiver. She'd never admitted she was attracted to him, not even to herself, but why else would his image be so vivid within her mind?

He ambled toward her, his hands tucked into the pockets of his jeans, but the sensual grace in his movements belonged to Tal.

"Tall, dark and mysterious?" he asked.

She laughed and shook her head. "No, he's tall, dark and *dangerous*. I heard he's doing time for armed robbery or something." She sighed, no longer amused by the game. "He's part of my past. I don't even feel like that person anymore. So much has happened. So much has changed."

Tal's natural shape reemerged.

She smiled and stepped closer to him. "This is my home now and you're my future. You're my hope and my stability. You're my anchor in this stormy world. I'd be lost without you."

He crushed her against his chest, capturing her mouth with his. The kiss was urgent and demanding. She tried to respond but he seemed bent on conquest.

"I have never been so frightened in my life," he ground out against her mouth. "I don't know what I would have done if I lost you."

Tal frantically searched for the belt securing her robe, desperate for the warmth of her naked skin. He shifted out of his clothes, his mouth devouring hers. Opening her robe, he rubbed against her, gasping as his aching cock found her heat. It was too soon, it was much too soon, but he was lost.

He laid her down in the thick grass and covered her with his body. She opened to him, cradling him between her legs. Desire tore through him, making his hands shake and his insides clench. He needed to touch her, to share her breath and feel her climaxing around him.

With a trembling hand, he found the heart of her sex and groaned. She was wet and willing, but he knew that wasn't enough. He wouldn't last long enough to carry her with him.

She arched in silent invitation. Tal cursed his weakness and sank into her. His whole body shuddered at the ecstasy.

"I'm sorry," he whispered as he thrust. "I'm sorry."

She moved with him, accepting him, grasping him, holding him. Tal released his last pretense of restraint and raised her legs to his shoulders. Grasping her hips tightly, he drove into her over and over, deeper and deeper. He threw his head back in a silent roar as hard pulsations shook his body.

"I'm so sorry," he muttered one last time while he lowered her legs to the ground.

Charlotte stared up at him, awed by his primal beauty and the significance of what had just occurred. Everything he did was precise, carefully controlled. He was a Master-level Mage, a distinction that took twenty cycles to attain. And his desire for her had snapped that practiced control.

"I forgive you," she said, making her voice low and breathless.

"Look at me like that and I'll teach you the meaning of utterly selfish."

She laughed, loving the feel of his body pressing her down, buried deep inside her.

Reluctantly, he rose and pulled her to her feet. "This was supposed to be about *your* pleasure."

Looping her arms around his neck, she smiled into his eyes. "I found pleasure in knowing how badly you wanted me."

He swept her into his arms without saying a word. Charlotte expected him to open a vortex and return them to his chamber. Instead he helped her shed the robe and walked into the water.

Her bare bottom touched the pool and she gasped. "That's cold." She wiggled, tightening her arms around his neck. Despite her initial protest, he soon had her submerged to the shoulders. Squirring out of his arms, she lowered her legs, but her feet didn't reach the bottom. He grinned. She could cling to him or tread water.

He pulled her against him, guiding her legs around his waist. "Relax," he murmured against the wet skin of her shoulder. "I have you."

"Our current position isn't conducive to relaxation," she said with a little laugh.

"I know."

His hands roamed over her back and bottom, teasingly tracing the sensitive crease. She shivered and pulled his face away from her shoulder. "Kiss me," she said.

For a long moment he looked into her eyes, communicating a wealth of emotion. He wanted her. He needed her. He cared for her. She saw fear there as well. Why would he be afraid of her?

His mouth covered hers, his tongue slipped inside for a slow, gentle sweep.

I am not afraid of you. His voice sounded in her mind. I am afraid for you.

He traced the even line of her teeth and the ridges along the roof of her mouth. She caught his lower lip between her teeth and nipped. Heat pooled low in her belly, stoked by his lightest touch. He left her mouth, nibbling a path down the side of her neck. Cool air played across her wet skin. She shivered.

She felt his hands on her bottom lifting, pushing, until his mouth latched on to her nipple. The breeze chilled her skin while his caresses fanned the flames deep within her.

Firmly cupping her bottom with his hands, Tal strode across the pool. A rock ledge protruded between the falls and he set her upon it. Charlotte shuddered as her back pressed against the stone wall. Worn smooth by the tumbling water, it felt silky and cold.

They were far enough from the falls that only a fine mist rained upon them. It was the most stimulating combination of heat and cold. Charlotte squirmed helplessly as his mouth continued to tantalize her breasts.

She needed more. She needed him there, stretching her, filling her, completing her.

"What will give you the most pleasure? Shall I use my fingers, my mouth or my mind?"

"Yes," she murmured, wanting everything all at once.

He chuckled, immediately beginning a descent along her torso. The night moon bathed them in soft amber light. His hair fanned out on the water, creating a silken web around her legs. He combed his fingers through her feminine curls and Charlotte trembled.

"Like this?" He lightly traced her slit, touching but not entering. "Or like this?" Slowly, he pushed two fingers into her snug center.

Charlotte could hardly stand the pleasure. She squeezed him greedily, pulsing with the need for a greater penetration.

His arm encircled the small of her back and his fingers pressed deeper. Covering her mouth with his, he delved boldly with his tongue. She didn't understand the precaution until she felt his telepathic caress.

Like the soft, ticklish brush of a feather, she felt his psychic touch circle the nerve center of her body. Groaning into his open mouth, she tightened her inner muscles around his fingers. He did it again.

Charlotte returned his kiss fervently, rocking her hips. He matched each slow slide of his hand with a psychic caress. She panted and arched, knowing her climax was upon her.

"I don't want to come like..." Her words faded into a keening moan as her body erupted in pleasure. She clutched his shoulders and rolled her head back against the rock wall, helpless to stay the waves of release.

"I wanted you inside me," she whispered when she could think again.

“I want to be inside you,” he whispered in return.

He reached under her knees and pushed her legs up and back. Charlotte bit her lower lip, anxious and ready.

She felt his psychic touch again, tracing her, parting her. The blunt head of his cock found her but he didn't push home. His mind flicked across her swollen clit until Charlotte cried out.

“Now...please now!”

With one forceful lunge, he filled her. Charlotte cried out again and reached for his face. She sealed her lips over his and thrust her tongue into his mouth each time he drove into her body.

He continued to accelerate her arousal with his mind. Charlotte arched as much as the position allowed. Water sloshed, dousing her thighs with each thrust. Tension coiled, tightening with ruthless force until Charlotte tore her mouth away.

The metaphysical plane erupted in her mind, heightening the intensity of his mental stimulation. She screamed but it was too late to break the link. Sensation burst around them, consumed them completely.

Tal's harsh, panting puffed across her breasts, drawing Charlotte back to her senses. His forehead rested against her shoulder and his hands clasped her hips.

“What just happened?” she asked in a small, shaky voice.

“I have no idea. Did you activate the catalyst intentionally or did...”

His question trailed away and Charlotte's heart slammed into her ribs at his expression. “What? What's wrong?”

He made the palm of his hand reflective like a mirror and held it in front of her face.

Charlotte looked at her image, stunned and confused. Though the basic arrangement of her features hadn't changed, her eyes were now a swirling combination of green and blue.

She truly looked Ontarian. The thought filled her with wonder until she realized where she had seen this particular shade of turquoise.

She had eyes like Dez dar Joon.

## Chapter Thirteen

"I understand your confusion, Master Aune, but there is nothing *wrong* with her," Director Aksera insisted.

"Look at her eyes!" Tal gestured toward Charlotte so forcefully that his tightly coiled hair whipped around his torso and snapped his back.

"You brought her to me because your most accomplished Mystic healers were unable to identify her ailment. My team has analyzed every element of her physiology, including an in-depth DNA profile. She is a perfectly healthy, Ontarian female. There is nothing wrong with her."

A firm knock on the office door drew the director's attention away from Tal. Charlotte silently thanked the intruder. Each of Tal's objections stung a little more, made her feel...diseased.

Before the director could make it around his desk, the door opened and Trey Aune stepped into the office.

"Pardon the interruption," he said, and turned to his brother. "I've been looking all over this complex for you. Dro Tar told me you brought Charlotte in, that she..." He approached her, muscles rippling beneath the supple material of his clothing. Stopping well out of arm's reach, he stared. "What happened to your eyes?"

He made no effort to hide his horror. His bronze-tinted features twisted and his amber gaze darkened. She wanted to weep for the friendship disintegrating like a snowman on a sunny afternoon.

Tal's reaction had been no different. As soon as her eyes turned turquoise, he couldn't get away from her fast enough. He'd transported them back to the Conservatory and summoned a healer. It wasn't as if she'd done this on purpose!

"I don't know what the hell happened to my eyes but thanks for your compassion," she snapped.

She rose from her chair in front of the desk and moved to the other side of the office. Floor-to-ceiling windows showcased Frontine's impressive skyline. The sophistication of Trey's ship should have prepared her for the Ontarian capital, but their arrival this morning had left her reeling.

Tal went to her. "Charlotte, I'm not angry with you. I'm concerned that Joon—"

"Contaminated me?" she cut in. "Yeah, I figured that much out already."

"I can show you the results of the tests, if you like," Director Aksera said. "Take you through them screen by screen."

"That won't be necessary," Tal said.

"Well, then from a medical standpoint there is nothing else we can do. There is nothing that needs to be done. Perhaps the Mystics can..."

"I appreciate your assistance."

The director nodded and quietly left his office.

"What did Vee have to say about all of this?" Trey asked.

“Vee was still at Fortress Joon when we left the Conservatory this morning,” Tal explained. “The overlord has dispatched troops from the City of Tears to secure the fortress so Vee should have returned by the time we get back. We’ll speak with him next.”

“Speak with him about what?” Charlotte asked. He had been treating her like an object all day. She had had just about enough of his attitude. “I’m sorry the color of my eyes offends you. They function normally. How many times do you need to hear it, Tal? There is nothing wrong with me.”

He didn’t react to the provocation. “I know you’re still upset about what happened yesterday, but there is much we need to understand. Are you able to explain or may I scan your memory?”

Though Tal had disabled the compulsion to resist telepathic connections, she still cringed at the thought of having anyone invade her mind.

“I’d rather explain.”

A round conference table sat in one corner of the room. They assembled around it and she began. “Did Tal tell you about the captives, what that animal was doing with them?”

Trey nodded. “The Mystics sensed a distortion in Joon’s energy pattern. Now they understand why.”

“Are the women all right?” she asked. “Where were they taken?”

“The one named Cin required medical attention, but the others were examined and released. E’Duri is of the Reformation Sect. She has not yet decided what she wishes to do,” Tal explained.

“He forced this atrocity on one of his own women?” Trey shook his head.

“Is it any less vile because the others belonged to the Traditionalist Sect?” Charlotte objected.

“Of course not,” Trey said, sounding offended.

“What happened before you escaped?” Tal steered the conversation back on course. “How did you discover the women?”

Charlotte folded her hands on top of the table and tried to relay the information without reliving the events. “He trapped me within some sort of energy field. If I tried to move or if I touched the field, it was extremely painful.”

“What happened next?” Trey prompted.

Shifting her weight in the chair, she looked at each brother in turn before she spoke. “That’s when it got really weird. He knew I was using a shield to keep him out of my mind, but I can’t seem to stop broadcasting my thoughts, especially when I’m upset. When he realized I was a catalyst, he was shocked. No one is that good an actor. He honestly didn’t know.”

“If it wasn’t your ability that interested him, then why—”

“Why indeed,” she interrupted Tal. “The only other thing he said—before he started raving about all of the delightful things he intended to do to me,” she shuddered, helpless to restrain the memories entirely, “was that he couldn’t believe I still didn’t know who I was. *Who*, mind you, not what.”

“All this happened before your eyes changed?” Trey asked.



She nodded then pushed her chair back and returned to the windows. Trams raced past at regular intervals, making private transportation within the city all but obsolete.

"He was weak. I could sense his need for energy but he didn't take it from me. He just left me there and... One of the women contacted me telepathically a short time later."

Thoughtful silence enveloped the room for a moment.

"Will the Reformation Sect retaliate?" she asked. "You said armed forces have been dispatched to Fortress Joon. Will this escalate the war?"

The men exchanged knowing glances before Trey said, "The Reformation Sect and Dez dar Joon are not one and the same. Close. But there are still a few rational people skulking around in the shadow of that madman."

Charlotte crossed her arms, tucking her hands tightly against her sides. "We've all assumed I'm a descendent of the House of Aune. Maybe we had it almost right. Maybe I'm a descendent, just—"

"Don't even say it," Trey cut in.

"Then how do you explain my eyes? Does anyone else on the planet have eyes this color? You have certainly reacted as if it's unusual."

Tal gently touched her face, his thumb curving just below her eye. "The shade is unique to the House of Joon."

"Does this make us enemies?" She meant the question to be funny but it sounded sad, almost desperate.

"Never," he whispered.

"I guess we should let Director Aksera have his office back," Trey suggested.

They moved out into the corridor, Tal at Charlotte's side. "You didn't answer my question, you know," she pointed out. "Will the Reformation Sect retaliate?"

"What do they have to retaliate for?" Trey protested. "You discovered Joon was intentionally impregnating women to increase the potency of his energy. We have the right to search every nook and cranny of that gloomy heap and make sure there are no more captives."

"The troops are looking for more than captives and we all know it," she said.

"Yeah, but the Reformation Sect can't prove it," Trey replied with a roguish smile.

The sharp clatter of bootheels echoed down the hall. Tal and Trey immediately stepped in front of her as the newcomer approached.

Charlotte had to peek between the brothers to see the man striding toward them. Resplendent in gaudy purple robes and flashing jewels, his intense turquoise eyes swirled rapidly and his hands fisted at his sides. He was obviously a Joon. But which one? Was this Lor's father?

"TS troops are swarming my home," the man began. "My brother is missing and I've just learned that you have information directly pertaining to the House of Joon. Why wasn't I notified?"

"*Nothing* here concerns you, Lilt dar Joon," Tal warned. "Step aside."

"Let me see her," Lilt demanded. "I want to look into the eyes of the meddlesome female who unleashed this madness."

Incensed, she shouldered her way between the Aune brothers and faced Lilt squarely. "I did nothing but free the victims of your brother's depravity," she snapped.

"Who are you?" he demanded, his gaze searching her face, desperately searching. "She has *our* eyes, Aune! Why does your whore have our eyes?"

Tal sent him crashing into the wall with the wave of his hand. Before Lilt could move, Tal was there. Tangling his fists in Lilt's plush robe, he slammed him twice into the wall. His temper not yet satisfied, he smashed his fist into Lilt's nose. Warm blood gushed onto his knuckles. He absorbed the brutal pleasure without remorse. Lilt slumped in a graceless heap at his feet.

"If you come near her, I will kill you. If you ever touch her, I will kill you. If you harm her in any way, you will rue the day you were born and pray for death."

Trey grabbed Tal around the middle, restraining him with great effort.

"Let's go," Trey urged.

Tal's gaze swung to Charlotte and she nodded. "Yes. Get us out of here."

With one last glare at Lilt dar Joon, Tal opened a transport conduit.

\* \* \*

"Lilt dar Joon showed up at the clinic. Joon spies are everywhere." Tal stood in the archway to one of the meditation chambers in the Conservatory. It was customary to respect the privacy of anyone using the chambers, so doors were unnecessary.

Considering all of the other rules he had broken today, Tal figured interrupting Vee's meditation was incidental.

"I know," Vee said, gracefully rising from the floor. "Was it wise to pummel Lilt? He has always been rational, for the most part. Now you have given him reason to sympathize with his brother's fanaticism."

"That was not my intention but—"

"He started it?" Vee teased. "An age-old defense, my friend."

"Were you informed of the change in Charlotte?"

"Yes." For a long, strained moment he said nothing more. "I am waiting for a transmission from the Symposium. As soon as it is received, I shall meet you upon the gallery. It should not be long. Please bring Shar Lott to me there."

"Do you understand what is happening to her?" Tal asked urgently.

Vee inclined his head. "I await confirmation."

He walked back into the meditation chamber so Tal had no choice but to leave him in peace.

\* \* \*

Charlotte's eyes narrowed as Tal handed her a transparent mug of blish. He tended to offer the beverage when he felt she needed to relax so she suspected whatever he had to say wouldn't please her.

It was easy to understand why the Mystics spent so much time on the gallery. Peace emanated from the secluded valley surrounding the Conservatory, but the tranquil vista did nothing to calm Charlotte's nerves.

"Just get it over with," she suggested as Tal joined her on the bench. Charlotte set the mug on the table in front of them and met his smoky gaze. "Am I the reincarnation of a mass murderer or the carrier of some horrible plague? I'm beginning to wish you'd just left me on Earth."

Tal chuckled. "I think you should spend less time with my brother. Trey intensifies your sarcasm."

She sat back and crossed her legs. He had summoned her here. Let him carry the conversation.

"Vee will be here shortly."

"You brought in reinforcements?" She tried to sound playful. "What's this about?"

"Vee believes he understands what is happening to you."

Impatiently brushing her hair off her forehead, she shot him an angry glower. "We've been through all this. *Nothing* is happening to me. Nothing is wrong with me. You need to get over it."

"This is not just about your eyes."

"Then what *is* all of this about?" she shot back.

"It's about your heritage," Vee announced as he stepped out onto the gallery. With a regal swish of his robes, he turned to face her.

His glistening white hair hung over one shoulder. Charlotte watched in fascinated silence while it worked itself into one intricate pattern after another – deftly, smoothly, like silken yarn on an invisible crochet hook.

"Does he even realize it's doing that?" she whispered.

Tal chuckled. "It helps him think."

"'Tis a complicated tale," Vee muttered. "You must understand the significance of what I am about to reveal, not just the revelation."

She shifted position on the bench. "Just start at the beginning and work your way through."

He smiled, but the strands of his hair wove faster. "The beginning is a very long time ago, far longer than you realize. Your story is as old as the war itself."

Reaching for the blysh, she waited for Vee to speak.

"What are you talking about?" Tal asked.

"Listen, all will be made clear with the telling." Vee focused his emerald gaze on Charlotte and began. "According to history, when Frim dar Joon abandoned E'Lanna dar Aune, she was carrying his third child. His abandonment was more than she could bear and E'Lanna lost the child. E'Lanna was strong, but Frim's rebellion shredded the very fabric of her universe."

Charlotte didn't rush him. Tal had spoken briefly of how the war began, but apparently it was important that she understand the details.

"E'Lanna was a Mystic unparalleled. This world has never seen her like." He paused, seeming to focus his thoughts. "She knew Frim would search for their daughters so she hid them away. Frim found their eldest and held her prisoner until she took her own life."

Charlotte shivered. She had endured Joon captivity for less than a day. Still she could imagine what horrors Tal's ancestor must have suffered.

"Their younger daughter Sae dar Aune, was brought here to the Conservatory and the Mystics concealed her until after Frim's passing. But Frim's deeds were soon eclipsed by the evil of his son. No one guessed where the Great Conflict would take us or the price it would exact on Ontariese." He sounded choked and she could almost see tears blurring his eyes.

Vee stepped away from the railing, his hair looped around his shoulders. "Fro dar Joon was born to Frim of his second life mate, the one he took after setting E'Lanna aside. Fro changed the nature of the Great Conflict. It was no longer a clash of ideals but a deadly civil war.

"The true irony is that Fro dar Joon was nearly a victim of his own ambition. His two sons died in the war and the House of Joon passed on to his nephew. Still his true legacy is thriving to this day. Fro dar Joon founded the Reformation Sect, which motivated the House of Aune to establish the Traditionalist Sect."

"Then, you're a descendant of E'Lanna dar Aune?" Charlotte asked Tal, making sure she had it all straight in her head.

He nodded. "Our connection to the High Queen is distant at best, but with the murder of my mother, even that is gone. According to the sacred traditions, the House of Aune must now bow to one of the other great houses."

"I began my tale with the words 'according to history'," Vee reminded.

Tal and Charlotte both looked at him. Charlotte felt a shiver course down her spine. What did he mean? And what did all of this have to do with her heritage? And her eyes?

He took a deep breath, meeting her gaze directly. "E'Lanna did not miscarry. She delivered twin daughters and sent them through an interdimensional portal." He paused as if searching for words. "Shar Lott, you are the third daughter of E'Lanna dar Aune and Frim dar Joon. You are a descendent of the Royal House of Aune as we suspected, but you also descend from the House of Joon. You are the heir to *both* royal houses."

## Chapter Fourteen

Charlotte felt frozen in time. Her lungs wouldn't move. Her heart forgot its rhythm. What did he mean? Had she just won the lottery or been sentenced to life in prison?

Inhaling deeply, she scooted to the edge of the bench and set the mug aside. "How is this possible? The Great Conflict began almost a hundred years ago."

"E'Lanna used both space and time to conceal your location," Vee told her. "As we approached the era to which your mother sent you, your signal grew stronger. We believe this is how Dez dar Joon was able to locate you."

"I don't believe you." She forced the words past the dryness in her throat.

"Doubtless, this is hard for you to accept, but there is no reason I would lie."

She stood, her gaze darting from Tal to the twilight landscape before it returned to Vee. "I don't know that. I want to see the scans. I want to... I've been here two months and you just now figured this out? Why didn't you —"

"There was nothing of significance in the scans," Tal reminded in a stunned monotone.

Vee moved toward her, his emerald eyes glowing subtly. "I asked the Symposium to compare your DNA pattern to that of E'Lanna dar Aune and Frim dar Joon. DNA is —"

"I know what DNA is," she snapped. Tal came to her but she jerked away. "The cross-reference revealed that they were my parents?"

"Yes." Vee waited until she looked at him again then reinforced the Symposium's conclusion. "You are the daughter of Frim dar Joon and E'Lanna dar Aune."

"But *why*?" Charlotte didn't want to cry. She was a mature woman. Why did she feel like a part of her heart had just been stomped on? "Why was I sent away? To keep Frim dar Joon from finding me? Why didn't someone come back for me?"

A single tear escaped despite her determination and she batted it away. Vee made the announcement as if this were the best thing in the world. He obviously expected her to cheer and embrace her heritage with wild enthusiasm. Instead she felt empty and cheated.

Tal tried again to touch her. She stepped farther away. He returned to the bench, leaving plenty of room for her to join him. Still she stayed against the wall, separate and alone.

"E'Lanna died generations ago but what about my sister? What's her name? Where was she sent? Did they bring her back? Is she still alive?" She rattled off the questions so quickly she couldn't remember how many answers to expect. "Wait, let's come back to that. I'm still confused about the basics. Why was I left on Earth?"

"If Sae dar Aune had been lost or barren, perhaps you would have been retrieved," Tal speculated.

That wasn't very endearing. Annoyance eased the sadness just a bit. "I was a contingency plan," Charlotte muttered.

"A failed plan we were led to believe," Vee said, drawing their attention back to him.

"What does that mean?" she asked. "Led by whom?"

"The High Queen entrusted me with the secret of your existence. I knew the knowledge was too dangerous for one person alone to guard so I meticulously selected five others. Each swore to protect you with their life," Vee explained. "I am the last of the six."

"What led you to believe the plan failed?" Tal asked.

"The twins were sent through the portal with guardians, one male, one female, both powerful Mystics capable of Summoning the Storm. Shar Lott's male guardian returned near unto death. He claimed that the illness afflicting him had taken Shar Lott's life and the life of his mate. We had no reason to doubt his word."

"Why would he lie to you?" she asked, spreading her arms. "I'm obviously alive."

"He did not lie. We scanned his memories," Vee clarified. "He overheard the healers on Earth saying it was only a matter of time before death claimed you. He knew if he waited any longer, he would not have sufficient strength to Summon the Storm and he wanted us to know what had transpired."

Raking her hair with both hands, Charlotte tried to absorb everything Vee had said. None of it seemed real. Yet all of it made perfect sense. She possessed an extinct gift. She knew nothing about her biological parents. She had eyes like the House of Joon.

He spoke of history, events far in the past, people long gone—except for one. In a hushed, aching voice, the questions came rushing out again. "Where was my sister sent? Is she still alive? Can we bring her back? What is her name? For that matter, what is mine?"

"Her name is Krysdar Aune," Vee supplied. "You are Shar dar Aune."

"That's why you refuse to call me Charlotte." She stepped away from the wall and moved closer to Vee. "How long have you known?"

The most powerful Mystic on Ontariese began to fidget.

"I have suspected," he admitted.

"And when did you intend to share your suspicions with me?" She planted her hands on her hips, facing him squarely.

"When you had become more comfortable with your role in our world. So much has been expected of you already. I did not want to burden you with—"

"With the fact that she is the High Queen of Ontariese?" Tal scoffed, coming up off the bench. "She deserved to know. This entire planet deserved to know."

Vee stared at them stoically. "It was the sworn duty of the six to protect the royal twins, to shelter them from any and all danger. Shar Lott is not yet ready for the political tempest this revelation will unleash."

"We cannot pretend we don't know who she is," Tal protested. "I'm the prefect's son. If you were not prepared to go public with this information, why tell me?"

"It is not your decision to make," Vee snapped.

"Is my sister still alive?" Charlotte asked again.

Heaving an impatient breath, Vee turned back to her. "I do not know."

"What?" She rested her hand on the railing beside him, scowling up into his impassive face. "How can you not know?" Her legs trembled and her stomach knotted. How could she find some release from this tension?

"The guardians were to transmit a report once each cycle. No report has ever been received from your sister's guardians."

"Where was she sent?" Charlotte asked. "Is she on Earth or some other planet?"

"It is best if you not know," Vee said. "Any knowledge you have regarding your sister could endanger you both. I have told you far more than I ought."

"Bullshit!" She stepped backed, afraid she'd hit him. "It seems to me the all-powerful six didn't do such a bang-up job of keeping the royal twins safe. I want to know exactly where and how you've searched. Then we'll start over, looking at everything from a fresh perspective."

After a long, silent moment, he asked, "Right now?"

Had Vee just cracked a joke? Surely not. She smiled, her lips trembled and then she laughed. Tears slid from the corners of her eyes and she quickly wiped them away.

"I believe she's overwhelmed," Tal said.

"Understandable," Vee replied.

"Will you come sit down or shall I come get you?" Tal asked playfully.

She walked to the bench, her legs shaking beneath her. Tal joined her, slipping his arm around her shoulders before she could object to his embrace.

"I still don't understand about my eyes," she said, skimming the moisture from her lashes with her thumbnail. "If this is their natural appearance, why were they blue for so long? What caused them to change?"

"Before your mother sent you through the portal, she bound your gifts and shifted the appearance of your eyes. All was done for your protection. It is really a wonder the shift held as long as it did. Unbinding the catalyst probably triggered the deterioration and your heightened emotions completed the task."

"I just took off my disguise," she said quietly. Sitting up a little straighter, she asked, "What will be expected of me?"

"The Symposium is searching the Clarifications for the answer to your question," Vee told her. "Never before has Ontariese faced a situation such as this."

"Yeah, no kidding." She looked at Vee and did her best to smile. "When will the Symposium report their findings?"

Vee just shrugged. "Sometime before the dawn. The TSC convenes on the morrow and I will give a full reporting then."

"The TSC knows her identity?" Tal asked.

Vee shook his head. "I would never make such an announcement without Shar Lott's permission."

"Then on what are you reporting?" Tal challenged.

"My plans for engineering a ship that will be more easily maneuvered through the interdimensional portal. This will cause less of a power drain on the Mystics."

"Are you making this up?" Charlotte asked.

"No." Vee chuckled. "But the proposal is little more than a concept. The council will be far more interested in learning about you."

"Let me know what the Symposium discovers," Charlotte said. "And we'll take it from there."

"Yes, Your Majesty." Vee bowed and walked off down the gallery.

"Your Majesty," she repeated, amazed by the wonder of it all. Three months ago, she'd been worried about the bar exam and now she was poised to inherit a world.

But did she want to inherit a world?

Partnership in a law firm would have been enough for me.

"It is the correct address for the High Queen," Tal said. "You had better get used to it."

She took the end of his coiled hair and wrapped it around her hand. "I don't know if I can. I'm not sure I'm the right person for this job." She paused, looking deeply into his eyes. "I think we better talk about what happened in the library."

"I'd rather make love to you."

Her body heartily agreed but Charlotte focused on the remnants of her fear and frustration. "I want that too, but we can't pretend it never happened."

"Yes, we can, and unless you wish to rekindle our argument, I suggest you do."

His hair uncoiled and slipped off her hand. Charlotte nearly lost her nerve. Did she really want to start this all over again?

"I don't want to fight with you," she whispered. "I need you now more than ever. All I want to say is that I need the opportunity to study all of the Clarifications. If I'm to have some sort of governing role in this world, I have to understand its evolution, the forces that shaped it. I can't blindly offer my allegiance. I trust you, Tal, but you are not exactly objective when it comes to Ontarian politics."

A smile slowly bowed his lips and Charlotte released her pent-up breath. Thank God.

"May I assist in your studies?" His mischievous tone made her laugh. "I promise to continue with my present objectivity."

"Oh, I just bet you do." She scooted closer to him and his hair circled her wrist. "Actually, Vee said you would be the perfect person to answer many of my questions."

Charlotte downed the remainder of her blish and looked at Tal expectantly.

Tal gently took the mug from her hand and set it aside. He had never seen her this disconcerted. "You need to know what to expect tomorrow and you don't need to be battling the aftereffects of blish."

Lifting her feet to the chair across from her, she rested her head against the wall and recited, "The TSC is the primary governing body for the Traditionalist Sect. They consist of twelve members, six of whom are elected to their positions every five years, and six who inherit and hold their positions for life. The elected terms are staggered to maintain a balance of fresh thinking and experience. If the council is split down the middle on any issue, the prefect decides the matter."

"And who is the prefect?"

"The prefect is the eldest female member of the House of Aune. Because there are no female Aunes, thanks to the House of Joon, the current prefect is your father."

"Correct." The indifference with which she rattled off the information grated on Tal's nerves. He revered and cherished his lineage. To do otherwise devalued the sacrifices made to protect the sacred traditions.

She turned her head and looked at him. "Do you think they'll try to make me prefect?"



He recoiled from the aversion in her tone, his hair tightening to the point of pain. His jaw clenched and his nostrils flared. "It is the highest honor on Ontariese. Why would you hesitate if that is their intention?"

"Honors are earned," she said emphatically. "I've done nothing to deserve any of this."

"You are the daughter of—"

"You thought I was *human* until just a few weeks ago."

"I believe you are more prepared for this meeting than I thought," he said stiffly.

She heaved a frustrated sigh and strode to the gallery's high stone railing. For a tense moment she stared out into the night then she angled so she could see him.

"I *don't* want to fight with you. I definitely don't want to fight about this." She paused for a moment. "I was raised in a country that celebrates individual achievement and free enterprise. We broke away from our parent country because of tyranny and hereditary power. We've always fought for freedom. Why should a person or a family have ultimate control over half a planet simply because of the luck of birth?"

He felt each word like a slap. "It is far more than the 'luck of birth'. Each member of my family is prepared from childhood for the responsibilities awaiting them. We are educated and trained, cultured and conditioned."

"Which makes me completely unsuitable."

Tal had no response to that. She was right and it annoyed him to admit it.

"Sometimes people have to agree to disagree and focus on what's important."

He stood, striding slowly toward her. "What is important to you?"

"You are." Her voice was hushed, her gaze luminous. "*We* are. There has to be some compromise, a middle ground. We can't let this destroy...our love."

*Our love.* The phrase swept over him like a healing balm. He put his hands on the railing beside her, leaning in close, absorbing her heat, inhaling her scent. "We will find this middle ground," he said softly. "Because I will keep searching until we do."

She smiled and his pulse leapt in response. He wanted to crush her to him and shelter her there forever.

"Let's just take it a day at a time. We'll see what happens at the meeting tomorrow and decide what to do from there."

"Agreed." He gently kissed her forehead.

"Let's go back to your room," she proposed in a husky whisper.

"Let's stay right here and enjoy the moonlight," he countered.

He felt her shiver and smiled against her hair. The night air wasn't cold. His little Earth—no, the High Queen of Ontariese wanted him.

"Someone could see us." She moved restlessly in the loose circle of his arms.

"I will create a privacy shield. We won't be interrupted." He shifted out of his boots and vest before she could protest. Her heated breath sensitized his skin, accelerating his restlessness.

She looked down the wide gallery in either direction. They were in a secluded corner, far from any of the main entrances to the Conservatory. Still uncertainty played across her expressive face.

"No one will see us. Relax."

After a moment of hesitation, she kicked off her shoes and unfastened the sash at her waist. With her gaze staring into his she pulled off her garments one by one until she stood naked before him.

Moonlight gleamed on her flawless skin and Tal could scarcely breathe. Uncertainty sparked in her eyes and he didn't dare to touch her.

"Just let me look at you," he whispered.

Long, slender legs, softly rounded hips, he longed to explore every inch of her beckoning flesh. Trim torso and high, rounded breasts, he needed to be inside her now! He shifted out of his remaining clothing, revealing the urgency of his desire.

"If you touch me, I'll lose control," he told her, his tone harsh and hoarse. "Grasp the railing and do not let go."

"But I want to touch you."

"I know. Please, for now."

Slowly she did as he asked, her breasts thrust forward by the position. Tal groaned.

He framed her face with his hands and kissed her, savoring the warmth of her mouth with deep, possessive sweeps of his tongue. She tasted of desire and woman and bliss. He couldn't get enough of her sweetness.

She responded eagerly to his kiss but shifted restlessly against him. His mouth moved along her throat. Her pulse pounded beneath his lips. Slowly he formed a vision within his mind and gently sent it to her. His image lifted hers to the railing and spread her legs wide.

Charlotte gasped into his open mouth, unable to resist the erotic image. "That's cruel." She panted. "Let me touch you and stop teasing me."

His hands skimmed across her breasts, down her sides, teasing and taunting until she squirmed beneath his hands.

As if that weren't enough, within her mind the vision shifted, progressing rapidly. His image grasped her waist and she held herself open, begging to be taken, to be filled.

"Yes," she groaned. "I'll do that for you. Is that what you want?"

He spun her around, putting her hands back on the railing.

"Tal, please." She shook with frustration and need. Each teasing touch only built the flames higher.

His hands cupped her aching breasts, firmly rolling her nipples. Charlotte squirmed, grinding her bottom against him.

"Give me your mouth," he said gruffly.

It was awkward but she twisted, offering her parted lips to his plunging tongue. He drank deeply, thrusting into her mouth as she desperately wanted him to thrust into her body.

His fingers drifted across her abdomen and combed through her damp curls. She moaned, knowing what he would find. Her core throbbed against his probing fingers, desperate to have him there.

Suddenly, he turned her again and brought them together, skin to skin.

"I want you so badly my whole body aches."

“Patience, my love. Enjoy the ache. Know how much better it will feel when I’m finally inside you.”

Her entire body flushed at the thought and she moaned. “If I make it that long.”

Chuckling with wicked intent, he guided her hands back to the railing and sank to his knees. “Let me see if I can help you survive.”

Charlotte shook so badly it amazed her that she still stood. His warm hands glided up her sides to cup her breasts, but again he only avoided what she wanted most.

“When do I get my turn to torment you?” she murmured.

He raised her leg to his shoulder and pressed a kiss to her inner thigh. “Not tonight.”

She arched her back and grasped the railing so tightly her knuckles stung. He parted her with his fingers and found his target with his tongue. Charlotte barely managed to stifle a scream. Every nerve in her body suddenly aligned with that one spot. Each loving pass of his tongue sent fiery darts throughout her body. She throbbed, she ached, she burned.

He brought her quickly to climax, ruthlessly using his carnal kiss. Her head dropped back on her shoulders, her eyes staring up at the stars. But he didn’t stop. He continued to caress her, to stimulate her until she her desire flared again.

“More?” he asked, his breath its own brand of torment.

“No, come inside me...please.”

As he stood, he raised her other leg and pressed her bottom against the railing. Charlotte gasped and then groaned. The cold stone made her skin tingle, while his heat pressed against her breasts and thighs.

“Are you sure? I could give you pleasure all night and take you slowly as we watch the sun rise.”

Charlotte’s head swam and her heartbeat thundered as she realized he meant every word. He would do that for her. He would selflessly stave off his own pleasure and abandon himself completely in hers.

She kissed him slowly, tenderly. “No, I need you now.”

He notched himself at her opening but didn’t press inside.

“See me,” he murmured. “In your mind. Come to me.”

She visualized the metaphysical plane. He waited for her, gloriously naked and hugely aroused. A tremor passed through her body and she gasped against his mouth.

“Oh yes,” he groaned.

In her mind, they didn’t hesitate. They fell together to the grass and he drove forcefully into her. Charlotte cried out. She could feel him inside her body, but he hadn’t really entered her yet.

“Not like this.” She pushed against his chest.

He held her firmly, his hands grasping her hips. “It is who we are. It is as much a part of us as – this.”

He thrust into her fully. Charlotte dug her nails into his shoulders and wrapped her legs around his waist.

“Look at me,” he said.

His eyes glowed with silver light, pulling her in, intensifying the sensations, both physical and psychic. He kept himself buried deeply within her, but in her mind, he moved and she arched to meet each thrust.

“Don’t deny who you are,” he whispered. “Glory in it.”

Their images bucked and writhed. She felt the movement, the friction – the frenzy. Her image grabbed his and shoved him over onto his back. She quickly straddled his hips and sank down onto his thick length.

Tal laughed and pulled nearly out of her. He mirrored each of her forceful movements, taking her as she took him.

Charlotte could no longer distinguish between the physical and metaphysical sensations. He cried out against her mouth and the pulsing rhythm of his climax triggered hers. Pleasure rippled through her, stealing her breath, focusing her entire world on their joining and the utter completeness of this moment in time.

\* \* \*

The twelve members of the Traditionalist Sect Council faced Charlotte across the gleaming horseshoe-shaped table. Vee stood at her side. Tal, Trey and Dro Tar occupied the front row of the observation loft, which was crowded with curious Ontarians.

Directly across the table sat Roe Aune, Tal’s father, prefect of the TSC. His shoulder-length hair combined various shades of brown and orange, but his eyes were the same smoky gray as his younger son’s.

They had exchanged a quick greeting before the session. He had been pleasant if a bit cautious, but he was all business now. His deep voice rang with confidence and authority.

“The motion to officially recognize the identity of Charlotte Layton has been passed and entered into record. To forego any confusion, let it be said, Charlotte Layton is the biological daughter of E’Lanna dar Aune and Frim dar Joon. Her birth name was Shar dar Aune, but at the request of said person, she will continue to use her Earth name.”

Charlotte straightened the jacket of her navy-blue suit. She’d learned on her first visit to Frontine that the nondescript uniforms worn at the Conservatory were not the fashion standard for the entire planet. So Tal had conjured the outfit this morning, combining images from her mind with the Ontarian penchant for asymmetrical drama.

“Do you have any objections or anything to add?”

It took a moment for Charlotte to realize Prefect Aune was speaking to her. “No, sir. Master Vee has shown me more than enough evidence regarding the identity of my parents.”

This was the easy part. She agreed with everything he’d said – so far.

“According to the Standards, the eldest female member of the Royal House of Aune is due certain rights and privileges,” Prefect Aune continued. “Have these been explained to you?”

“To some extent,” she responded. “Though I have read through the Standards, I haven’t had the opportunity to study them in any detail, and they’re quite extensive.”

He waved away her concern with an abrupt gesture. Charlotte's eyes narrowed and she caught her hands just before they tightened into fists. *What an arrogant jerk.*

"It's not necessary that you comprehend the Standards in their entirety. You merely need to understand the portions directly pertaining to you."

"I respectfully disagree with you, sir," she said to a chorus of muffled gasps. Her gaze never left the prefect's face. "The rights and privileges outlined in the Ontarian Standards only pertain to me should I choose to—"

An eruption of activity clamored outside the chamber door, drawing everyone's attention. The chamber doors burst open and a small army barged in. Tal suddenly stood beside her. He extended his arms toward Vee's, forming a Mystic shield all around her.

"How dare you!" Lilt dar Joon yelled over the cacophony of scrambling feet and outraged protests. His men fell into position around the room, their movements concise and deadly.

"How dare *you*?" Prefect Aune shot back. "And how the hell did you get your thugs past the amo-detectors?"

"Not every Mystic on Ontariese is sympathetic to the Traditionalist Sect, you old windbag," Lilt sneered.

For every Joon soldier pointing a pulse-rifle at a council member, there were two TSC guards aiming back.

"Oh, this is charming, gentlemen." She stepped out from behind Tal and Vee. Tal grabbed her arm but Charlotte was beyond caution. "What are you going to do? Blow each other's brains out? What will that accomplish? The sects will appoint new leaders—but the war will ramble on."

"If you are who I've been told you are, this meeting is just as relevant to the House of Joon as it is to the House of Aune," Lilt snapped.

He hadn't put much thought into his strategy. From his unkempt hair to his messy clothes, he revealed the rashness driving his decisions.

But he was right about one thing. He should have been informed. "I agree," she said to another chorus of outraged gasps. Did they practice unison reactions at these council meetings? "Have your buddies stand down and take a seat."

The military posturing continued for a moment longer then Lilt raised his hand and his soldiers lowered their weapons. Fury burned in Prefect Aune's wildly spinning gaze. Charlotte couldn't tell if she had incited the anger or if he simply couldn't stand being this close to the enemy.

"I disagree. He has no place here." His cultured voice reduced to a snarl.

"I'm as much a Joon as I am an Aune," she said. "How can you disagree with that?"

Ignoring the tension palpable in the room, Charlotte calmly waited for the dust to settle. Tal and Vee remained on either side of her, but one by one, the council members returned to their seats.

Someone found a chair for Lilt dar Joon and silence descended on the room.

Charlotte knew she would have to stand up to the TSC or become their puppet. She just hadn't expected the showdown to take place so soon. She'd also hoped to solidify her role with the Traditionalist Sect before involving the Reformation Sect.

Well, you wanted to know the challenges of being a litigator. This may be the most biased jury ever assembled.

Though she was talking to herself, she wasn't surprised when Vee responded.

You are not the litigator, Shar Lott. You are the judge. They must bring their cases before you and you will decree what is best for the greater good.

Charlotte smiled. From law student to judge in one fell swoop. Not bad for a day's work.

She forced her attention back to the hostile men surrounding her. How to begin?

"We were discussing my role as the eldest female member of the Royal House of Aune. Shall we continue with those details or would you prefer to address the issue from the perspective of the House of Joon?"

Lilt's eyes narrowed and he crossed his arms over his chest. "You want this to be an auction? Whichever house offers you the sweeter deal receives what? The use of your power? The pleasure of your company? The—"

His hands flew to his throat, blood rushed to his face and he could no longer speak.

Without shifting her gaze, Charlotte elbowed Tal in the ribs.

Lilt gasped and sputtered. "Keep your watchdog on a leash or I'll—"

"You'll what?" Tal interrupted.

"Master Aune, you are violating the Code of Ethics by using your powers to harm." Vee's complete lack of conviction made Charlotte want to laugh.

"Why did you come here?" Charlotte asked Lilt. "We were having an amicable meeting when you stormed in with armed guards. Say what you came to say and leave."

Lilt rubbed his throat for a moment longer, glaring at Tal. "First, I want to know if it's true. Are you Frim dar Joon's daughter?"

She had already admitted as much but these people seemed to be fond of *official* proclamations. "I am."

His gaze moved slowly over her face, intensifying as it locked with hers. "Are you a catalyst? Did you release latent abilities in my son?"

Whispers rippled through the room. Apparently, not everyone knew of her gift. How to answer?

You benefit nothing by denial, Vee silently advised.

"I am and I did."

The whispers escalated to hushed conversations. She took a moment to look at Tal, but his attention was fixed on Lilt dar Joon. Hatred shone in his eyes and Charlotte wanted to shake him. This was not Dez! This could be an opportunity for a new beginning, the possibility of a new direction. Perhaps Lilt would even cooperate with them in apprehending his brother. But Tal had to let go of the past.

"Prefect Aune, what are your intentions for Shar dar Joon?" Lilt asked.

Or perhaps Lilt was here to add fuel to the fire.

Before Roe Aune could respond to the provocation, Charlotte stood. "My name is Charlotte Layton, and I will be addressed as such until I say otherwise."

"A detail you would have known had you been invited to this meeting," Prefect Aune added. "Are you an official representative of the Reformation Sect or are you here on behalf of the House of Joon?"

It was a diplomatic way of asking if Dez was still alive and in power. Charlotte felt her stomach tighten and a stinging pulsation erupted in her brain. Grasping the edge of the table, she swallowed convulsively. The filth of Dez's mind, his corrupted energy, crept through her memory, nauseating her, repulsing her all over again. Would she never be free of that creature?

*You are safe, my love,* Tal's voice assured her.

She wanted to believe him. She needed to believe him, but not even the sanctuary of the Conservatory had kept Dez from her. Only the destruction of Dez dar Joon would make her feel completely safe.

"Where is your brother?" she asked Lilt directly. "If you're harboring him, I will have nothing to do with you."

Lilt shoved his chair back so forcefully it toppled and slid into the wall. "I'll make this easy for everyone," he said, his voice ringing. "I'm not my brother. I'm not my father. And you're not the only ones capable of contacting the Symposium. As you know, they're required to release information without prejudice."

Several of the councilmen began to protest but the prefect raised his hand and silenced them.

"You've confirmed her identity for me so I'll confirm her options for you." Lilt went on. "Charlotte Layton is High Queen of Ontariese and according to the *Traditionalist Sect*, her first obligation is to select her life mate and produce an heir."

Charlotte's mouth gaped, but she was the only one in the room to gasp this time. "Excuse me?"

"Those Clarifications are old. There hasn't been a High Queen for a very long time," Lilt commented. "But Clarifications never really go out of date, now do they?"

The obvious relish in Lilt's tone made Charlotte immediately suspicious. Somehow, the Reformation Sect benefited from what was transpiring. Even with Dez out of the picture, at least for the moment, the House of Joon was on the move.

"Get him out of here!" Prefect Aune managed the words with his teeth tightly clenched.

"Wait," she ordered. "What is he talking about?"

"You're hoping to recruit her before she understands the full ramifications of her choices," Prefect Aune accused.

Lilt's brow shot up in challenge. "There are many ways to recruit support for a cause, Prefect Aune. Why don't you ask your son how the Traditionalist Sect is doing?"

Tal took a menacing step toward Lilt, but Charlotte wrapped her hand around his coiled hair. "How's your nose, Joon?" she asked calmly. "The swelling's gone but you've got some nasty bruises."

His hostile gaze turned toward her.

"Unless you want this to turn into another brawl," she warned, "tell me what you learned from the Symposium and leave."

"If the High Queen reaches her twentieth cycle without having chosen a life mate, she has one cycle of the moons to make her choice or it is the responsibility of the TSC to appoint her mate for her," he recited.

She didn't need a month to choose her husband, Charlotte thought with a secret smile. She just needed a quiet moment alone with Tal —

But Lilt went on. "And her life mate *must* be chosen from among the male heirs of the six great houses."

Lilt's smug tone snapped her from her reverie. "What? I'm supposed to make this selection from six men?" Had these people lost their minds? What he described was right out of the dark ages.

"Again, let me stress, this scenario only applies under the strictures of the Traditionalist Sect. If such pointless rituals don't appeal to you, *Your Majesty*, I invite you to learn more about the Reformation Sect!" With a sharp hand gesture, Lilt dar Joon signaled his guards to follow him from the room.

Shaking with foreboding, Charlotte sank into the nearest chair. This couldn't be happening! "Is what he said true? Is this expected of the High Queen?" Her voice shook with disbelief.

Every member of the TSC stared at her expectantly. Was she the only one who found this absurd?

"He has intentionally made it sound utterly barbaric," Roe Aune objected.

"If it's true, it *is* barbaric. Now answer the question. Were his statements accurate?"

"This is an opportunity to restore Ontariese to the glory that preceded the Great Conflict," Roe Aune said. "If you choose your life mate carefully, we can reclaim peace for the first time in a century. This must be done for the greater good."

The wistful determination in Roe Aune's voice nearly convinced her until she realized what he was really saying. She would become the life mate of his heir.

Even if she chose the House of Aune, the closest she could get to Tal would be his brother!

\* \* \*

"If I hear the words 'greater good' one more time, I'm going to hurt someone," Charlotte shouted. She didn't often raise her voice, but this nonsense justified the outburst.

She insisted — repeatedly — that the sects were already reunified through her existence, that there was no need for this barbaric ultimatum. But the TSC voted — unanimously — to uphold the Clarification. Deaf to her protests, Prefect Aune resumed the speech Lilt's arrival had interrupted. Once his "pronouncements" were complete, the meeting adjourned and the council simply dispersed.

Stinking cowards!

That left her in the council chambers with Trey and Tal. Even Vee slipped away without explanation.

"I don't want to be High Queen of Ontariese." Charlotte glared at the Aune brothers, giving each equal time beneath her scathing gaze. "Give this *honor* to someone else!"

"It is not an occupation or an elected position," Tal said softly. "It's your birthright."

"Well, la-de-da!"



The brothers wisely stayed on the other side of the table. Charlotte slapped her palms down on the tabletop and leaned toward Tal. "If all my birthright entitles me to is a loveless marriage and the *honor* of being a brood mare, you can keep it. There has to be meaning in a monarchy or it should be abolished."

"You are being unreasonable," Tal said.

"You're damn right I am, and I have no intention of changing my strategy. This is ridiculous!"

She stopped to catch her breath and Trey Aune took up where his brother left off.

"Charlotte, you must understand what this war cost us. If our joining —"

"*Our* joining?" she cut in. "You've got the cart before the horse there, Commander Aune. I have no intention of marrying you."

"You would rather join with Joon?" he protested. "Or one of the others?"

"I'm not going to *join* with anyone." She kicked Lilt's toppled chair, sending it skittering across the length of the room. "Your father spoke of peace treaties and negotiations. Any treaty is only as good as the society backing it. Ask the Symposium to research the American Indians, if you don't believe me. Do you trust Lilt dar Joon? Do you honestly believe he'll abide by whatever conditions we lay down, even if I am High Queen? This is foolishness. There has to be a logical way out of this mess and I intend to find it."

"The Standards are clear —" Trey began.

"To hell with the Standards." She turned her back on him dismissively. "I want to talk to Tal alone."

She barely heard the heavy doors open and close over her ragged breathing. The TSC's expectations infuriated her, but she couldn't believe she stood alone. No one spoke a word in her defense. Not even Tal. They all agreed that she should willingly sacrifice her happiness to benefit the "greater good".

Tal moved to stand before her. He reached out but she slapped his hand away. She could hear blood rushing in her ears and she licked her dry lips.

"Do you love me?" she asked.

"It is not that simple."

"Do you love me?"

"You know I do, but this is not about love."

She closed her eyes against the pain. He wouldn't fight for her. He loved her, but he loved his precious traditions more. Preparing herself for the coming rejection, Charlotte opened her eyes. "Then take me back to Earth or somewhere, anywhere. I don't care. Just as long as it's a place where our love matters more than anything else." Tears burned in her throat, making it hard to speak.

"If it were just we two, I would not hesitate. But you are the High Queen of Ontariese. I cannot —"

"You ask me to sacrifice our love for your traditions, but you won't sacrifice your traditions for our love."

His fingers touched her cheek so softly it felt like a farewell. Grief ate at her composure until she wanted to wail.

"I will be your faithful consort," he pledged. "I will love you with my body and soul."

“Even after I marry your brother?” she cried.

“It is acceptable for a woman to have a consort, even after she has chosen her life mate,” he admitted stiffly.

She shook her head, repulsed by what he suggested. “Maybe that bastard is right. Maybe it’s time I learned more about the Reformation Sect.”

Tears blurred her vision but she shook off his hand and stormed from the room.

## Chapter Fifteen

Lilt dar Joon glanced up from the vidscreen centered on his desktop as the dark-haired lad entered his office. The boy carried the food tray Lilt had requested earlier, but something in his manner caught Lilt's attention.

"Place it there and leave." He pointed to a small table by the windows, making the command unusually gruff.

As the lad obeyed, Lilt carefully watched his movements.

"Is something the matter, sire?" the boy asked.

"Are you having fun, Dez?" Lilt responded, careful to keep all emotion from his face.

Without replying, the servant walked to the door, but instead of departing, he cast a Mystic seal, preventing both interruption and eavesdropping.

"You've always been able to spot my shifts," Dez said, returning to his customary shape. "It's really very disappointing."

"I looked for you at the council meeting but I didn't see you there." Lilt leaned forward, resting his forearms on the desktop. "Of course I was rather occupied."

Dez stopped directly in front of the desk, his arms folded, his hands slipped into the opposite sleeves. "Why didn't you tell me what you had planned? I must admit I was impressed. I've never seen you so...assertive."

Lilt stood and walked to the table, now bearing the food tray. "You've never really seen me. It's as simple as that." He sat and shook out his napkin. "What do you want? You're spoiling my meal."

"Do you really imagine she will come crawling to you?" Dez asked, his gaze narrowed and hostile.

"Did you bother to learn anything about the world on which you found her? The Reformation Sect has far more to offer a High Queen who believes in 'life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness' than the Traditionalist Sect will ever understand."

The sound of Dez's laughter halted Lilt's fork halfway to his mouth. "My interest in Charlotte has very little to do with the Reformation Sect."

Lilt set down his fork and pushed back from the table. "I may be invisible to you, but you've always been transparent to me. I know what you want, and thanks to Charlotte, I know how you get it."

"Then it *was* you." Dez sneered and his eyes began to glow. "I wondered why there were no females anywhere near Fortress Joon." He advanced.

"You can destroy me, brother. I don't doubt your power. But how will you destroy her if you use up what little energy you have left on me? I'm incidental. You can take care of me once you've finished off Charlotte."

The intensity in Dez's gaze subsided but his expression still promised murder. "Where are all the women?" he demanded.

Lilt laughed and crossed his arms over his chest. "Now that's interesting. It occurred to me when I heard about your captives that without a ready supply of females to recharge you, the fight might be a bit more interesting."

"I can find them," Dez bragged with a haughty toss of his head.

"Oh, I'm sure you can—eventually. But the Mystics aren't going to wait around while you do."

"I'm your brother! Why would you do this to me?"

"It also made me wonder when I heard about your captives if Ijhana wasn't quite as mad as I'd been led to believe."

"Ijhana?" Dez made the name sound like a snarl. "What does this have to do with your life mate?"

Leaning his hip against the table, Lilt shrugged. "Perhaps nothing. Perhaps everything."

"She slit her wrists five days after giving birth to Lor. How can you blame that on me? Many women go a little mad after a birthing."

"She complained of nightmares even before she conceived, but especially after. She said I would come to her and lie with her but it wasn't me. She said she fought this creature but he paralyzed her with his evil and fed upon her very soul. I believed then that her mind had gone, but now I wonder. Were they nightmares or did my brother force himself on my life mate while she was carrying my child?"

Expecting shock, hoping for regret, Lilt was stunned when his brother laughed.

"What makes you think Lor's your child?" Dez taunted, and shifted from the room.

\* \* \*

Mist curled around Charlotte's body, gossamer strands caressing and carrying her. She floated peacefully, weightlessly. Gently swaying, moving effortlessly with the breeze.

The wind intensified.

She flew.

Free. She was free. Laughing and twirling, she reveled in the freedom. She soared over snowcapped mountains, squinting into a bright blue sky. Pangs of longing interrupted her joy as the familiar landscape blurred in the distance, fading and twisting. But she was still free.

Eyes watched her, followed her, searing her with their penetrating stare. She couldn't escape the watcher. She ran—he followed. She hid, always hiding. Her legs ached from running. Her lungs burned.

She burned. Smoke choked her, stinging her eyes. She ran toward the smoldering ruin of her cabin, her feet kicking up ash with each frantic step. She gasped. Soot filled her lungs. Coughing and wheezing, she sank to the charred ground.

Overwhelming despair sprang up within her. She wept, tears flowing from her body in torrents, turning the ground all around her to mud.

The mud smelled like smoke. She gagged. It sucked at her, consumed her, seeping into her pores. She screamed, flailing wildly to free herself from the mire but it pulled her deeper.

Darkness.

Turquoise smoke.

She couldn't see, couldn't breathe. Desperately tilting her head back, gasping for breath, she felt the smoky mud ooze into her ears, fill her mouth...

Charlotte sprang up in bed, panting and shaking. Her head pounded in time with her heart. She told the lights to brighten and scooted until her back pressed against the wall. The room was small and perfectly square, each wall a bright primary color. "I feel like I'm trapped in a Rubik's Cube," Charlotte whispered, and then chuckled, resting her head against the yellow wall.

Thank God for Dro Tar. She hadn't known where else to turn after the fiasco with the TSC, but Dro Tar had welcomed her without hesitation.

She swung her legs over the side of the bed and took two steps toward the door before she remembered it was the middle of the night. Returning to the bed, she stared up at the dark blue ceiling but thought of a bright blue sky.

\* \* \*

"You have a visitor," Dro Tar said from the open doorway.

Charlotte reclined on the Ontarian version of a couch in Dro Tar's version of a den. Plants cluttered every conceivable surface and hung from hooks in the ceiling. One entire wall became a viewing screen for a variety of entertainments. Charlotte wanted only to relax so Dro Tar programmed the wall to resemble a white sandy beach at sunset.

"Male or female?" Charlotte asked. "If they're male, send them away." Dro Tar was the only female she knew on Ontariese so they both knew it was a silly question.

"This particular male isn't an Aune. Does that change your answer?"

"Not if he's a Joon."

Dro Tar laughed. "Nope. Do you want to keep guessing or should I just let him come in?"

Charlotte sat up and shoved her hair out of her eyes. Dro Tar had sent a message to the Symposium requesting a direct connection for Charlotte. Had they contacted Vee or had she inadvertently broadcast her emotions? "If I refuse, he'll just pester me telepathically. I guess I'll see him."

The Mystic glided into the room and rested his hands on the back of the sofa before Dro Tar could tell him Charlotte's decision.

"I only entered your mind uninvited because there was no other alternative," he reminded her.

He hadn't really been uninvited either, just unwelcome.

"Do you realize how hard it was to find you?" Vee asked, impatiently commanding his hair over his shoulder. "Tal Aune is quite perturbed."

"I decided to see if I could use the catalyst to strengthen my own abilities," she muttered.

"Well, your shields are impenetrable."

"Then how did you find me?" It helped to have friends in high places.

Vee shifted through the sofa and sat. Charlotte rubbed the bridge of her nose and tried not to laugh. Would she ever get used to shapeshifters?

"When your energy pattern just vanished, we became concerned that something ill had befallen you."

She pivoted, facing him by raising one knee to the seat. "The only thing ill to befall me is an exasperating Mystic and a ridiculous set of traditions he finds sacred."

"Tal Aune's upbringing and —"

"I don't want to argue with you. I understand why he feels so strongly, I just don't happen to agree. You didn't answer my question."

"The Symposium is inundated with requests for direct links. They encourage those who can access a person with an existing link to utilize the Wisdom of the Ages in this way."

"So they sent you —"

"All requests of the Symposium are confidential. They would never compromise your privacy in such a way. Dro Tar contacted me about an anonymous friend. She wanted to know if I, as an official of the Symposium, would be bound by their privacy pledge."

Charlotte smiled. Oh, she liked Dro Tar more each day. "And are you? If you have contact with me, as an official of the Symposium, are you unable to share any information with anyone else?"

"Council-client privilege?" Vee chuckled. "As your friend, Shar Lott, I would not share anything you did not wish me to share. As an official of the Symposium, it is forbidden."

"Then I officially request your services as an officer of the Symposium."

Vee heaved a sigh and tilted his head slightly, his bright green eyes intent upon her face. "Are you terribly unhappy here?"

"I wasn't — until..." She didn't bother to finish the thought. Why detail what they both understood? "I don't think I can do this, Vee. My feelings for Tal are what link me to this world. I had finally accepted that I didn't leave anything important back on Earth. Victor and Stephen will always live in my heart. I was ready to build a life with Tal. But without him..." She couldn't find the words. Without Tal, nothing else mattered.

He loved her, just not enough.

"I want to tell you a story."

Charlotte laughed and flopped back on the couch. Draping her forearm over her eyes, she said, "If it uses the phrase 'greater good', I don't want to hear it."

"I will do my best to avoid the phrase." He paused. "Attentive listening allows the speaker to ascertain the effectiveness of his tale."

She chuckled and moved her arm away from her eyes. "Attentive enough or do I need to sit up?"

"Reclining is acceptable so long as your expressions indicate you are listening." He lifted her feet into his lap and lightly patted her knee.

Solemnly nodding her head, she wiggled until the couch adjusted to her new position. "I shall attempt to be expressive." She batted her eyelashes at him.

"Kindly retain your questions until the end of the story. This is a difficult tale to tell."

The rough edge to his tone caught Charlotte's attention. She sat up and bent her legs, wrapping her arms around her knees. "Go on."

"E'Lanna dar Aune may have been the most powerful Mystic Ontariese has ever known. She was gifted with many powers as well as the one she passed on to you. As you have already learned, it is possible for a catalyst to intensify the strength of their other abilities. This made E'Lanna's potential almost limitless."

"But I was told most catalysts don't have other abilities. I don't," Charlotte muttered. "Well, I'm mildly telepathic and I can erect a strong shield. But this isn't anything you haven't already told me."

He smiled and stretched his arm out along the back of the sofa. "Why are the young always so impatient?"

"Because the ancient never come right to the point." She softened her playful sarcasm with a smile.

"Your mother was very much in love with someone else when the sacred traditions demanded that she accept Frim dar Joon as her life mate."

Okay, this was new information. "Then why did she accept Frim?"

"Because the traditions demanded it."

His expression was completely neutral. She couldn't tell how he felt, what he was thinking.

"Was there no way for E'Lanna to appeal the match? No way to fight tradition?"

"She wanted to appeal the match but her lover would not allow it. The Royal Houses had been at odds for years. The joining of E'Lanna and Frim was meant to stave off the building aggressions."

"But it didn't work. She married him and it didn't matter. The war happened. The Great Houses divided and the sects were formed," Charlotte said softly.

He averted his gaze for a moment then met her gaze directly. Sorrow burned in the depths of his emerald eyes and Charlotte understood. This was no simple tale. This was the history of E'Lanna dar Aune and her lover – Vee.

"E'Lanna became my apprentice when no other Mystic could manage her skills. Numerous Standards forbade our love. Though she was promised to another, it was the cry of my heart to be with her. No trace of royal blood can be found in my veins and still we –"

"You're not of royal blood?" Vee was treated with respect and something akin to awe. It had never occurred to her that he was anything less than royalty.

"My abilities have exalted me far beyond the station of my birth." He paused for a moment, fiddling with his sleeve.

"You would meet her at Rainbow Falls." She remembered what Tal had told her about the beautiful glen. "That's why it's too painful for you to go there now."

He nodded stiffly, his expression distant.

"It was there she Summoned the Storm for you and your sister. She gave you your Earth names and entrusted your lives to the guardians."

"What is my sister's Earth name?"

"Krystabel," Vee said then his gaze narrowed on her face. "E'Lanna implanted a memory that day. Have you never envisioned your mother's face?"

"I've dreamt of a woman I always believed was my mother, but I was never able to see her face."

"Show me."

Charlotte formed the image within her mind.

"Can you use the catalyst to enhance the image?"

"I'm not sure. Let me try." She focused on the woman's face, peeling back layers of shadow until her features were clear. Upswept in a twisting mass of tiny braids, her hair mixed shades of brown, gold and red. Like Vee's, her eyes were one solid shade with no movement. But unlike Vee's, hers held the rich purple of amethysts.

"She was beautiful." She felt Vee's reluctance as he withdrew from the image. Her heart ached with a similar emptiness. "Why did her eyes not swirl?"

"It is the final level of control for a shapeshifter. Tal Aune has yet to master the ability but he will."

"If you loved her so much, why didn't you fight for her? You chose tradition over love." The familiar phrase nearly choked her.

"I chose *honor* over love." He took her hands between his. "If they had not bonded, it would have meant war. Had I been so selfish as to make a life with E'Lanna while our world was torn asunder, I would have been unworthy of her love."

"I don't accept that," Charlotte said simply, pulling her hands from between his. "If I'm to be High Queen of Ontariese, then it will be a place where people don't have to choose between honor and love."

Vee smiled, his emerald eyes twinkling. "This is the very reason I am here."

\* \* \*

"What am I going to do?"

Trey laughed and Tal turned to face him. "That *must* be a rhetorical question. It's inconceivable that you are asking my advice."

"I cannot lose her. But I see no way out for us."

"No easy way for sure. Do you love her?"

"With every fiber of my being."

"Then fight for her." Trey paused for emphasis. "Find a way."

"I wish it were that simple. She is High Queen. Ontariese needs her as much as I do."

Trey shrugged one broad shoulder. "Your piety is surpassed only by your arrogance. Mystics make everything so complicated. If she were mine, little brother, there's no power in the universe that would keep us apart."

Tal nodded, knowing his brother was right. Regardless of the challenges set before them, Charlotte was worth fighting for. "I will find a way."

"That's the spirit."

"She is angry and confused. I must—" A ripple of awareness disrupted his train of thought. "She is *here*. Vee just brought her through a vortex."

"That's my cue to leave. Don't screw this up. Or you'll answer to me."

Trey had been gone only a moment when the buzzer sounded announcing Tal's visitor. He steadied himself with a deep breath and raised the privacy panel.



“What can I do for you?” She was still shielding her emotions from him. Even her expressions were carefully guarded.

“May I come in?”

He stepped aside. His first instinct was to pull her into his arms and kiss her senseless but passionate kisses couldn’t resolve the fundamental differences looming between them. She had mentioned a middle ground. They must find it now or all was lost.

“Where have you been?” he asked, keeping his tone even and quiet.

“With Dro Tar and Vee. We’ve been working on that logical solution to our little problem.”

He instinctively reached for her before he realized what he was doing and clasped his hands behind his back. “A sacred tradition forbidding our union is a ‘little problem’? What do you consider a crisis?”

“Finding out you don’t love me,” she said softly. “That would be a crisis. There would be no logical way for me to make your feelings change. But laws, Clarifications, even sacred traditions,” she paused for a playful smile, “these must bow to the mighty force of logic. They simply have no choice.”

He smiled, fascinated by her buoyant mood. “If the problem is so simple,” he began, “then you have found a way for us to be together, truly bonded as life mates?”

“Is that what you want?”

“You know what I want.”

Her head tilted, her turquoise gaze catching the light of the firestones. “Do I?” She reached out and caressed the edge of his robe where it lay against his chest, touching yet not touching him. “I know you love me—to some degree, but I’m not sure it’s enough. I’m the High Queen of Ontariese, Tal Aune. I’m the High Queen of *all* Ontariese. My allegiance *must* not be to either of the sects but to Ontariese herself.”

“You set yourself above the Clarifications?” His heart pounded within his chest. “You need not abide by the laws?”

“No. I must abide by the laws of both sects and set a higher standard for myself than any other.”

His brows drew together at her words. “And how do you propose to do that?”

“One sect at a time,” she said with an enigmatic smile.

Frustration surged through him. Her evasive optimism was just as infuriating as her candid attack had been. “Why did you come here?”

“To let you know everything is going to be all right.”

“How? What logical solution have you found for our little problem?”

She started to speak then shook her head. “I’m not going to tell you. I’ll only have to explain it all again for the TSC tomorrow. You will be there, won’t you?”

“Of course I will be there.” He didn’t want her to leave. He wanted to sweep her into his arms and never let go. “What about tonight?”

“Tonight we must concentrate on tomorrow.”

\* \* \*

"Are you sure this is necessary?" Charlotte asked, gazing at her reflection in the section of wall she had just transformed.

"If you hope to negotiate —"

"The dress, Vee. I meant the dress. It seems a bit much to me."

He laughed and his reflection joined hers. His nondescript robe made her outfit appear all the more ostentatious. Her hair had been upswept and styled into a complex combination of tiny braids and smooth waves. She adjusted the shimmering fabric across her shoulders and down her sides. The color changed from purple to green to gold with her movements. A decorative golden cord crisscrossed the bodice and a slightly gathered train attached at the waist but remained separate from the full skirt.

"This seems more appropriate for a ball than a TSC meeting."

"This will be no ordinary meeting. You are the High Queen of Ontariese and it is imperative that they perceive you as such."

"I know you're right. I just feel like I'm on my way to a masquerade party."

"This is no masquerade," Vee said. She met his gaze in the mirror. "You are High Queen."

With an Ontarian command, she returned the wall to its natural iridescent state and turned around. "So when do we start searching for Krystabel?"

Vee chuckled. "As you directed, the Symposium and I are compiling a history of 'when and how' the search for your sister has been conducted. But is it not wisest to fight one battle at a time? I believe you are stalling."

She took a deep breath and squared her shoulders. "Is the Symposium ready in case the TSC references a Clarification I'm not familiar with?"

"Yes, Your Majesty."

She shot him an impatient glance. He knew the formal address annoyed her but just wouldn't quit.

Vee chuckled. "Shall we go?"

Charlotte glanced away. Much to her chagrin, she had one last stop to make. "I need to...um, powder my nose."

It took a moment for comprehension to dawn in his emerald green eyes then he offered her a rare smile. "You should find *powder* in the stateroom where you changed your garments."

She impulsively kissed him on the cheek. "I'll be right back. Don't start without me." Leaving Vee in the vestibule, she hurried down the corridor and ducked into the luxurious suite designed for visiting dignitaries. Well, they might wish she were only visiting but Charlotte Layton was here to stay.

After using the facilities, she stepped out into the sitting area and found Vee awaiting her. "Last stop. I promise," she said, surprised that he had followed her from the vestibule.

"Do you feel better, Charlotte?"

Panic formed a hard knot in her stomach but she managed to raise her shields. "Much," she said, forcing herself to smile. The tone had been perfect, but Dez dar Joon had called her *Charlotte*, not Shar Lott or Your Majesty.

What should she do?

Try to trap him here?  
Summon Tal?

Where was the real Vee? Standing in the vestibule. Impatiently waiting for her to powder her nose.

Dez's eyes slowly deepened, changing from green to turquoise before they started to spin. "I called you by name. Didn't I?" he muttered. "Damn. He would have used your fancy new title."

She took a deep breath, meaning to scream, physically and telepathically, but a containment field rose from the floor. Like a dense tube of Mystic energy, it not only surrounded her, it enveloped her, robbing her of movement, preventing any sound.

"Oh no, you don't," he said with a chuckle. "I'm not ready for an audience yet."

He paused, swaying unsteadily and panting for breath. Why would a few simple maneuvers tax his strength? They certainly hadn't fazed him at Fortress Joon. Was it possible he had yet to replace the captives? She focused on the unexpected spark of hope.

Someone tapped on the door.

"Charlotte?"

Dro Tar!

Dez moved so the door would conceal him if Dro Tar entered.

"Charlotte," she called, pushing open the door. "Anybody home?" She spotted Charlotte trapped within the containment field. Her swirling hazel eyes widened and she turned to sound the alarm.

Dez grabbed her, dragged her into the suite and kicked the door shut in one continual motion.

"I've never been so glad to see a female in my life," he muttered. Before she could spout the sarcastic insult so clearly written in her expression, he sealed his mouth over hers.

Charlotte struggled within the containment field, ignoring the searing pain shooting through her body. She could see the energy draining from Dro Tar into Joon. He was taking too much. Dro Tar's body wilted within his careless embrace.

He was killing her!

Screaming with her mind, Charlotte desperately broadcast her fear and frustration. But the containment field reflected her emotions back to her, building them, amplifying them until she broke off with a mental sob.

Finally, Joon pulled away. His chest heaved, his eyes spun wildly while his body absorbed the energy.

Dro Tar slipped forgotten from his arms, landing hard on her side. Holding perfectly still, Charlotte watched the other woman's chest.

Waiting.

Praying.

Dro Tar moaned.

Charlotte exhaled.

"Well, I feel better," Joon gloated. "I might have to keep that one around. She's just full of energy."

Glaring at him was the only rebellion possible within the containment field so Charlotte tried to kill him with her eyes.

"Now stop that. I can't face the TSC looking like that." He approached the field and studied her. "Let me see."

In a smooth, sustained ripple, Dez dar Joon shifted away his shape and replaced it with hers. He captured every detail of her appearance, down to the stubborn curls at the nape of her neck that refused to remain confined.

"The voice comes naturally with the shape," he said, sounding just like her. "But as I failed to do with Vee, I've got to mimic your speech pattern. You continually use contractions and I'll throw in touches of English slang."

Why?

She focused entirely on the one word. Willing him to hear her.

"Because the Aunes are fanatical tyrants who have held Ontariese hostage for generations. After *you* assassinate Prefect Aune, people will flock to the Reformation Sect. You'll have to go into hiding of course, which will give us plenty of time to start our family."

He laughed, but it was her laugh, which made it all the creepier.

"It would be a lot easier just to kill you, but you are the only catalyst on Ontariese. We'll debate whether or not it's reason enough to keep you alive later, but I've got to go right now. Be a good girl. No one else needs to die unless you misbehave. Except Roe Aune of course...but that doesn't count."

Charlotte focused all her Mystic energy and poured it through the catalyst. She had to warn them. She had to...

Dez spun around, the gown billowing out around him as he intercepted her transmission. "For that, Dro Tar dies."

Excruciating pain exploded within Charlotte's brain, radiating out to every cell of her body. Did he intend to leave her in agony? It was her last thought before the darkness claimed her.

\* \* \*

The doors flew wide at Vee's command, silencing the council chambers. Tal watched Charlotte enter, head held high, steps measured, gown shimmering all around her lithe form. Her beauty mesmerized him but an arrogance radiated from her that he hadn't notice before.

Their brief conversation had haunted him, tortured him through the night with confusion and uncertainty. He had come today ready to support her, to listen with an open mind to whatever she had planned.

He had been taught from the cradle to accept the traditions as indelible. Perhaps he was too close to the problem to see the solution. As Dro Tar would say, he couldn't see the forest for the trees.

Charlotte fussed with her skirt, preparing to address the council.

"Thank you for accepting my invitation, esteemed gentlemen," she began.

Did he detect a hint of sarcasm in her tone?

"You requested an undesignated period of time for *study* before your coronation, when your official duties will begin," Tal's father stated with his typical bluntness. "Is this what you wish to address? Do you have questions for us?"

"Actually I do," she responded. Instead of moving along the inward curve of the U-shaped table, she skirted it and headed toward Prefect Aune. "How long did you intend to allow your son to brainwash me before I became suspicious enough to do some investigation on my own?"

Roe Aune just stared at her, a stunned expression frozen on his face.

Tal looked at Vee, who stood near the door. He looked nearly as shocked as the prefect. What, by the ghosts of the night moon, was going on here?

Charlotte continued her approach, her eyes intent on the prefect's flushed face. "All of the information I've been given has been Traditionalist propaganda. If you'd been honest with me, Prefect Aune, if you'd presented me with both sides and allowed me to choose, perhaps I could forgive you. But you manipulated me – used me. Was Tal in on it or did you use him too?"

Shoving back his chair, the prefect stood and faced her. "I manipulated no one." His voice was brittle with restrained irritation. "I did not write the Clarifications. I just uphold them."

She laughed. "Boy, that nonsense is spouted across the universe. If you must make excuses for your precious Clarifications, then there is something wrong with them."

His father's face turned a darker shade of red and an artery at his temple began to throb. Only those who knew him best understood how close he was to unleashing his infamous temper.

Charlotte, you're pushing too hard.

She wasn't there. Chills ran down Tal's spine. He reached for her along the familiar mental path linking his mind to hers, but she wasn't there.

How could he have been such a fool?

His gaze flew to Vee. Their thoughts arrived in unison.

Dez dar Joon!

\* \* \*

"I appreciate your indulging me like this, Commander Aune. The child simply would not be calmed until he saw me transport out with his own eyes."

The muffled voice drew Charlotte back to consciousness. She straightened within the containment field and some of the pain receded.

Help! Help me!

"And when said child can throw fireballs, it's probably best just to indulge him." Trey's reply was a bit louder.

They were in the corridor.

"That's what surprised me most." She thought it was Mage Gerr, but the voices were too muffled for her to be sure. "Lor didn't use his pyrokinesis, even at the height of his

frustration. That, in part, is why I'm here. If he had thrown a temper tantrum, I would have merely punished his misbehavior."

"The meeting has already begun," Trey said, and she heard more footsteps. They were moving away.

Desperation surged through Charlotte. She had to do something. If they left, Prefect Aune would die. Dro Tar lay at her feet, mere inches from the containment field. Hating what she was about to do, Charlotte closed her eyes and poured Mystic energy directly into the field, expanding it.

The sizzling cloud touched Dro Tar's leg and she yelped, shaking her head and looking around dazedly.

*Trey! Get Trey!* Charlotte screamed.

Dro Tar looked up and reached for something on the belt at her waist.

"Aune here. Go ahead."

Charlotte heard the words and wanted to weep with relief. Dro Tar had activated her audiocom.

"Stateroom. Help!"

Dro Tar only managed the two words before she slipped back into unconsciousness, but they were enough. Charlotte heard several hearty thuds against the door and then the Mystic's voice. "That's not going to help, Commander Aune. It has a Mystic seal."

"Well, unseal it," Trey said impatiently.

"Now try it."

Trey barged in, followed a step behind by Mage Gerr.

"Are you okay?" Trey asked Charlotte while he pulled Dro Tar away from the containment field.

Charlotte managed an infinitesimal nod.

"It appears Lor wasn't just needing attention." Trey scooped Dro Tar up in his arms and moved her to the sofa across the sitting room.

*Can you hear me?* Charlotte sent her thoughts to the Mystic.

*Just barely.* Mage Gerr slowly circled the containment field. *How do we get you out of there?*

*I'll open the catalyst, but you'll have to do the rest.*

*Understood.* He positioned himself in front of her and waited for her to manifest on the metaphysical plane.

Charlotte felt as if she were swimming through mud. Each motion drained her strength, dragging her deeper into the containment field. Finally, she felt his presence, the concentration of his Mystic energy.

Opening the catalyst, she let him come to her.

His energy passed through the catalyst and the containment field vibrated. Charlotte braced against the scorching intensity, freed from the containment enough to tremble.

It was slipping! Her hold on the meld wavered but Mage Gerr gently augmented her Mystic energy. The field expanded and then contracted. Charlotte screamed as pain blazed across her skin. The sound was audible now. She stubbornly held on.

With one mighty surge, Mage Gerr burst the containment field, filling the room with brilliant sparks. Charlotte collapsed. The Mystic caught her, easing her to her knees.

"Has Joon assumed your shape?" he asked.

"Yes," she panted. "He means to kill Prefect Aune." Trey was halfway to the door before she could say, "You can't fight him alone."

"Well, you're in no condition to help me," he pointed out.

"If Mage Gerr will transfuse my energy, I'll be with you in a moment."

"If you two are going to—"

"There are many ways to transfer Mystic energy," she interrupted. "This is no time for your locker-room humor."

Confusion sped the motion of his amber eyes. "What's a locker room?"

## Chapter Sixteen

"No one is fooled, Joon," Tal Aune said evenly.

Dez dar Joon stood directly behind Prefect Aune, his arm circling the prefect's throat. Roe's fingers clasped the aberration's forearm, the difference in their heights bending him backward, keeping him off balance. Tal approached slowly from one side, Vee from the other. Could they shift simultaneously and trap Joon where he stood?

"Try it," Dez challenged. "I'll break your father's neck and disappear before you reach me."

"We all know you're not Charlotte." Tal refused to ask what Joon had done with her. Doubtless, anything Dez said would only provoke him.

The council members looked on in terrified silence. No one moved. They seemed afraid to breathe. Any interference on their part would only distract and hinder the Mystics' efforts so their passivity was welcome.

The chamber doors crashed open, propelled by Trey's booted foot. "You will die for what you did to them!" he shouted, his bronze-tinted features contorted with rage.

Trey fired his pulse-rifle in a high arch above Joon's head. "Come face me like a man, you sniveling coward! Or are you more comfortable in a dress?"

Blood pounded in Tal's brain so forcefully it made him dizzy. Trey couldn't mean Charlotte was dead. Tal wouldn't even consider the possibility.

Joon shifted back to his customary shape and stalked toward Trey. A transport conduit opened behind Joon, but his angry turquoise gaze was focused entirely on Trey.

Trey was a decoy.

Tal grinned as Charlotte emerged from the vortex, followed immediately by Mage Gerr. Explanations would have to wait. There was no way Joon would escape this time.

*Don't let him shift from the room.* Charlotte's dear voice chimed loud and clear within his mind.

Vee cast a containment field around Joon, but before it completely materialized, Charlotte threw herself toward Joon, and the field encircled them both.

"No!" Tal rushed forward. Trey put out one brawny arm and stopped him.

"She knows what she's doing," Trey said.

The field restricted their movements. Still Joon dodged and arched, trying to avoid her touch. Charlotte framed his face with her hands, repulsed by the feel of his clammy skin.

She simply had to do this. Everything else had failed. Knowing what lay ahead made her weak and nauseated, but she remembered the captives and pictured Dro Tar weak and helpless in this creature's arms.

His fist tangled in her hair and Joon yanked her head back. "I'll drain you dry, little girl. Right here in front of your lover."

Quickly finding the mental path she'd accessed once before, Charlotte dove into the depravity of Dez dar Joon.



“Stop it!” he snarled, his hand tightening painfully in her hair.

He tried to block her, to force her out, but Mage Gerr unobtrusively supplemented her Mystic energy. Joon groaned and writhed while she pushed deeper, stirring up his mind like a swarm of locusts. Evil surrounded her, permeated every molecule and twisted every thought. She gathered it, compacted it then directed it through the catalyst.

He shrieked, tossing his head from side to side, desperate to dislodge her hands. Charlotte pressed on. She found the foulest concentration of his corrupt energy and fed that through the catalyst as well.

Over and over she compounded his evil.

Fight turned to flight and Joon clawed at the containment field. He poured the last of his energy into his desperate escape and fought his way through the barrier, dragging Charlotte with him. She dug her nails into his flesh, refusing to relinquish the link.

Tal stood beside Trey, horrified that they could do nothing but watch. “How do we help her?” he asked in an urgent whisper.

“She does not need our help,” Vee said. “For times such as these were the royal twins born. This is her destiny.”

Chills passed through him at Vee’s confident words yet restlessness plagued him still.

Joon’s skin drained of color, turning the putrid gray of a corpse. Charlotte’s hands didn’t budge from his face. His cheeks sucked inward and his eyes bulged but still she gripped him firmly.

Mage Gerr began to pant, beads of perspiration breaking out on his forehead. Tal finally found a purpose. Thrilled to play a more active part in the drama, he linked with the other Mystic, offering a fresh source of energy.

Turquoise light beamed from Joon’s eyes directly into Charlotte’s. She cried out, rocking back as far as her hold would allow. The stream continued and she screamed.

Summoning the metaphysical plane, Tal sent out a pulse, searching desperately. Joon controlled the visualization. His distorted energy vibrated through Tal, making his head pound and his stomach heave.

Sulfuric vapor clouded his vision, stinging his nose.

Where were they?

“Tal, don’t come any closer. Stay back!”

The mist parted and Tal staggered to a stop. Charlotte stood hip-deep in the sucking mire of a mystic trap. Tal’s chest heaved and his hair snapped then coiled tightly around his waist. *Calm down.* This wasn’t helping her. His fear would escalate hers and she must remain calm – she must remain still.

He hunched down and extended his hands toward her.

“Don’t move!”

“He’s draining my energy. When I struggle, it pulls me deeper.”

“We will fight this thing together! Link with me.”

“It would only make him stronger.” The defeat in her tone fueled his determination.

I will not stand here and watch her die!

She shook her head. "If I stay still, it's more gradual, but I can still feel..." Her voice caught on a sob.

He scrubbed his face with his hands. "I will summon the others Mystics –"

"No!" she shouted. "Don't you understand? That's what he wants. He knows how Mystics think, how we bind together in times of trouble. He's counting on it. If the Mystics link and pour their energy into me, it will wipe out the entire Conservatory."

It was forbidden.

It was suicide.

But it was the only option left to them.

Squaring his shoulders, he resolutely met her gaze. "Then I will purge the metaphysical plane."

"What does that mean?" She unconsciously shifted and cried out. The trap sucked her down, pulling until she stopped moving.

Tal roared in exasperated fury. All the love pounding through his being and he could not even touch her! The trap now held her immobile to the middle of her chest. Her features twisted and she wheezed. "I – can't breathe."

"Listen to me and do exactly what I say. Do you understand?"

She nodded.

He hid his feelings from her. She must be strong. She must be brave. She must not realize...

"I will Summon the Storm here. I will open a portal and it will purge the metaphysical plane. Like opening an airlock on a spaceship. Do you understand? The moment before I unleash its power, you must strengthen your shields with the catalyst or you will be sucked through the portal."

Her beautiful eyes filled with terror and fresh tears washed her cheeks. "What about you?" she sobbed. "If it will purge... How will *you* survive?"

"This is your mind. It cannot harm me," he lied. "I'll simply sever the link. Do you think you can do this? The Storm will be catastrophic. Will your shields hold?"

"I will make them hold."

Tal spread his arms, his gaze never leaving her terrified face. Grief ate at him, tore through him, but he allowed only tenderness into his expression.

"Are you ready?" he asked, praying she hadn't noticed the catch in his voice.

She nodded almost imperceptibly. He drained himself, drawing all his energy into the center of his being. He gathered the Storm, pulling it to him, building its pressure and intensity. No one knew where the portal led when it was opened on the metaphysical plane because no one had ever survived.

"I love you, Charlotte. I will always love you," he said, and Summoned the Storm.

The world exploded and Charlotte screamed. Flung back to physical reality like a leaf driven before a hurricane, she clutched her head with both hands and rocked back and forth, moaning. Searing pain blinded her, deafened her and robbed her of thought.

Pain.

"Tal?" she whispered, her voice dry and choked.

Nothing.

Forcing herself to move, she pushed her hair out of her eyes and gingerly lifted her head. Someone had cleared the council chambers. Only Vee, Trey and Mage Gerr remained.

Joon's body lay in a crumpled heap. Tal sprawled limp and still across her lap, his hair tangled all around them.

No one spoke.

No one moved.

"Tal," she tried again, her heartbeat adding to the pounding in her head. "Sweetheart, we're back. You did it."

Struggling to her knees, she knelt beside him on the cold stone floor. She brushed the hair off his face and anguish crashed in upon her. No breath stirred against her skin.

She shook him, rubbed his cheeks briskly. No response. She sobbed as fear twisted through her.

This couldn't be happening!

She sealed her mouth over his, preparing to breathe into his lungs, but her heightened senses revealed a hollow shell, devoid of life and Mystic energy. "No!" The one word tore from her with all the torment in her soul. "My love, don't leave me. Please, don't leave me. I can't do this alone. I can't – not again."

Burying her face in his lifeless hair, she wept. For just a moment, her lungs rejected breath and her heart refused to beat. Without the other half of her soul, there was no point in continuing the journey.

Vee touched her shoulder gently but she twisted away.

Her spirit rebelled.

Anger spread through her like wildfire.

*You are the phoenix.* Her heart pounded. *You are made stronger by the fire.* She dragged a deep cleansing breath into her lungs and focused entirely on solutions.

We will fight this thing together! Tal's words echoed back to her.

She dragged him into her lap, cradling him as he had often cradled her.

"I love you, Tal Aune." She spoke into his ear. "Feel how much I love you, find the feeling – come back to me."

Feathering kisses across his motionless features, she rubbed her hand over his chest. "This is wrong. It was not meant to end like this. We were meant to..."

Tears choked her, stealing her words. She opened her mind, transmitting her devotion and her tenderness. Communicating her need, her desire.

Clutching him to her heart, she channeled her love for her soul's mate through the catalyst and poured it into his body.

"Come back to me," she whispered.

Nothing happened.

Intensifying the power of the catalyst, she made the signal stronger, more passionate.

Tears burned her throat and doubt hovered on the edge of her consciousness, waiting, mocking.

"I am the High Queen of Ontariese. I will not live without my true mate. I command you, come back to me!"

The *Sah Keeta Narri*. The true bonding.

They hadn't performed the ceremony but she knew the chant. He'd taught her the chant.

"Tera meta forlay fontou

*Teri forlay meta fortou.*" She formed the words urgently.

Nothing happened.

She tried again, more forcefully.

His body shuddered. Charlotte cried out.

Had she imagined it?

"Tal, come on. You can do it. Listen to the sound of my voice. Know how much I love you."

She resumed the chant, easing her hold on him so she could see his face. His chest moved and she spoke faster, running the syllables together until it sounded like one long word.

His hand slowly rose and found her hair, but he didn't caress her. His fingers tangled there and dragged her face down to his.

"Tera meta forlay fontou

*Teri forlay meta fortou.*"

His lips moved against hers as he spoke the words. Tingles darted throughout her body.

"My love," she whimpered.

He said the words again.

Their mouths came together, urgent and hungry. His hair swirled around her and Charlotte felt as if her heart would leap from her chest. He was back. He was really back!

He dragged her to her knees, refusing to relinquish her mouth long enough to speak.

Molding her to his body, he summoned a vortex, transporting them to his bedchamber. Charlotte heard Trey's happy shout before the conduit closed in on itself.

Tal devoured her mouth, grinding his shaft against her belly. Responding immediately, her core tightened and pulsed in tune to the rhythm of his heart.

She laughed as they went on kissing.

Oh boy, was he back!

His hands moved urgently over her and she gently pushed him away. "Slow down, love. We have the rest of our lives."

"I cannot," he panted. "I burn as I have never burned."

The catalyst. She had intensified her emotions with the catalyst.

Without pretense or shame, she stripped and lay down on the bed. In one fluid motion, he shifted out of his clothing and knelt between her thighs.

"Say the chant together with me."

With each word, he entered her a fraction farther, filling her, stretching her until as they spoke the last word they were one.

Complete.

Charlotte sobbed, amazed by the beauty of their joining. He framed her face with his hands, gazing silently into her eyes. Pulling back slowly, he filled her again and again. Gently at first then faster, more aggressively.

Her eyes started to drift shut and he cried, "No. It will weaken the bond."

So she watched his face as he took her and saw herself reflected in his eyes. Unity. They rode the storm together, the joining strengthened with each shiver, each sigh.

Charlotte circled his waist with her legs, arching to meet his thrusts, taking him as he took her. Sensations passed back and forth between them, building in intensity with each exchange. She grasped his arms, her nails digging into his flesh.

Tension coiled with brutal concentration. Her entire body shook, vibrating with an energy she didn't quite understand.

"I'm frightened," she gasped.

"Trust me."

She surrendered herself to the tempest, reveling in the storm. Energy flowed around and through them in sizzling currents. She cried out and he soothed her. She found release and he roared.

The storm coalesced, solidified with peals of thunder that shook the bed. Charlotte looked at Tal, only at Tal as heated wind whipped their naked flesh.

Time paused. A brief moment of peaceful silence then lightning struck all around them, creating a visible circle of energy. They clung to each other, trembling and glowing, flushed from head to toe.

"What was that?" she asked, still panting. "Did you Summon the Storm again?"

He shook his head, his hair clinging to their damp skin. "This is different. I'm afraid I lost control."

"Is that a bad thing?" She chuckled. "I don't know that I want lightning striking every time we make love but that was pretty spectacular."

He pulled her to her knees and slowly extended his hand toward the circle of energy. His hand jerked then eased completely into the flow. "Go ahead. It won't hurt you."

Charlotte ran her fingers along his arm until their hands joined within the shimmering circle. Light and color danced through her mind. She gasped. She swayed into Tal's arms.

"Do you see them?" His voice was hushed, almost reverent.

Chubby cheeks, identical faces, wide, smoky-violet eyes. "They're beautiful."

He chuckled and pulled her hand to his lips. "Of course they are. They're ours."

Charlotte's abdomen tingled and heat swept through her in a slow, intense wave. "Ours? *That's* how you lost control."

His gaze searched her features, love glowing in his smoke-colored eyes. "I did not intentionally break my promise, but it is broken all the same. Are you upset?"

"Surprised, not upset." She wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him tenderly. "I'm thrilled, my love. This was one amazing wedding day."

## Epilogue

Charlotte's presentation to the TSC resumed three days later. She glanced at the spot where she had last seen Joon's body and felt remarkably at ease. It was over. It was finally over. Vee and Mage Garr had dispersed Joon's energy and incinerated his remains, leaving nothing to chance.

She sat across from Prefect Aune, but his sons now sat at her side, Tal on her right, Trey on her left.

"I'm not sure how to begin." She folded her hands on top of the table, carefully choosing her words. "But I think the incident three days ago proves how imperative it is that we move forward with my plan."

"Incident?" Roe Aune echoed, his eyes round with disbelief. "That lunatic tried to assassinate me and you two nearly died."

"My point exactly. We've lost too many to this war, Prefect Aune. It has to end and we must be the ones to take the first step."

His eyes narrowed, his gaze boring into hers. "If you extend a hand toward the Joons, they will likely lop it off. Did what happen here teach you nothing?"

"We have a lot of work to do before we ever approach the Reformation Sect," she said calmly.

"We do, do we?" His voice raised a notch. "And what work would that be?"

"It's time, Prefect Aune. The Clarifications have been allowed to accumulate and mold for generations. It's time to rework them, to create a realistic standard by which the Traditionalist Sect can operate."

He laughed, pushing back far enough from the table that he could cross his legs. "Even if the council had a mind to undertake such a task, how do you propose we do so?"

"I've already begun." Sliding a packet of papers across the table, she explained, "This is a list of every Clarification that directly contradicts another. The next list indicates Clarifications that are so old they have little or no relevance. I had just begun a list highlighting those that unfairly benefit one group of people over another. With the Symposium's help to cross-reference the actual statutes, it's not as daunting as it sounds."

No one spoke for a long time. Charlotte glanced at the other council members but they seemed to be waiting for Prefect Aune to react.

"What do you think about all this?" Roe Aune asked Trey.

"There are a lot of Clarifications that seem foolish in this day and age," he said.

"Including the one insisting the High Queen choose a life mate from the heirs of the Great Houses?" Roe's gaze moved back to Charlotte. "That's what this is all about, isn't it? You're in love with the wrong son."

She couldn't help but laugh. "I'm very much in love with the wrong son, but this is about much more than my mar—er, life mate. Laws must be logical. 'Because that's the way it's always been' isn't good enough anymore. Ontariese has come too far and we've lost too much. It's time for change."

"And what say you, Master Aune?" Roe asked his younger son.

"Like you, Father, I honor the traditions. I believe they give us strength and have defined our character." He paused before adding, "But they also caused this war."

"That is blasphemy!" Prefect Aune flared. "The House of Joon started this war. Frim dar —"

"We're not here to relive the past. We're here to plan the future," Tal said firmly.

Charlotte shivered. She'd been thinking those same words when Tal crashed into the mountain behind her cabin.

Tal looked at her and smiled. "I think what she proposes is wise and overdue. It's a compromise, a balance. We shouldn't be encumbered by our past. We should be empowered by it. Our world has changed. We have changed. We can't build a future if we're focused solely on the past."

Roe Aune shook his head. "I do believe I've been ambushed." He made a bland gesture to his council members. "Does anyone have objections to updating and refining the Clarifications to more accurately represent our current society?"

"Only so long as the Code of Ethics is not violated," Flex Lemar, the oldest member of the council, said.

"Councilman Lemar," Charlotte responded, "I find the Ontarian Code of Ethics one of the most moving documents I've ever read. As long as I am High Queen of Ontariese, the Code of Ethics will remain unchanged. In fact it is my hope — no, my mission — to refocus our societies on those very principles."

"Any other comments or objections?" Prefect Aune asked.

"Oh, I'm sure there will be plenty once we actually start doing this, but I agree that it needs to be done," another councilman said.

When no one else spoke up, Prefect Aune turned back to Charlotte. "Looks like you won this round, Your Majesty."

She curled Tal's hair around her hand and beamed. "I won a lot more than that."

Read on for a preview of  
Cyndi Friberg's  
*Beyond Ontariese 2*  
**OPERATION HYDRA**

Trey dar Aune's routine rescue mission to Earth becomes incredibly complicated when he discovers Dr. Hydran is genetically engineering captive Ontarians to maximize their Mystic abilities.

Krysta despises Dr. Hydran and anyone associated with him. Still, her desire flares right along with her temper when she encounters Trey, Hydran's enigmatic new customer. How can this gorgeous stranger mean her harm when everything within her cries out for his touch and the comfort of his embrace? Her prophetic dreams promise freedom from Dr. Hydran's tyranny but first she must determine if Trey is ally or enemy.



## Chapter One

*The Center*  
*Rocky Mountain Demilitarized Zone*  
*May 2205*

"Doctor Hydran wants to see you."

Krysta ground her teeth at the orderly's monotone voice. Why did so many of her days start with those six words?

"And I care because?" She stood and brushed off the seat of her khaki-colored uniform bottom. More to annoy the dour-faced orderly than for any need for tidiness, Krysta removed the elastic band from her wrist and wrapped it around her thick hair.

"Now," the orderly growled.

Mission accomplished. Krysta smiled.

An artificial breeze fluttered the top of her uniform and she glanced longingly at the rugged mountain peaks visible through the transparent dome. Though the courtyard provided all the sights, sounds and smells of the mountain valley in which The Center sat, none of the occupants were ever allowed outside.

Out of habit, Krysta projected her thoughts, searching for her twin sister Belle. Her sister responded with a pulse of soothing calm and Krysta chuckled. Why would Belle presume *she* would need to relax?

A narrow red beam scanned one of the orderly's eyes as they approached and the door leading to the observation rooms between wards A and B slid open. She motioned Krysta inside with a stiff nod.

"So how's the family?" Krysta asked, stepping beyond the stoic orderly.

They marched past the first three rooms and Krysta's stomach began to knot. "I'm not going in there."

Their destination became inevitable when the orderly passed the last observation room. The high-security treatment center lay at the end of the hall. A supervisor's station was situated between two identical "torture" chambers, allowing two procedures to be observed at once. Large two-way mirrors hid the supervisors but none of The Center's occupants were fooled.

"I am *not* going in there," Krysta said again.

The orderly heaved an impatient sigh and wrapped her meaty paw around Krysta's arm. "It ain't what you think. He wants a demonstration."

Krysta jerked her arm out of the woman's grasp. "Then use one of the other rooms. I'm not going in there."

"It's already set up. Just do what you're told for once in your life."

A wide red beam scanned the orderly from head to toe before the door released. She shoved Krysta into the treatment chamber before Krysta could find a way to stop her.

Fighting the bile rising in the back of her throat, Krysta felt her fingernails bite into her palms.

It's just a room.

And he's just a sadistic pig!

She glared at the two-way mirror, noting the crack she'd put there two months before. "Can't bleed enough out of your research grants to replace the mirror?"

"You know the rules, Krysta. Attend the patient." Dr. Hydran's disembodied voice blared out of speakers hidden somewhere in the ceiling.

The entire room was white, sterile, but Krysta felt filthy. Her ankle boots tapped noisily against the gleaming tile floor. She hesitated, listening to the faint buzz of the energy barrier, bracing herself for Dr. Hydran's most recent surprise. His games varied greatly but she knew this one well. Determine if the patient is ill or not. Determine the cause of their illness if any. Heal the illness if necessary.

The barrier fell. Krysta gasped, immediately tromping down her emotions in lieu of helping the child. The little girl couldn't be more than three. Her tiny body shook with fever and a blue tinge colored her lips. Sooty lashes fluttered then opened and she gasped again. Swirling violet eyes, identical to her own, stared up at her through a feverish haze.

Time for fury later—she must heal the child! Extending her hands, fingers splayed, she identified the cause of the fever and set about eradicating the microorganism. Each cleansing pulse became more intense until the little girl vibrated with Krysta's psychic energy.

It wasn't working. Krysta focused. She couldn't use a stronger pulse. It would kill the little girl. But the virus remained persistent. She adjusted the concentration, making the rhythm more intense without increasing the actual level of her energy. Slowly the organism weakened and finally succumbed.

The child murmured sleepily and curled up on her side, tucking her hand under her angelic cheek. Krysta continued, her hands hovering inches above the girl's small body, meticulously cleansing every trace of the virus. Her arms trembled and her legs wobbled by the time she was satisfied. Blowing out a measured breath, Krysta schooled her expression and turned to face the mirror.

"You enjoy tormenting children?" she managed a calm, nearly expressionless tone. The orderly returned to collect "the patient", bearing the child away with all of the care Krysta would give a bundle of dirty laundry. Folding her hands into fists, Krysta took two steps toward the mirror.

"Dr. Hydran, I would like to speak with you."

"So speak."

Carefully, painstakingly, Krysta modulated her voice, infusing it with command and compulsion. "I would like to speak with you face-to-face."

The intercom system changed the sound of her voice, filtered it, protected him. Would he obey? She had never sent so strong a compulsion. Never managed this much control.

\* \* \*

Trey dar Aune felt the Mystic pull of the healer's voice. It was an ability well known to the people of Ontariese, his people. The healer's people, though she didn't know it yet. Did Dr. Hydran realize he was being influenced?

Trey glanced at the man standing beside him. Hydran was reputed to be one of the most brilliant minds in the galaxy, but Trey wanted to snap his scrawny neck. Any man who would endanger a child's life to pique the interest of a potential customer was beneath contempt.

"Would you like to meet my little hellcat, Mr. Darrin?" Hydran's gaze never left the indignant woman. She glared directly at him, though Dr. Hydran claimed she couldn't see into the observation booth.

Trey didn't answer. He would love to talk with the healer, to quiz her about this godforsaken center and the people exploited here, but that conversation was a long way off. For two cycles of Earth's moon, Trey and his team had planned every detail of this rescue, anticipated every outcome, every complication. But their strategy had been compromised by a frustrating lack of information. So Trey had come to The Center to learn.

"Let's go," Hydran said.

Trey watched the full-body scanner pass over Dr. Hydran. He looked ordinary, a man of medium height and build with thinning gray hair and common blue eyes. His sagging jowls and wrinkled skin were all typical of a man in his late sixties.

The healer faced them, her angry gaze focused entirely on the source of her fury. Trey stayed near the door, silently watching. Hydran moved toward her, flanked by his personal guardians, both burly men with some sort of weapon strapped to their side.

"Here I am." Hydran made a gesture with his large beverage container – coffee mug, Trey corrected. One corner of the healer's mouth curved upward. "Go ahead, rail about the blackness of my soul then return to ward B."

"I'd rather watch you writhe," she said casually.

Without shifting her gaze from Hydran's watery blue eyes, the healer jump-kicked the mug right into his face. The steaming beverage doused his skin, the mug broke against his jaw – and Dr. Hydran writhed.

He screamed and the healer smiled. Hydran's two guardians grabbed her and Trey instinctively started forward. He shouldn't interfere. He *couldn't* interfere. Damn it! But he couldn't let them hurt her. They twisted her arms behind her back, pressed their slender, wand-like weapons to her temples and waited for Hydran's order.

Wiping his face with his hands, Hydran spun in a circle, shouting obscenities. He stalked toward the healer. She bent her knees, dragging the guardians down with her. Their boots stomped down on top of her feet, keeping her from kicking again. She twisted and spit before one of the men clapped his hand over her mouth.

"I should strangle you," Hydran sneered.

*Should*, Trey noted, not *I'm going to*. He slowed his pace, waiting, watching. The lower portion of Hydran's face and the right side of his neck were already a vivid red. He reached for the healer with both hands and she went utterly still, but the belligerence never left her eyes. She wasn't afraid to die.

Hydran grabbed the front of her uniform and yanked with both hands, baring her to the waist. The healer made a desperate little sound and tears escaped the corners of her eyes. To hell with the masquerade! He was *not* going to stand here while this depraved old man... Trey strode forward but Hydran turned from the healer and moved to the sink. Hydran soaked the material of her uniform with water and pressed it carefully against his face.

The healer saw Trey, perhaps for the first time. Her eyes stared at him in unblinking horror. Had she never seen an "alien" before? Or was she afraid he would take up where Hydran let off? Keeping his expression blank, he moved behind her and waited for the scene to play out.

Hydran's guardians rubbed against her, enjoying their task entirely too much. Trey clenched his fists. *You can't play hero! Hydran must believe you're one of them.*

"My skin is blistering, you worthless bitch," Hydran muttered. Motioning his guardians toward the door, he glanced at Trey. "Are you coming?"

"May I stay and speak with her?" He tried to sound casual but he couldn't remember the last time he'd been so angry or so intrigued.

"Do whatever you like with her," Hydran snarled. The guardians released her. She stumbled but didn't turn around. Following Hydran from the chamber, the guardians left him alone with the healer.

Trey stared at her slender back, amazed by her wild spirit and amused by her foolishness. It was all he could do not to cheer when she kicked the hot beverage into Hydran's face. But he had a role to play, and loathsome as he found it, endearing himself to Dr. Hydran was part of that role.

Quickly unfastening his jacket, he blinked repeatedly, forcing himself not to rub his eyes. Dro Tar, one of his crewmembers, had warned him that the "contacts" would slip out of place if he rubbed his eyes. He pulled off his jacket and slowly approached the healer. She stood motionless, her arms crossed over her chest.

Unbidden, a vivid image of her breasts appeared within his mind. Full, round and thrusting toward him. Oh, to be a bad man for just a little while. He dropped the jacket onto her slender shoulders and immediately stepped back.

She started then stilled. It took another moment for her to fully regain her composure. He just waited, fighting his admiration. She must be uncertain of him or he'd never earn Hydran's trust.

He heard her deep, extended sigh. She pulled her thick, blonde hair out from under the jacket and slipped her arms into the sleeves. Hip-length on him, the jacket nearly reached her knees. She turned to face him. A deep flush colored her cheeks and her swirling purple eyes stared at him suspiciously. Swirling, purple, *Ontarian* eyes.

He half sat, half leaned against the sleeping station where the little girl had been. His boots were crossed at the ankle and his arms braced on either side of his hips. Her gaze moved over him slowly and Trey smiled. Fair was fair.

"Who are you?" Her voice still trembled.

"My name is Trey Darrin. Your demonstration was conducted for me."

She swallowed, her hands tightly clutching the front of his jacket. "Which demonstration do you mean?"

He chuckled. "As amusing as it was to watch, your temper tantrum was really quite foolish."

Her eyes narrowed.

"What made you so angry? Dr. Hydran led me to believe you'd participated in these sorts of demonstrations many times before."

Her nostrils flared and her lips compressed into a tight line. "Hydran is a vile, evil man. If you're in league with him, there will be no peace in your life from this day on."

Trey arched one of his eyebrows. "Is that a curse?"

"An observation."

He made himself move. Intimidation was definitely not his style, but there was far more at stake than one hotheaded healer. He took her chin and raised her face until her petulant gaze met his. "Answer my question."

"Or what? You'll beat me? Strangle me?"

In one lightning-fast motion, he released her chin and hooked his forearm under her rounded bottom. He pulled her off the floor, dragging her body along his chest. Her arms were trapped between them and the strength of his hold kept her from struggling.

"I didn't see fear in your eyes until you thought he meant to rape you," he whispered into her ear. "I found that very interesting. Now will you answer a simple question or shall we investigate my observation?"

"Put me down."

He caressed her bottom with his other hand. "Answer my question."

"I had to adjust the vibration of the healing pulse. It's an adjustment few healers can manage. If Hydran had summoned most of the others, the little girl would have died."

Trey eased his hold, sliding her down along his body. The instant her toes touched the floor, she shoved hard against his chest and scampered away. She jerked the sheet off the sleeping station and turned her back to him. Frantic to be rid of his jacket, she yanked it off over her head and draped herself in the sheet. With so forceful a kick it nearly toppled her, she propelled the jacket across the smooth tiles. It collided with his boots.

"Stay away from me." Somehow she made it sound like a command.

Trey heard the door release when he bent and picked up his coat. Stepping out into the corridor, his steps staggered to a halt. Dr. Hydran emerged from the observation booth, his lecherous expression making it obvious he'd watched at least part of the tussle. Anger twisted through Trey and he clutched the material of his jacket.

"Well done, my boy. Could it be the hellcat from ward B has finally met her match?"

## About the Author

**Anything-but-Ordinary** is Cyndi's creed and her writing reflects her dedication to the concept. She writes in a variety of genres, but seems happiest in outer space. Her books have been nominated for numerous awards, and *Taken by Storm* was named Best Fantasy/Science Fiction Romance of the year by *Romance Reviews Today*.

She lives in Colorado with her high school sweetheart turned husband of many years. With a pampered cat curled on the corner of her desk, she dreams of fascinating words and larger than life adventures – and wouldn't have it any other way!

**Website / Blog:** <http://www.cyndifriberg.com>

Other Titles by  
[CYNDI FRIBERG](#)

**Beyond Ontariese:**

Taken by Storm  
Operation Hydra  
City of Tears  
Mystic Flame  
Fire Pearl  
Consort

**Shadow Assassins:**

Royal Obsession  
Mystic Militia  
Alpha Hunter  
Fallen Star  
Unique Ink

**Rebel Angels:**

Rage and Redemption  
Echoes and Embers  
Splendor and Darkness

Non-series:

Tears of the Dragon  
Tainted Hearts

**Therian Heat:**

Therian Priestess  
Therian Prey  
Therian Promise  
Therian Prisoner  
Therian Prize