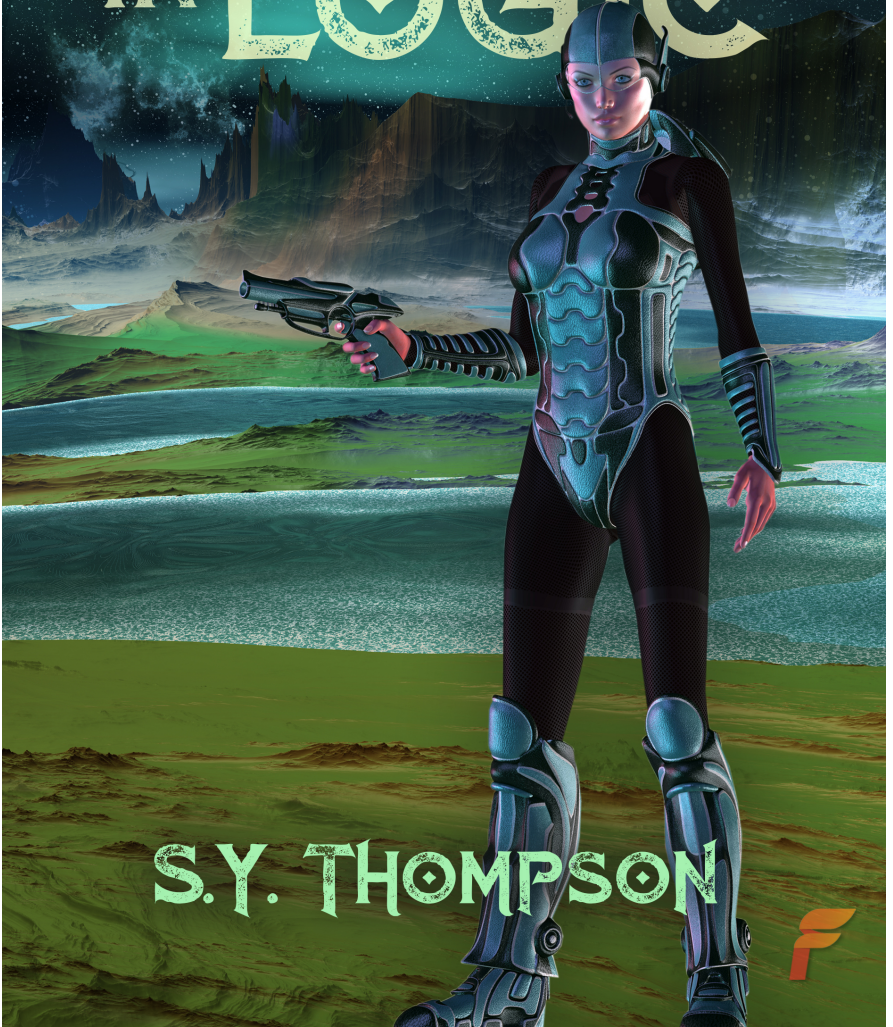


SECOND EDITION

THE FLAW IN LOGIC



S.Y. THOMPSON



The Flaw In Logic

By

S.Y. Thompson

©2021 by S.Y. Thompson

*Second publication 2021
Flashpoint Publications*



All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording, or any information storage and retrieval system,

without permission in writing from the publisher. Parts of this work are fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, or events is entirely coincidental.

ISBN 978-1-61929-470-7
eISBN 978-1-61929-471-4

Cover Design by AcornGraphics

Editors Jeannine Hoffman and Lynnette Beers

Publisher's Note:

The scanning, uploading, and distribution of this book via the Internet or via any other means without the permission of the publisher is illegal and punishable by law. Please purchase only authorized electronic editions, and do not participate in or encourage electronic piracy of copyrighted materials. Your support of the author(s)'s rights is appreciated.

Map





Chapter One

Commander R'cey Hawke's dark eyes narrowed as she spotted the blue and green planet hanging in the backdrop of space. From here, it didn't look like much, but appearances meant nothing. It was hardly the first time she'd traveled to such a place in the name of the Amalgam. Behind her, the squad of hunters teased and argued in a good-natured manner. R'cey didn't join the banter. As Commander, she felt the need to hold herself apart. Instead, she focused on the ion trail leading straight to the last world she wanted to set foot on. Ever.

"Readings confirmed." Lieutenant Brenna Jasul spoke quietly from the pilot's seat.

R'cey wondered if the small redhead kept her words low in order to go unheard by the balance of the squad. Then again, that wasn't likely. As the Amalgam's most highly trained all female criminal retrieval squad, they would hear every syllable. They probably could hear Brenna in their sleep. Sure enough, conversation in the rear compartment ceased. Three pairs of footsteps approached, but only one of the crew members actually stuck her head into the cockpit.

Lieutenant Teles Gubler quietly surveyed the planet toward which they flew, before grunting in disgust. "You've got to be kidding me, Commander. Triana's the most backwater dirt ball in the quadrant. Are you sure he's there? Zolla likes his technology, and the Trianans...don't."

R'cey quirked an eyebrow at her weapons officer's remark. Teles didn't flinch under her gaze. She reached up to scratch absently at her jaw. Then Teles smiled, and her white teeth stood out in direct counterpoint to her inky complexion.

"Don't tell me you doubt Echo's navigating skills?" R'cey was going for funny, but the jest fell flat.

R'cey wasn't much on humor, but no one seemed to mind. Sarcasm was always a better fit for her anyway. Though they hailed from different planets inside the Amalgam, they had worked together off and on over the years. These people

understood her dry wit.

“She’d better not,” Brenna said with a grin. “Not if she knows what’s good for her.”

“Yeah, and what are you going to do to me, Little Echo?”

Before the pilot could respond, two others crowded into the cockpit. R’cey’s second in command for this assignment, Aedon Gentry, stood quiet. She was in her “survey the troops” stance, but R’cey caught the amusement in her eyes. Beside Aedon, and completely opposite in personality, Ensign Melousa Wilt seemed scared spitless. Her pale blue eyes were wide open, reminding R’cey of a frightened cartoon cat she’d once seen on an antique data file. R’cey spotted the movement of Melousa’s throat as she swallowed nervously.

“Triana?” There was a nervous quaver in Melousa’s voice. “I heard the atmosphere there is poisonous for us.”

R’cey had heard the same rumor but never before had occasion to test the theory. She’d avoided personally visiting this planet. Deliberately heading to a distant world that orbited a galactic cluster of asteroids wasn’t her idea of a good time. Damage to a spacecraft, even a minor dent, could spell disaster. As for the planet itself, R’cey checked her gauges for anything that might seem threatening to the people under her command. All indicator sensors showed in the green. Scientists within the Amalgam would probably test every micrometer of air before daring to land on this little orb. As part of the Intelligence and Retrieval Corps, hunters came from hardier stock.

R’cey checked the gauges one more time and studied the navigation board. “We’re still a ways out, but readings are good. Oxygen and argon are a little heavier than we’re used to, but the suits should keep out any undetectable toxins.”

“You’ll be fine, Scout.” Aedon slapped Melousa on the back.

Brenna spoke up as she punched a few buttons on the navigation board. “I heard the Trianans just want to be left alone. Maybe they’re xenophobic.”

“Either way, we have a non-interference agreement with the planetary leaders,” Teles said. “They deliberately keep their own people in the dark. The natives don’t know advanced species exist, and the rulers on this world want to keep it that

way. What are your orders, Commander?”

“We follow protocol,” R’cey felt the answer should be obvious. “Full chaser gear at all times. That means helmets too, Melousa.”

“Aw, Commander. Those things make me feel like I have blinders on.”

“Deal with it,” R’cey ordered without the slightest hesitation or compassion. Everyone knew Melousa didn’t like the helmets, but the built-in technology could make a difference that would save her life. “Avoid the indigenous population at all costs. We go in fast and hard and take Zolla down before he can do any damage to this planet.”

“Deadly force?” Teles zipped her skin suit up to the neck.

“I wish. The man’s a traitor and a thief, not to mention a murderer. He’s stolen money and armaments from the Amalgam and killed to further his own personal crusade. As far as I’m concerned, he doesn’t deserve to live.”

According to the briefings, Colonel Zolla craved power the way most people craved air or food. He didn’t hesitate to murder anyone who stood in his way. Unfortunately, R’cey followed orders. She would do everything in her power to bring him into custody alive.

Teles frowned in disappointment. “So, I guess that’s a no. Apparently, it pays to have friends in high places. Or family.”

“If you mean the fact that his brother is on the High Parliament, you’re not wrong.”

“Commander,” Brenna interrupted, “I’m picking up some communications chatter on the surface, or at least that’s what it looks like from this distance. It could just be signal static, but unless the Trianans are misleading us about their level of sophistication, there’s only one person it can be.”

“Yeah, but who’s he talking to?” R’cey asked.

“The colonel’s making it easy for us,” Melousa said.

R’cey found it amusing how Melousa worked herself into a frenzy about the smallest things. Likely, due to her youth and exuberance. The communications signal might not be what they thought. It could just be some kind of interference. Still, Melousa’s responses made her fun to tease. “Why are you in such a hurry? Got a date?”

Melousa's cheeks reddened, surprising R'cey. Maybe she was closer to the mark than she thought.

Teles answered the question as she passed Melousa's helmet over. "She has a date with Tasia."

"Tasia? The gaming girl at Auberg's Bar?"

"That's the one. I keep telling Melousa that Tasia will take her for every credit, but she's thinking with her hormones."

"That's not all she's thinking with," R'cey said.

Her crew burst out laughing, but R'cey was pleased to see they were still donning their chaser gear despite the levity. She noted their proximity to Triana and jammed her own helmet onto her head. R'cey fastened the tops of her gloves onto the suit sleeves and punched up the heads-up-display, or HUD, inside the helmet. A series of green holographic readouts popped into view.

"I've got the board, Brenna. Go ahead and suit up."

"Understood."

The navigator spun around in her chair and reached for her skin suit. She had stowed it in the adjacent equipment locker. Brenna unfastened her seat restraints as she moved. R'cey absently watched from the corner of her eye. Brenna was the last member of the team to prepare for the mission. R'cey decided to keep the *Cyrene* airborne until she was fully dressed. She had barely formed the thought when alarm klaxons blared throughout the cabin.

"We've got incoming fire from the surface." R'cey kept her tone calm. "Everyone brace for impact. And shut off that alarm."

Beside her, Brenna turned back to the boards. Her fingers flew over the controls as she maneuvered the ship to avoid the ruby-colored laser fire. She'd only managed to get one leg into the suit; the rest of it lay on the deck as she fought to keep the vessel under control.

R'cey leaned back and quickly assessed their next move. "Teles, target where that's coming from and return fire."

"How the hell did Zolla get fusion cannons into place so fast? He only left Celetron a cycle ago."

"I don't know. Maybe he had this planned before the Amalgam ever caught on to his extracurricular activities.

That's not important right now. Blast that cannon apart."

"Aye, Commander."

An arc of scarlet light shot from the planet before Teles could reach her station. It raced inexorably toward them. R'cey watched the amazingly rapid approach and knew Teles would never reach the weapons console. A split second later, the pulse passed over the port strut, and the *Cyrene* shuddered. The shields didn't even pretend to deflect the blast. R'cey noted the exact moment when they failed and the strut vaporized. Sparks showered from a few of the side panels, and acrid smoke mingled with their oxygen supply.

Cyrene spun around, slamming R'cey into her seat restraints. Teles bounced into her as she sailed across the deck. The inertial dampers had failed under the onslaught. Teles's elbow jammed into her thigh, but R'cey barely noticed the pain before the weapon's officer careened across the cabin. Even over the shriek of screaming metal, R'cey heard the bang as Teles's helmet crashed against the bulkhead. She pushed away grisly thoughts of a broken neck and concentrated on the assault.

"Our power core is compromised. Prepare for landing!" Brenna studied the controls one more time.

"Prepare for *crash* landing," R'cey corrected. "Someone get the air scrubbers going before we suffocate. I've got the yoke. Brenna, get into your harness." She couldn't possibly finish suiting up, but with luck, her harness would provide ample protection.

Brenna reached for the straps. Another laser blast arrowed into the vessel before she reached them. The deadly beam struck the same damaged side of the ship as before.

R'cey's readout clearly displayed the point of impact. She didn't need visual confirmation to know the exact moment that the tail fin exploded. "I've lost elevator control."

No one answered. With her attention centered upon the furiously blinking readouts, R'cey had failed to notice the now empty pilot seat. *Cyrene* bucked and shrieked, forcing R'cey to concentrate on keeping the vessel in one piece. Searching for Brenna, or anyone else, had to wait. If she couldn't get them to the surface with any kind of controlled descent, their status

wouldn't matter.

“Attempting to shut down remaining thrusters.”

R'cey kept speaking in the hopes that the ship's flight recorder still functioned. She had no illusions about the seriousness of their situation and realized that the chances of walking away from this were slim. Should the unthinkable happen, the recorder would tell her squad's families their final story.

“I've lost the port side engine and the tailfin. Navigational control is spotty.”

R'cey clenched her teeth against the lie. Any kind of control was a farce. Engineers constructed the *Cyrene* for space travel. The designers generously saw fit to incorporate landing pads and emergency evac pods. They'd even allowed for maneuvering through a planet's atmosphere but only insofar as to facilitate said landing. That did not include any real navigation once planet side.

“The ship has sustained heavy damage and will not fly again. I am dispatching a locator beacon.”

R'cey suited actions to her words. She reached for the upper right side of the controls to press a switch she'd never before used. The tip of one finger managed to hit the button just as more weapons fire struck the *Cyrene*. Smoke poured throughout the cabin, and R'cey realized their life support had taken a serious hit. She was glad she'd already donned her helmet. Although limited, the suit had its own internal oxygen supply. The helmet prevented that supply from leaking out.

A second later, R'cey coughed and silently cursed herself. She'd forgotten to lock the helmet into the neck of her suit. With all the shaking going on around her, it took several precious seconds to correct that oversight. By the time R'cey finished, she could see trees rushing toward them at an alarming rate.

“We're coming in too fast. Attempting to fire anti-gravity turbines.”

For several long, scary seconds that resembled an eternity, R'cey fought the ship's few remaining systems. Most of the controls had already shorted out or melted down. Nothing responded. In vain, R'cey kept pressing the switches.

“Come on, damn it.”

Finally, she realized she was wasting her time. No amount of willpower could make the landing turbines respond to her commands. Angry at the situation and panicked more than she cared to admit, R'cey banged both fists into her board. She put all of her pent-up rage into the blow. The ship reacted with a single burst of downward thrust. It wasn't much but proved enough to give her hope.

“Come on, you feather-tailed dung eater. Fire!”

R'cey struck the control console again, figuring that she had little to lose if it didn't work. To her surprised delight, the turbines kicked in fully. Unfortunately, they were so close to the ground by then that her gratification proved short-lived.

She closed her eyes and hit the crash down panic button. Her seat responded immediately, apparently the only system on the vessel that still functioned as it should. The synthe-leather shifted abruptly. Extra segments shot out and upward, wrapping around her body in a protective cocoon. At the same time, the chair tilted so that she faced the ceiling. R'cey hugged her arms around her torso and braced herself for a less than gentle stop. A plasticene bubble formed around the chair and occupant, until it resembled a translucent egg.

Despite the protective sphere, R'cey slammed around as the ship careened through the trees. She heard branches breaking as they smashed against the hull. It was only a matter of seconds before she would crash straight into a massive trunk or the ground. R'cey tried to prepare herself for that fact, tensing her body against the inevitable. When it came, she wasn't even close to ready.

Chapter Two

Princess Thalia Dumont tossed and turned in her high feather bed. She intended the movement to keep herself from falling asleep. Even with the breeze coming in through the adjacent window, which proved no easy task. At this late hour, all was quiet. Proof enough that the rest of the people within these walls slumbered away. She blinked against the lull of sleep and looked out the window toward the sky. Clouds slid across the expanse, easily visible under Triana's two moons. That meant Solis had reached its zenith. The smallest but brightest of the two satellites was her signal. The time had come to act.

Thalia moved quietly as she threw back the heavy quilts and reached for her trousers. She had laid her clothes on a nearby chair earlier in the night. Now she dressed as silently as possible so the guards wouldn't hear. The king handpicked his Enforcers to keep his daughter safe from their enemies. At least that was what she had believed all her life. Lately, something had changed.

Thalia acknowledged that lately was a relative term. The darkness in King Lotar had grown for quite some time. She just hadn't wanted to see it. He was, after all, her father.

Finally dressed in dark trousers, boots, and a long-sleeved linen shirt, Thalia reached for a cloak. The cape covered her entire upper body and helped ward off the night's chill. She hesitated to cover her long blond hair, but with luck that wouldn't be an issue. She didn't intend for anyone to see her, yet she finally realized it was better to be safe than sorry.

In the end, Thalia pulled the hood up over her head. She tiptoed across the marble floor. She released her breath in a grateful rush when she reached the thick rugs. They helped to muffle her footfalls and would keep anyone from noticing her. Concern at discovery caused her heart to beat a little faster, but her resolve held fast.

Thalia knelt to the right of the fireplace. Heat from the embers caressed her face, and the scent of ash tickled her nose.

For some reason these details stood out as she reached for the trigger. The brick slid out of the notch, and a hidden recess sprang open. Thalia had discovered the portal leading into the catacombs many years ago and often used it to sneak out of the castle. The promise of grand adventures encouraged her to repeat the process often. She had carefully preserved that secret over time, aware of the repercussions if the guards discovered the tunnel. Thalia slid into the narrow corridor, cognizant of the seriousness of this particular excursion.

Ambient light had no hope of penetrating these recesses. Cold, damp air washed over the exposed skin of her face and hands. An unpleasant, musty odor assaulted her. A shiver raced up her spine. Thalia shuddered at the chill but continued down the corridor. She trailed her fingers along the wall to maintain her orientation in the darkness. Moss and rough brick tickled beneath her fingertips, and she hoped that she didn't encounter anything that would bite. Running into poisonous shank spiders could ruin her plans before she'd hardly begun.

Eventually, the shadows lessened, and Thalia saw light up ahead. She felt like she'd walked the darkness for hours, but it was probably less than five minutes. The light wasn't much but told her that she neared the exit. Thalia let out a nervous chuckle and strode more confidently toward the brightness. The sound of crashing waves beckoned in the distance. Her ancestors had purposely situated the palace near the sea to protect the land from invaders. Now it worked to her advantage.

The tunnel ended amidst a jumble of fallen stones. She crouched on hands and knees to climb out of a small aperture before clambering over the debris. Under Solis's light, Thalia noted the surf crashing over the beach. Triana's two moons created massive tidal pulls. Fortunately, the smaller satellite moved quickly through its orbit and stayed overhead for only a few hours. Thalia planned to be back within the castle walls before the tides settled.

Thalia hurried away from the catacombs. Her boots sank into the soft sand, muffling her footfalls. Regardless of the silence, she worried about the guard spotting her from atop the tower lookout. Thalia minimized the possibility by hugging the bluff as she moved away from the stone edifice. Finally, she

left the royal grounds altogether as she darted into the trees.

The forest grew thicker as she traveled, providing additional camouflage. Thalia found it ironic that she had to steal away from her home like a criminal. Lotar would never allow her to leave without accompaniment of a guard contingent. Thalia shook her head, mentally correcting herself. Lotar hadn't allowed her to leave the grounds at all for the last several lunar cycles. If he somehow grew aware of her purpose for leaving the castle this night, she'd be in the dungeons before dawn.

Somewhere close by, a dray snorted. Thalia dove behind a bush when she heard a mechanical squeak. Seconds later, a loaded cart lumbered into view. Moonlight provided enough illumination for her to make out the scene. A dray pulled the cart, attached by a wooden and leather harness. Its feet made a soft clip-clop sound. The dray was a simple four-legged beast of burden. One could consider only the two horns atop its muzzle as dangerous, but they were too small to do any real damage. The gray coloring around this one's whiskers told her it was far past being any kind of threat at all. Thalia was more concerned about the peddler who led the animal along the path.

She found it unlikely the man would recognize her as his princess, but Thalia couldn't take any chances. She waited until he disappeared around a bend before hurrying toward the city. Honui was the capitol of Triana and by far the largest city on the planet. There was a time when laughter filled these streets. Thalia hadn't heard that joy in a very long time. The sight of the darkened shops stopped her in her tracks. The only sounds came from a pub at the far end of the shopping district.

Solis had already headed toward the horizon. Litter blew down the street, carrying the stench of urine on the wind. For one long, breathless moment, Thalia teetered on the edge of indecision. She could continue down this dangerous path, courting chaos, or return to the safety of her rooms in the castle. A moan of agony interrupted her musings, startling Thalia and drawing her attention.

The lure of her nice warm chambers vanished. Thalia hastened past the poor soul locked in the stocks, more determined than ever. She desperately yearned to release the

man but couldn't afford taking the chance. King Lotar's despotic reign had to end. She crossed the dirt compound, trying hard not to look at the prisoner, praying his agony would blind him to her presence. In seconds, she darted down a deserted alleyway. She was here to meet someone. A magician, supposedly, who could change her people's fate.

She'd heard of a dark figure who could alter her tyrannical father without leaving a link to her. The only stipulation to the agreement was that the sorcerer would speak with her first. Thalia's heart pounded in her throat. Traipsing down Honui's streets without guards nearby had her jumping at shadows. Then she saw a darkness that stood out more deeply than the others did.

At first, there was only a vague shadowy outline. Thalia recognized the silhouette of a person who leaned casually against a building. The stranger stood tall and lean, yet the menacing air proved unmistakable. Thalia shivered and wanted to believe the cool evening breeze generated the sensation. She found it difficult to embrace such a lie when fear caused the moisture in her mouth to evaporate.

"You are the one." The stranger was female and sounded very sure. "You are the general's daughter, the one who would be queen."

The voice sounded familiar yet that of an unknown. It was the sound of destruction and the promise of chaos. It was the voice of change. As frightening as she found that prospect, it was one she had no choice but to embrace.

"I am." The firm resolve carried in her own husky voice surprised even her.

The magician moved into the moon's light. A pale gaze assessed the steadfastness in her stance. The weight of that scrutiny weighed heavily on Thalia, the noblewoman who would be warrior. There was a test coming. Thalia felt as surely as she felt the blood in her veins. The trial would not be one of weapons or stratagems but one of character. If she failed the test, the stranger would strike her down where she stood. Thalia wasn't sure how she knew this but was hopeful that if she passed, a new age of peace would begin.

"Why should he die?" the magician asked.

The simple query surprised Thalia, but she realized there were many layers to what seemed a casual inquisition.

“I don’t want him dead. I want him...different. Make it so he will step down and relinquish the crown to me. He is evil. He razes the land and murders all who would oppose him. The people suffer under the heavy burden of unmanageable taxes while he locks those who cannot pay in the stocks.”

“Many would say this is common for a ruler. A leader must maintain control.”

Thalia heated up to the challenge and countered. “A true king welcomes new ideas and leads through example. Mercy isn’t a sign of weakness. It is a sign of strength, of compassion. Lotar will not even heed the advice of the seers. Our land is dying under his iron grip.”

“And you are the one to lead through mercy? Why you and no other?”

“The people recognize me as their rightful heir.”

“That is your answer?” The woman’s countenance darkened with anger. A thick scar along her jaw line stood out more sharply beneath the moon’s light. “Only the fact that you are next in line gives you the right to replace Honui’s king?”

Thalia had spoken without thinking and suddenly realized the mistake she’d made. Anyone could stand next in line for a throne. The stranger wanted to know what made her believe she could lead the people to an age of prosperity. She wanted to know what special gift Thalia bore in her makeup to lead the way out of the darkness. Somehow, Thalia suspected that if she responded inappropriately, she would become the target. She walked a very thin line, but fear vanished as outrage rose.

“No, it isn’t the only reason, but it is the one that will place me in power. Why me? Because I will do whatever it takes to protect my world and my people. They need to be free of fear.”

“And if my response to your proposal results in regicide? After all, spells backfire. Unexpected things sometimes happen.”

Thalia weighed the question carefully but quickly. The council discussed her father’s possible premature death, and her conscience revolted. He was her father even if she hardly knew him anymore. Then memories of King Lotar’s cruel,

oppressive and paranoid reign reminded her why she was there. Fearing plots from every angle, he refused trade and closed off the lands with an impenetrable army. The population stagnated. He executed anyone who stood in his way. Lotar was a bully, and Thalia cared nothing for bullies. She didn't really believe this avenging angel would kill him. This was merely a test. Thalia could not afford to waver in the eyes of this woman.

“Even so.”

“Your journey will not be easy. Are you prepared for the peril that awaits you?”

“I'm ready. This is the first step in bringing my people into the light of a new day.”

“Then step forward.”

Thalia hesitated. She hadn't expected this. Although she sensed the mage accepted her words, she hadn't any idea what came next. This woman was dangerous. Thalia had no assurances the woman wouldn't kill her.

The memory of the man in the stocks surged forward, and Thalia attempted to focus on the people. She was doing this for them. Hadn't she just said she would do anything for Triana and the Western Kingdom?

Thalia swallowed her fear and stepped into the center of the alleyway. She felt exposed in the increased lighting. Thalia expected her private guard to rush toward her at any moment. Then the shadowy figure moved, and terror trembled through Thalia's small frame.

A dark cloak shifted at the stranger's shoulders. Light glinted off a metal blade. “Hold out your hand.”

The intent was clear. Thalia's heart pounded even harder as her palms began to sweat. The cost of this pact would be one paid in blood. For a moment, she considered the notion of returning to her knitting and entertaining nobles at court. Then she realized it was far too late for such simple ideas.

Thalia steeled her nerves and held out her right hand, hoping the shadows would conceal how she trembled. “Do it.”

“You are found worthy.” The magician sounded harsh as she suddenly stepped next to Thalia. The stranger sheathed her sword and drew a dagger from her belt. “Accept the gift of Grace.”

Sharp steel sliced quickly across her palm. Thalia felt the sting dimly, the largest part of her focus centered upon the woman standing before her. Even in the darkness, her beauty proved overwhelming, but the only feature that struck Thalia's mind was the ice blue of the woman's eyes, so unusual among a species of lavender-eyed humanoids. She thought she knew her, but from where?

Pain swirled in her head, blinding Thalia's vision. After a long moment, bent over and struggling to hold to her consciousness, Thalia realized she was alone. She was tempted to believe she'd imagined the entire exchange. Then she opened her hand. Blood welled, visible in the darkness. The large gash assured her that she hadn't hallucinated, but how had the woman left so quickly?

The sound of laughing and drunken partygoers suddenly found purchase in her foggy mind. Thalia had no desire to become easy prey for any scoundrel that happened along. The night had grown quite late, and she needed to hasten back to the castle before anyone discovered her absence. She held the cloak around her face for concealment and hurried through town, attempting to ignore the burn of her wound and hoping not to be recognized. The chance of such a happening was slim, but if word reached the guards that she'd been in the city, it would spread back to her father.

In minutes, Thalia stumbled against the stone of the castle's keep. The palm of her hand throbbed insistently, although the bleeding had all but ceased. She twisted the fabric at the side of her cloak around the wound. Her guilt convinced her that the tyrannical patriarch would recognize the mark for what it was—the brand sealing her to a plot to take his power.

Fear at discovery caused sweat to bead above her lip. Thalia attempted to appear casual as she strode through the portico and onto the main floor. In the torchlight that illuminated the area, she could hardly make out the weathered features of the soldier on duty. Logic comforted her as she realized the gloom would keep him from noticing her wound. She should have taken the tunnels back to her room, but her mind was clouded. Thalia had forgotten all about them.

“There you are.”

Thalia turned with a guilty start at the harsh tone. She spied her handmaiden stalking toward her across the cold stone floor. Torches hung against the walls to light the entranceway, and shadows scurried ahead of the old woman. Hannah had her gray hair covered by her customary bonnet, but she wore sleeping robes and soft slippers. It was only then that Thalia realized exactly how late it had grown.

This was unusual behavior for her, to be sure, and would never do. If Thalia kept this up, someone would surely deduce she was up to something. As paranoid as he was, King Lotar might leap to the conclusion that she was after his throne. He would be right.

“What’s the matter, Hannah? Am I now not permitted a simple moonlight walk?” Thalia hoped the question would provide her with an alibi.

Worry showed clearly on Hannah’s wrinkled visage and in her lavender eyes. She had tended Thalia since her entry into the world and could very likely see through the thin excuse for her absence.

“Milady, if you please. The nights are not safe for a noblewoman. You should have taken your personal guard or at the very least, a chaperone. It’s not seemly.”

Thalia snorted in frustration. “Honestly, Hannah. I feel like a prisoner in our own kingdom.”

Hannah apparently recognized an old argument and quickly calmed. “It is not safe, Thalia. You should know better. I realize you are free-spirited, but you are also more intelligent than this. I swear there are times when your rashness overrides any sense at all.”

Only Hannah could get away with speaking to her in such a manner. In many ways, she was like Thalia’s mother. Immediately contrite, Thalia rested her uninjured hand upon Hannah’s shoulder and released her tension with a sigh.

“You’re right, of course. I’m sorry I worried you, but as you can see, I am unharmed. It’s late. Why don’t we both get some sleep?”

“After I settle you into bed,” Hannah offered.

Thalia felt warmed by the gentle sentiment and offered Hannah a smile. “I think I can manage on my own. You haven’t

served as my nanny for many years.”

As Hannah left for the servant’s wing, Thalia ascended the winding staircase to the third floor of the drafty castle. Her rooms were spacious, and heavy furs covered the stone floors. A brocade curtain hung around the large circular bed, providing her a measure of privacy. Her room was not under constant guard, as were the King’s chambers, and allowed her to feel as though she had a sanctuary in this world. Rather than climb into bed as she had promised Hannah, Thalia ignored the lure of soft sheets.

She stepped over to the washbasin on her dressing table and inspected her injured hand. A narrow slice ran across the palm. The line had already closed, spurred to healing by the magic of the natural world around her.

As long as a wound wasn’t fatal, Triana sustained its inhabitants. Its healing energy connected the land to its people, and they recovered quickly from such small lacerations. The sword knife cut was red but not infected. By morning, it would be barely perceptible. Still, she needed to take care that any injuries go unnoticed until fully healed.

After washing up, Thalia decided not to bandage her hand lest the binding draw undue attention. Her eyes felt gritty, and already she could see a hint of light on the horizon. Grateful that her mission had ended, Thalia headed to bed. She drew back the heavy curtain and saw the multitude of cushions. Suddenly, she felt exhausted.

Thalia stripped off her clothing and climbed naked between the sheets. She knew Hannah would fuss but was too tired to care. Though slumber hovered at the fringes of her consciousness, beating futilely like bat wings against a rock wall, Thalia could not help but fret over the pact she’d made. When sleep finally did claim her, it was as stealthy as a thief in the night, gradually and completely taking her unaware.

Shadows crept across the old king’s bedchamber as the smallest moon, Solis, sailed steadily through the night sky. Grace watched as Lotar slept fitfully, tangled in the sweat-

soaked sheets. Apparently he fought with his nocturnal demons. A bead rolled down his temple and dripped onto the down pillows.

A curtain moved softly, rustled by the night breeze. Although the king had many enemies, Grace thought he never felt concerned with one taking him in his sleep. His chambers were located high in the tower, a circular room usually reserved for prisoners. Common knowledge told her he'd always joked that not even the mice in the castle were comfortable being so high. A single set of stone steps led to the tower room, and four of the king's Enforcer guards maintained post at any given time. Even if he conducted business elsewhere, a sentry contingent always stayed present near the bedroom lest an unknown assassin creep in and lay in wait for him.

A stagnant odor wafted on the breeze, the scent created by the dirty, unmoving water held in the moat. Mist floated gently into the room, and on the amorphous tendrils, a figure emerged. Moonlight glinted off a gilded breastplate and heavy shoulder plates. A golden helmet covered the head, fitting low and concealing much of the feminine features.

Eyes glinted emotionlessly, like stones at the bottom of a stream. She stepped quietly into the room. Long fingers steadied the heavy sword at her side, although she did not intend to use the weapon. Grace would not bestow the gift of an honorable death upon such a cowardly human. Lotar ruled from the safety of his throne, crushing the people under heavy taxes and taking food from the mouths of children. He was not worthy.

Grace felt pleased that Lotar never seemed aware of her presence. She crossed silently to his side. Lotar didn't react as Grace reached out to rest the frigid hand of fate upon his forehead. "Your time is done but not in the way your child believes. There is much more at stake here than despotic rule of a simple people."

With the utterance of her words, Lotar's breath rattled in his throat. Grace felt the evil clinging to his mortal form, and for a second, she was tempted to follow through with the self-conceived assassination. She held back at the last moment because his death wouldn't be the catalyst that properly

motivated Thalia. Guilt at such an outcome would weigh the princess into a deep, soul crushing depression. She required motivation to become the leader Triana needed to guide them into a new age.

Grace had waited for this day, for the decision Thalia had made to set them upon this path. It would not be as smooth as Thalia assumed but was necessary. There would be strife; there would be turmoil. A small smile curled her full lips, but it was an expression without joy or pleasure. It was the smile of a predator. Grace headed for the window, deliberately halting at a small table. She tipped a heavy vase from the top and allowed it to shatter against the marble floor. The sound would draw the guards. They would discover the king's death-like sleep and set Thalia's destiny in motion.

Shouts sounded from the corridor. Grace leapt gracefully from the tower as the door burst open. She tapped into Triana's mystical properties and willed her body to dematerialize. Thalia didn't know it, but she had conversed with one of the planet's spirit forms. Grace held this world in balance. For many seasons, she had sensed a growing darkness. Now the time had come to restore order.

Chapter Three

R'cey awakened slowly, resisting the truth of astonishing pain. Knife-like darts of agony shot through her left leg. Each deep breath burned like fire. Finally, R'cey's muddled mind sorted through the agony, and she recalled her team. Her eyes flew open, and consciousness snapped forward. Along with awareness came the full brunt of pain. As quickly as the knowledge blossomed, R'cey realized her injuries were severe though not life threatening. At least not at the moment. Her consciousness wavered, and she felt a little ill.

She coughed and swallowed, distracted by the sight before her. R'cey still faced upward and noticed how the blue sky held only a few wispy clouds. The relaxing sight induced her to sleep again. Being hit on the head, despite the helmet, seemed a good excuse. R'cey forced the lassitude away and raised her head. The simple movement generated an involuntary gasp; searing pain lanced upward from her left leg and throughout her torso. Then she noticed the clearing around her.

The *Cyrene* lay in twisted, unrecognizable chunks of smoking metal. Scorch marks covered what R'cey could see from her limited field of vision. Scattered fires burned throughout the wreckage. Small piles of leaves and twigs also smoldered, though nothing large enough to create a forest fire threatened. At least R'cey hoped against such a possibility.

"Hunters, sound off."

R'cey coughed again and couldn't have heard a reply had there been one. She tried again, but her team remained silent. Worry galvanized R'cey into action. A quick movement released the safety harness, but the protective bubble around her seat failed to retract. Only then did R'cey notice the massive breach in the shell. The encasement had cracked down the center from top to bottom. Roughly even with her knees, the barrier had given way entirely. Debris littered the deck plating that remained attached to her seat.

What remained of the safety shell seemed fragile at best.

Since the retraction system wasn't operational, R'cey decided upon a more physical approach. Fallen leaves and twigs obscured a view of her lower extremities, but R'cey kicked at the barrier with her uninjured leg. She struck something solid and knew it wasn't the protective shell. She groaned as two ideas occurred to her. First, a heavy tree limb lay concealed within the debris. The second and most salient was that the branch in question was somehow responsible for her leg injury.

Frustration caused R'cey to growl low, the sound reverberating inside the helmet. Trapped inside the bubble, she couldn't determine the seriousness of her injury. At the same time, her injury caused enough pain that it proved difficult to get free of the protective casing. R'cey clenched her teeth against the unpleasant sensations of concern and physical discomfort, telling herself that she had suffered worse injuries and survived. She would do so this time as well, but first she had to get loose from this chair.

She fisted her left hand and raised it toward the remaining plasticene bubble, as though to strike a physical blow. Instead, she triggered a small projectile from the wrist brace. By pressing against a hidden switch with her opposite hand, she could choose steel rounds, a laser setting, or an actual flamethrower. In this case, a small and simple bullet did the trick. The already weakened plasticene gave way, shattering harmlessly outward and dropping away.

R'cey searched around for her people again even as she swept leaves and safety glass from her body. She thought she saw the back of someone's helmet near a particularly hulking piece of the ship, but it was hard to be sure from a distance. R'cey concentrated on getting loose, reassured that she could help her people as soon as she did.

She slowed as she reached her injury, struck by the amount of blood that soaked into her gloves. This was not good. Ignoring a broken bone or lacerated flesh was one thing, but even she couldn't come back from significant blood loss. The snapped off branch had punched through the safety bubble and impaled the inside of her lower left leg.

Things could definitely be worse. A broken leg she could deal with. Still, the sight of blood left her feeling a little

queasy. No matter how unpleasant the idea, she had to get the tree limb out. If she didn't, a member of her team might die because she didn't apply first aid in time. As much as she hated to admit it, R'cey needed help.

"Aedon, Melousa, respond." The shouted words threatened to deafen her inside the helmet. R'cey flipped up her visor, simultaneously remembering the previous concern with indigenous toxins. She pushed the thought away and tried again. Still nothing. "Teles, Brenna, answer me."

The continued silence seemed a confirmation that no one else had survived. The knowledge felt like a crushing weight in her gut. These people were more than her friends. They were family. As their commander, it was her duty to keep them safe, and she had failed. That realization gave R'cey the will to grasp the tree limb with both hands. She mentally braced herself and pulled.

Agony lanced through her leg. R'cey groaned against the pain but refused to stop. Muscles bunched, enhanced by the artificial properties of her suit. The limb moved abruptly and then slid out altogether. R'cey tossed it away and then leaned back against her seat, panting and sweating. Her head swam dizzily as unconsciousness threatened to return. Finally, the fog cleared.

She rested only a moment more, concerned about blood loss from her wound. Blood ran in a steady stream down her skin suit but didn't seem as bad as she'd expected.

R'cey let out a long, slow breath. That was the first bit of good news since the cannon fire struck the *Cyrene*. She wasn't out of the woods yet. She still needed to bind the injury. R'cey stood awkwardly on one leg and held onto the chair arms to shuffle off the deck plating. She took a single step onto the forest floor and attempted to put weight on her injured limb. The excruciating pain came as no surprise, but she resolved to reach *Cyrene's* wreckage.

Despite her determination, her leg wouldn't hold her. R'cey hit the ground face first with a muffled thud. She screamed as broken bones shifted, digging into lacerated muscle and nerves. R'cey lay panting for a few minutes, willing the agony to ebb. For several long moments, her head swam. She resisted the urge

to pass out.

Suddenly, a computerized voice sounded inside the helmet. “Warning, high levels of argon detected. Recommend immediate hemotide injection.”

“Some days,” she gasped, “it just doesn’t pay to get out of bed.”

Fortunately, hemotide wasn’t something R’cey needed to find in a first aid kit. Hunters routinely required blood oxygenation when pursuing felons. The hemotide provided a short burst of muscular enhancement and lung function. As a matter of course, the skin suits carried enough hemotide for an extended mission. The suit could synthesize the drug directly from the atmosphere. The technology could conceivably provide hemotide indefinitely, as long as the suit remained functional.

Following the computer’s suggestion, R’cey ordered the interface to administer the injection. “How often does the hemotide need to be dispensed?”

“Inject one dose of hemotide every twelve hours.”

Good news at last. R’cey wouldn’t last twelve hours without medical help. The injection would be just enough for her to collect the tags and deal with her dead. After that, nothing would matter. R’cey tensed in preparation of crawling and hissed again at the daggers of pain.

When the misery finally began to dissipate, R’cey realized how exhausted she felt. Logically, she realized it hadn’t been that long ago that this whole ordeal began. Half of that time, she’d probably been unconscious inside the damaged pod. The hemotide should have helped with any weakness. Why, then, did she feel as though she’d completed a triathlon? Then again, what did it matter? She couldn’t just lie around. There was something she needed to do, but she had trouble remembering what that something was.

“Why am I so groggy? Oh, right. Bind the injury,” she mumbled. “Check on the others.”

She had to make it to the first aid kit, even though crawling proved agonizing. Her team needed her, but she couldn’t help them if she passed out.

R’cey rolled over, the action taking most of her remaining

strength. From the corner of her eye, she noticed a thicker branch that had snapped in the crash. Very aware of the irony, R'cey reached for it. What better tool to use as a makeshift crutch?

Questing fingers grazed the end of the limb. She attempted to pull it toward her but didn't have enough leverage. R'cey rose onto her elbows and shifted forward slightly. She felt like a black bug staggering along the ground. The simple movement drove spikes of misery through her body. Nausea swirled in her gut, and sweat rolled down her face.

In seconds, she had the crutch and forced herself to her feet. R'cey leaned gratefully on the support and shuffled toward what remained of the cockpit. It lay only a few yards away; strangely, most of it seemed intact. The few steps it took to reach the burnt-out hulk felt like they took forever. She was shaking from fatigue when she finished the short journey. R'cey instinctively grasped the edge of the cockpit with one hand. Instantly, a thermal readout popped up on the heads-up display inside her helmet.

The metal registered hot underhand but not enough to burn her. Apparently, her initial assessment was right. She'd been unconscious for quite some time, long enough for the ship to cool.

R'cey took a stumbling step toward where she estimated the supply cabinet should be. Her foot struck something soft and yielding. She closed her eyes briefly as she registered the familiar sensation of human flesh. When she could no longer deny the truth, R'cey looked down. Horrified, she identified Brenna Jasul.

In truth, R'cey could only see an arm. The rest of the body lay beneath a huge piece of deck plating, but R'cey recognized the tattoo visible on the wrist. They were together on Celetron when Brenna had it burned into her skin. Brenna said the compass rose would always lead her home.

R'cey wasn't surprised to find her pilot like this. Brenna had never made it into her skin suit or her seat restraints. R'cey swallowed the lump in her throat and attempted to focus. In minutes, it became obvious that she wouldn't find the first aid

kit. All of the hatches had sprung in the crash. Any supplies had burned up or been scattered into the nearby woods.

“Warning, blood pressure falling. Emergency medical procedures advised.”

“Do you think?” R’cey mumbled her response to the automated warning.

As interesting as it was that the suit still functioned properly, the information didn’t really help. R’cey already knew she needed to stop her bleeding. Yanking the tree branch out of her leg had been the equivalent of pulling a plug from a drain.

R’cey grasped her crutch with both hands and carefully lowered herself onto one knee. She unsnapped the sheath on the outside of her right calf and removed a large hunting knife. R’cey rarely utilized the primitive weapon, eschewing such tools for the more sophisticated ones housed within her skin suit. In this case, however, the knife was exactly what she needed. She dropped the branch onto the ground and reached for Brenna’s arm. Her hands shook as she cut away the sleeve from the cold flesh.

She used the material to tie a rough tourniquet in place above the wound. It wouldn’t work for long but would provide enough time to finish what she needed to do. R’cey had no illusions about her situation. Her team was unquestionably dead or seriously wounded. She herself was badly injured and probably wouldn’t survive without the first aid kit. She could die simply from shock if nothing else.

The mission was a bust but no longer important. As Commander, R’cey needed to see to her people. That meant collecting identification tags from the bodies so she could return them to their families, assuming that the emergency beacon had deployed.

Celetron rituals for the dead required gathering the bodies, placing them face up so their ghosts could reach the stars, and then burning the corpse. R’cey didn’t much believe in such things but knew that some of her crew did. With that in mind, she assessed Brenna’s position under the fuselage. She was tempted to try to free the pilot last and go for the other missing members. The only reason she didn’t was that R’cey realized

how tired she already felt. If she waited to move Brenna last, it would never happen.

R'cey used fallen logs as fulcrums to lift the deck plating. She lucked out that the section of hull wasn't very large. After about an hour, Brenna lay free on the alien turf. Now came the hard part. R'cey held her injured leg as straight as possible and maneuvered Brenna onto her back. She tried not to notice the startled look on Brenna's frozen features as she closed the brown eyes. Then R'cey grabbed Brenna's shoulder pads and hauled backward. By shuffling on her knee and scooting backward a little at a time, she finally managed to position Brenna near the center of the clearing. The area was large enough to situate the remaining three members of her team.

When she finished, R'cey intended to sit with them until the end came. She would hold the ID chips in her hand where she hoped they'd remain until the Amalgam came for them.

Urgent pounding upon the door brought Thalia out of sleep with a startled gasp. Instantly awake, she knew the clamor had to do with the king. The thought did nothing to calm her pounding heart. Along with the dreadful intuition came the terror of discovery.

"Princess, you must come quickly. The king has fallen ill."

Ill? That made no sense. She'd expected a summons to hear of him stepping down.

"What sickness do you speak of?" Thalia couldn't stop the nervous quaver in her voice. She hoped the servant would think it merely the result of lingering drowsiness.

"He will not awaken and appears to be in a trance. Galron cannot arouse him. Please, you must hurry."

Thalia hesitated to respond. She'd anticipated news but not this. Guilt hammered at her soul. The magician had spoken of killing Lotar, even if Thalia hadn't truly believed that a serious threat. While committing regicide was one thing, at least the king wouldn't suffer. Consigning him to a death sleep was unforgivable. Why hadn't the stranger kept to their arrangement and cast a spell for the king to abdicate?

“On my way.”

Thalia threw back the covers. Despite the apparently botched assignation, she still had her duty to perform and appearances to maintain. If the people discovered her involvement in this, the situation could quickly become ugly. It mattered not that the kingdom disliked Lotar. He remained the acknowledged ruler. The people would not hesitate to punish the guilty party.

“Have Galron summon the king’s healer. I shall be there presently.”

Footsteps faded into the distance as the manservant rushed to do her bidding. Thalia dressed quickly in a loose cotton blouse and faded brown britches. She laced her knee boots and paused to pull on a cloak before heading for the door. Before throwing back the bolt, she glanced at her hand. A thin, red line remained across her palm. Thalia clenched her fist and tossed the door open.

As Thalia strode through the castle, she noticed the draft more than usual. The cloak helped ward off the castle’s perpetual briskness but did nothing for the chill that had taken up residence in her heart. Remorse for actions taken against Lotar proved undeniable. She’d give anything to have avoided this path, but thoughts of her people were enough to strengthen her resolve. As a leader, Thalia had to put her own emotions aside and make difficult decisions.

A short time later, Thalia reached the corridor outside the king’s quarters. An Enforcer guard stood sentry at the top of the narrow steps. Thalia couldn’t see the squatty woman’s features through her helmet, and the eyes gave nothing away. Nevertheless, the woman saluted Thalia with a fist thumped against her chest. She held a spear in her other hand and quickly moved aside to allow the princess passage.

Another sentry, this one a male, stood at the far end of the hallway with his back to her. He defended the only other entrance to this floor. The door to her father’s room stood closed but unattended. Thalia strode toward the chamber, intent upon entering to see the healer. Her courage deserted her just as her hand touched the door latch. At present, the healer tended her father. Undoubtedly, Galron stood inside with him. She

couldn't face anyone until she got her whirling emotions under control.

Thalia released the handle and stood with her back against the wall. Her gaze locked on the horizon through one of the arrow slits. She remained that way for over a half hour, watching the sun crest the horizon and begin its slow rise. Eventually, she could stand still no longer. She had to move and expend pent-up energy.

Her pacing ceased abruptly as Galron exited the king's chamber and stepped into the hallway. As Lotar's chief advisor, he'd stayed with the king while the healer worked. When he glanced her way, Thalia felt sure that her culpability would show. It mattered not that her plan had failed. The bungling mage had succeeded only in adding the burden of guilt to Thalia's soul.

Galron shook his head slightly, causing greasy dark curls to bounce. Through his short, unkempt beard, Thalia noticed the stern set of his thin lips. Even his lavender eyes shaded more toward blue, a very bad sign.

"The news is not good, Princess. King Lotar will not awaken, and I fear the worst."

"Explain. Exactly what is it you suspect?"

Rapid and heavy footfalls interrupted any reply. Thalia turned at the sound of booted heels striking stone. Creaking generated by leather armor echoed throughout the cavernous halls. Thalia resisted the urge to bow in her uncle's presence. Sunlight gleamed off Kilik Dumont's straw-colored hair, and Thalia noticed his hand rested upon the hilt of his sword.

"What of my brother, Galron?" Kilik's voice echoed down the hallway, loud and intense.

Galron sketched a bow toward Kilik. As usual, Thalia wasn't sure if the gesture intended mockery or proved merely awkwardness due to the hump he carried on one shoulder.

"My Liege, as I was just saying..."

"Spare me the platitudes. I am Captain of the Guard, Galron. There's no need to coddle me, so get on with it."

Galron's eyes shifted to Thalia. She met his gaze openly, silently daring him to accuse her of treason or treat her with weakness.

After a moment, Galron nodded. “Very well, the healer cannot rouse the king. He remains in a death sleep. There seems nothing we can do.”

The door to the king’s chamber opened, and a thin, wizened man emerged. He still wore sleep robes, evidence of the rude awakening in the night and being hurried from his home. From his typical unfriendly visage, Thalia feared he’d deduced her secret.

Thalia slowly released her breath and willed her muscles to relax. Despite her concerns, she had to remember that no one knew of her pact. The stranger alone had acted, and there could be no evidence to the contrary. However, if she continued to behave like a guilty child, someone could make that leap. In this time of suspicion and uncertainty, there was no safety simply due to her station.

“Healer Elden, how is the king?” Thalia intentionally projected calm command, demanding a response while seizing control of the moment.

“I’m afraid I am of no use in this situation. King Lotar’s ailment is one of the soul and not the body.”

Kilik took a stride forward, half drawing his blade from the sheath. “What are you saying, old man?”

“Hold, Uncle,” Thalia shouted. “I will hear him.”

“Who are you to order me about, whelp? I am the king’s elder brother.”

“You are the king’s only brother, and I am heir to the throne,” she reminded him. “You gave up all right to speak to me this way when you chose to captain the Enforcers over accepting the crown.”

Kilik’s jaw tightened, but he released his grip on the sword. “Of course, Princess. Forgive me. I spoke out of turn. Healer, please continue.”

“As I said, the king’s ailment is not physical. I suspect dark magic at play.”

“So, he wasn’t poisoned?” Thalia realized she’d surprised the others by her question, especially Galron. “What? You don’t think I couldn’t figure out what you were thinking?”

Galron shrugged. “No, not poison. There are no symptoms of such crude measures.”

“Besides,” Kilik said, “how could anyone get past the king’s personal Enforcers or castle security on the whole? Dark magic is the only answer.”

Silence prevailed for several moments until Thalia realized all awaited her orders. As she’d just reminded the most powerful man in the kingdom, she was in charge. Thalia cleared her throat to buy herself another second.

“You are released, Healer. Thank you for your services. Galron, send for Saraphax.”

Galron slapped a hand against his sunken chest. His cape trailed the floor as he shuffled away with Elden in tow.

“That’s it?” Kilik asked. “You leave the king unprotected and send for an old fool in the place of an experienced healer?”

Thalia lost her patience. She felt on edge, and Kilik’s constant questioning wore on her nerves.

“In case you haven’t noticed, two of the king’s personal guards are already on station.” Thalia indicated the sentries posted at either end of the corridor. “Elden has stated he cannot help; therefore, I haven’t any reason to keep him. Saraphax will detect if Lotar’s condition is truly due to a spell. What else would you have me do?”

Kilik’s eyes narrowed. “You speak as though you doubt the healer’s words. Is there something you wish to share with me?”

“Nothing at all, Uncle. Once Saraphax has examined my father, I will decide how to proceed.”

“You will decide? Of course, I presume you will consult with the council to make that determination.”

Something in the phrasing caught Thalia’s attention. She carefully weighed her response. Politics were a large part of running a hierarchy. Cutting the council out of any decision making was a dangerous prospect. She couldn’t afford to make enemies so early into her leadership. Thalia wasn’t under any illusions. Regardless, if her father lay under a spell or a physical malady, credit went to her cohort. Lotar’s recovery remained highly doubtful.

“You understand me perfectly then.”

“Halt, state your business.”

Thalia turned toward the female sentry she’d passed earlier. The woman barred someone’s way. Due to the soldier’s slight

stature and the height of the newcomer, Thalia easily recognized the seer.

“Allow Seer Saraphax to pass.”

Instantly, the Enforcer stepped aside. Saraphax bypassed the soldier without a glance, striding toward Thalia with purpose in her step. Her pale eyes passed quickly over Kilik before settling on Thalia.

“You called for me, Princess?”

“Yes, but how are you here so quickly? I haven’t yet sent for you, and the temple lies across the Silver Valley. Not a short distance, to be sure.”

“I had a vision. The king lay ill, and I knew you would need me.”

“Isn’t that convenient?” Kilik mumbled. His disdain for the female soothsayers was common knowledge, and Thalia chose to ignore the remark.

“I will accompany you. Captain Kilik, please remain here.” Thalia cut him off before he could object. “Your aversion to seer visions may influence the outcome. If there is even the slightest chance of learning the source of Lotar’s malaise, I will pursue it.”

“Understood, but I shall not leave until we have answers.”

Thalia nodded and turned to the king’s chamber. She had hesitated to enter before, but this time she entered without pause. All doubt had vanished when she consciously assumed control. Her sense of accomplishment faded as soon as she saw Lotar.

Her father’s pallor competed with the paleness of the sheets. His cheeks appeared sunken, and dark circles lay beneath his eyes. Had she not known better, Thalia would believe him starved. She wondered if Healer Elden was wrong after all. Lotar’s condition certainly resembled the result of poisoning to her. The only thing Thalia found attractive about his appearance was the snow-white hair and beard. Once blond like Thalia, Lotar had the fortune of turning white instead of dingy gray.

“Princess, are you well?”

“Fine, please see to the king.”

Thalia took a stance at the foot of the bed. Her positioning

allowed her to see everything while providing some distance from Saraphax. Unlike Kilik, Thalia believed in the gift of foresight. She didn't understand how her uncle could accept magic, utilize it every day, and yet doubt the veracity of the seer's visions. Distancing herself probably wouldn't prevent Saraphax from knowing of Thalia's crime, but it was the best she could do for the moment. Fortunately, the elder of the temple seers had focused her vision upon the king.

Saraphax placed one hand upon Lotar's forehead and the other directly over his heart. The seer took a deep breath and closed her eyes. For long seconds, nothing happened. Suddenly, Saraphax's head reeled back, and she gasped as though in pain.

"I see darkness." Saraphax frowned, and her eyes moved beneath the closed lids. "He struggles to throw off the chains of magic."

"Who did this to him? Can you see?"

Saraphax shook her head. "The magic is old...it's been so long since Lotar has known freedom."

"Old? You mean the spell is old, or the caster is an ancient one? Speak not in riddles, woman."

"He calls out to you, begging for your assistance. Help me, Thalia."

Saraphax suddenly lurched backward away from the king's bedside. She gasped and opened her eyes even as her knees buckled slightly. Thalia rushed toward her to provide support.

Saraphax stopped Thalia with a raised hand. "I am fine, Princess. It was simply...overwhelming."

"What did you see?" Thalia knew well that Saraphax's mumbled words while in contact with her subject weren't all she experienced. Visions often came in a torrent of emotions, sometimes difficult to decipher. Only the initiated could interpret them.

"I do not know who cast the initial spell, but King Lotar has been under its influence for many rotations. The magic had the feel of age but not experience."

Thalia felt her stomach clench. She wanted to know how many rotations her father had suffered. She should have known something was wrong. Instead, she'd leapt to the conclusion

that the king had become evil. A malevolent curse explained his erratic behavior, but when did things change? When she was still a child? Somehow, the knowledge made her actions seem even more callous.

“Then whoever did this was not an expert magician but a coward seeking to use the king for their own agenda.”

“I cannot say, but this is not an everyday enchantment. It cannot be undone with a simple counter spell.”

“How do you know that? We should at least try.” Thalia’s voice rose as panic swirled inside her. “There has to be something you can do. Are you not the elder of all seers?”

The door opened, and Kilik rushed into the room. He carried his sword at the ready and visually scanned the chambers. “I heard you shout, Thalia.”

Thalia lurched over to the chair against the wall and dropped onto the brocade cushions. She lowered her head into her hands, thoughts swirling as she considered their options. There weren’t many, and she hadn’t the experience to decide.

Finally, Thalia looked at Kilik. “Assemble the council. I would like to speak with them.”

Chapter Four

Thalia stood watching the council members and carefully studied them as she waited for their reactions. The people considered the Great Hall the meeting place for everything from entertaining dignitaries to hosting meals for those who resided inside the palace. Now, all doors were sealed and guarded for this special meeting of eight. Three of those were the king's general council. Aside from Thalia, Kilik, and King Lotar's chief advisor, Galron, Saraphax stood in attendance as well. Thalia had invited her here to fill in any gaps concerning this dark magic. Thalia had never had occasion to interact very often with anyone other than her uncle. Even Kilik had become a stranger to her over the years as she grew into adulthood.

Now Thalia waited in the corner, ready to bring this meeting to order as soon as she garnered a feel for the remaining three. Could they be trusted? She simply didn't know. The only other woman present filled a spot on the council, but Thalia didn't really care for her. Danielle stood tall and willowy, with a kind of ethereal presence that made her seem easily broken—until someone looked into her eyes. Like all Trianans, Danielle had lavender eyes, but hers carried a hardness not easily explained. That she tended to look down her long aquiline nose at the people, however, was not in dispute. Should Thalia have to choose one word to describe Danielle, it would be haughty. In Thalia's opinion, she seemed to think of herself as special—perhaps because she hailed from the Eastern realms.

Next, Thalia considered Perry. A lieutenant in the Royal Enforcer Guard, Perry cared only for tactics and the welfare of the kingdom. His fanaticism with all things warrior bordered on paranoid. Despite this fact, none could argue that he was a master tactician. Currently, Perry stood beside one of the narrow windows with his arms folded. Thalia thought it was a deliberate stance to show off his muscularity. Even the muscles adjacent to his neck bulged in a way she found slightly nauseating. Perry kept his dark hair shorn down to the scalp

and his beard closely trimmed. As Thalia watched, he spoke with the final council member, Alagast.

Thalia softened slightly as she considered the old man. Alagast reminded her of a kind grandfatherly sort, patient and wise. His long gray beard brushed against his chest as he spoke. He hunched over slightly as though he had carried the weight of their world on his shoulders for far too long. Unexpectedly, Alagast turned his head and caught her eye. He winked at her and then returned to his conversation. Thalia smiled at the gesture.

Then there was Galron. Thalia's smile faded quickly.

Thalia had seen Kilik approach from the corner of her eye, but she kept her gaze trained upon Galron. "What do you think of that one?"

"Galron? He's a harmless sort. Not exactly what I'd consider reliable, to be honest. Why do you ask?"

"He's such a..." Thalia struggled for the right word.

"Worm?"

"Exactly. Why do you suppose the king chose him as an advisor? Surely there is someone better suited for such an important position."

Kilik shook his head, curls bouncing slightly. "I'm sure Lotar had his reasons, but no one questions the king. Before I forget, I've instituted a day of vigil for the king in your name. I've also dispatched Enforcers to keep the peace during this vulnerable time."

"Thank you, Kilik. I truly appreciate your diligence. I wonder if you could do me a favor. Dispatch someone to release the man from the stocks near the town square."

"Why? He is a thief. He did not pay the taxes owed to the kingdom."

"Just do it." Thalia clenched her teeth in silent anger. The taxes were too high. How could anyone expect a humble shop owner to pay such exorbitant tithes?

"I'll see to it. We should get started. This day escapes us."

"Of course."

Thalia pushed away from the wall and strode toward the High Table. Eyes followed her, and conversation dropped away as the others approached their seats. Thalia assumed the king's

customary position at the head of the table, slightly surprised when no one took offense. Kilik dispatched a messenger, presumably to see to Thalia's request. Then he perched to her right. Galron immediately seized the chair to her left. Thalia instinctively held her breath against the stench of wet dog.

As the others settled in, Thalia released the air in her lungs. It promised to be a long meeting, and she could hardly hold her breath for the entirety. Danielle took the seat directly across, bracketed by Perry and Alagast. Saraphax chose the seat at the far end, with as much space from the others as possible. Thalia wondered at the distance but let it go in the face of more pressing issues. No one spoke for long moments, probably waiting for Thalia to take the lead.

Finally, when Thalia felt she truly had the attention of all those present, she began to speak. "By now, you've all heard rumors of King Lotar's condition."

Danielle's gaze flitted toward Saraphax and then back to her. Thalia continued. "We have determined that the king lies under an evil spell. Elder Seer Saraphax could detect the curse, but there is some doubt on how to disrupt this magic."

"Is it possible Saraphax is wrong?" Alagast asked. "No insult intended toward the seer, of course."

"None. Healer Elden examined King Lotar first and stated he had no physical malady. I've called you all here because you are the brightest in the kingdom as well as the king's council. If anyone is able to determine the best course of action, it is you."

Thalia wasn't sure of any such thing. Of those in the room, only Alagast even appeared approachable. The others were distant, arrogant, and vile. Thalia considered it a great mystery Lotar had chosen this trio of advisors. Still, she'd found that one often received more cooperation through flattery than through candor.

Perry's expression hardened. Danielle blinked as though surprised while Alagast merely smiled. Thalia began to see a glimmer of why these three stood as council members. None reacted as she'd expected, and all kept silent in the face of her statement.

Galron finally broke the silence. "Princess Thalia, perhaps

you should tell us why we're truly here."

"Very well. Elder Saraphax tells me the king has been under this curse for many rotations. As you know, his behavior of late has seemed somewhat...erratic. More and more people waste away in the dungeons, and executions are now a regular occurrence."

"A kingdom must have order," Kilik said. "Should we allow criminals to have their way in Honui?"

"Certainly not, but I merely state what we've all seen with our own eyes. My point is that this curse has grown much stronger over time, even if we weren't aware. We need to counter it with light magic of equal weight. I hoped you might have suggestions."

"Seer Saraphax," Alagast said, "you oversee many who are trained in the ways of such magic. Can you not provide a sufficient remedy?"

"Unfortunately, I cannot, honored council member. The temple houses those gifted with visions. It allows us to see many possible futures, but even those have limitations."

Her answer reminded Thalia of something. Sudden suspicion filled her with dread. "Earlier, outside the king's chamber, you said you'd had a vision. What you did not say was when. You're a seer, an *elder*. Why are you only now coming forward with this vision when it is suddenly apparent that it occurred some time ago?"

Someone gasped, but Thalia kept her gaze centered on Saraphax. Depending on her answer, the seer walked a precarious line. Admitting that she knew of something amiss before the king's current malady and did nothing to prevent it could jeopardize her own life.

Thalia realized the implications immediately and rushed to soothe Saraphax. "Rest assured that no harm shall befall you. We simply need all information at hand if we hope to restore the king."

Saraphax visibly relaxed. "If I had mentioned the vision while Lotar remained healthy, I'd have lost my head. I began having a feeling something was wrong approximately a week ago, but I didn't have any portent of what it could be."

"Go on."

“As a Silver Temple elder, I see many novices every year. Their powers are sporadic at best. They have difficulty controlling their visions, often pummeled by sight and emotions that aren’t their own. Until they learn to block and filter what they see, it is impossible to make sense of the images. For that reason, I’ve learned to erect barriers that keep unwanted illusions from bombarding me.”

“Not to mention guarding the privacy of your apprentices, I’m sure. Please continue.”

“I’ve had a feeling of something wrong for some time but never anything substantial that I could pinpoint. That changed last night.”

Thalia held her breath as she waited for Saraphax to reveal her secret.

“Early this morning, as I lay sleeping, a dream came to me. I heard King Lotar screaming in my head. I saw him lying asleep, but his mind cried out to me for help. The fear in his thoughts forced me awake. I tried to tell myself that it was only a dream.”

“But you knew better,” Thalia finished. “That’s why you came this morning.”

“Yes. I spent the rest of the early morning hours reaching out to him, but Lotar has gone beyond my reach. All I can feel is a great darkness weighing him down. This isn’t something an ordinary mage can heal. You will need a great sorcerer to unbind this spell.”

“What do you suggest?” Galron demanded in his customary tactless way. “We can’t just send out an edict ordering every mage in the lands to our side.”

“Indeed,” Perry said, speaking in deep, gravelly tones for this first time. “Should we order every one of them to attempt to heal Lotar in turn? Lock them away in the dungeons if they fail? Ridiculous.”

Danielle cleared her throat softly, garnering everyone’s attention. “As most of you know, I’m not from these lands. I’m originally from the Eastern Kingdom, Ravinere specifically. I have friends there still, and I’ve heard recent rumors of someone. Supposedly, there is a new and powerful sorcerer.”

“A preeminent sorcerer in the Eastern lands?” Thalia asked.

“This is the first I’ve heard of such a person.”

Danielle smiled, but there was little warmth in the gesture. “He does not hail from the east but from south of there. I’ve heard he resides on the Southern Isles. Again, that is only rumor and one that the king knew. No one who has ventured there has ever returned.”

That explained one thing. Having Danielle on the council gave the king an ear into the other hemisphere of their world. Smart. Unfortunately, with information based upon a rumor, there wasn’t enough for Thalia to go on.

“From what I understand, the Southern Isles are at least two weeks’ journey by dray or cart,” Thalia said.

“Three,” Kilik supplied helpfully.

“Does anyone know of another powerful magician, perhaps one closer? There has to be another way, aside from trekking halfway across the known realms.” Thalia felt she needed all the information she could get.

“I fear there is no other choice,” Saraphax interjected. “I’m unsure why, but I feel that the fate of our world is interwoven with that of the king.”

Thalia glared at Saraphax. “And you believe contacting this unknown mage is the answer?”

From there, people began speaking all at once. Thalia had difficulty keeping up with all the remarks. One thing soon became clear. No one with sufficient magic resided anywhere in the western realms or in what they currently knew of the eastern region. Thalia began to have a sinking sensation in the pit of her stomach.

Eventually, Alagast spoke over the others. “I’m afraid Saraphax is right, Princess Thalia. Someone must be dispatched to the Southern Isles to bring back this cure.”

“A quest? We aren’t even sure such a mage exists, and whom could we send? Not only that, but also what guarantee have we that he would agree to assist? This magician owes us nothing,” Thalia couldn’t see the sense in such an action.

“All valid questions,” Kilik said. “However, I can answer at least one of your queries. I am the obvious choice to assume this venture.”

“Why? This is a fool’s errand with us remaining unsure of

the outcome. Why would you volunteer for a mission that can be accomplished by any of the Enforcer guards?" Thalia questioned his motivations. Her uncle had always preferred staying with the guard company. He had once told her that he felt they required supervision that only he could provide.

"Because I am captain of that unit and therefore the most qualified. I will find this magician and secure the counter spell, assuming both exist. I will take a full squad of soldiers with me to ensure the success of our mission."

Relief and gratitude proved almost overwhelming. Thalia could stay and see to the safety of the kingdom, perhaps forge new relations with the neighboring realms. As for the cure, no one was more equipped to handle such a dangerous task than Kilik. His combat skills were unparalleled.

"Very well, it's decided," Thalia said, accepting his offer.

"Uh, forgive me..." Galron said.

Thalia closed her eyes briefly before glancing to her left. "What is it, Galron?"

"No disrespect, Princess, but you should seek this quest. Not Captain Dumont."

"I beg your pardon? I am next in line as successor. What happens to our lands if I should fall?"

"The king lies upon what is potentially his death bed. All eyes in the realm will turn to you as his heir. What better way to set an example of bravery and leadership than to accept this task yourself?"

Thalia's heartbeat pounded in her ears. Images of meeting the sorceress in the alley flooded her mind. The woman had asked her so many questions about worthiness and demanded to know why Thalia should rule the kingdom in Lotar's place. Had she botched the crime deliberately? Set Thalia upon this course as a way to prove herself? Thalia wanted to rail against the stranger, but there was one major problem. Galron was right, and so was the sorceress. If she didn't accept this task, she didn't deserve the crown.

"It must be you, Princess," Saraphax said softly, confirming what Thalia already knew.

"I will take my crossbow and enough supplies for a single month. I can gather other provisions along the way."

“What? Thalia, you can’t be serious.” Kilik’s voice reverberated throughout the stone room, carrying his concern and outrage.

“I appreciate your concern, Uncle. Truly, I do, but Galron has a point. Should the unthinkable happen...” Thalia cleared the lump in her throat. “If we lose the king, our subjects must know they can rely upon the monarchy to protect them. That cannot happen if they believe their future queen a coward. How would it look if I sent others to fight my battles?”

Kilik apparently wasn’t ready to give up. “At least take a full squad with you, for protection. You’ll be able to carry enough supplies and weapons to make the entire journey in comfort.”

“We’ll also draw unwanted attention with so many warriors. No, it’s better to take only a few soldiers. We can travel faster, and time is of the essence. Please select four of your best to accompany me.”

Kilik finally nodded. Thalia noticed that the council remained eerily silent. She could only assume they were in full agreement with her decision. Perhaps they hoped she would fail, die along the way, and they could install someone more in line with their way of thinking.

“Have our supplies readied and everyone in the courtyard within the hour. I’d like to leave before midday. Also, have my mount saddled and brought around.”

Thalia felt her knees shaking and hoped Kilik acted quickly before she had a chance to back out. He took control of the meeting and dismissed everyone. Kilik tried one last time to change her mind, but Thalia remained stalwart. Eventually, Thalia managed to convince him.

“I know better than to argue once you are decided, Thalia. All I ask is an embrace for your old uncle before you go.”

Thalia stood and stepped into Kilik’s arms. She hadn’t anticipated such an emotional reaction. Perhaps a heart actually still beat within the grizzled warrior. In his embrace, Thalia felt like a little girl again. She remembered Kilik comforting that child after scraping her knee. Thalia hadn’t been that small in many years, and she realized it was time to act appropriately. She blinked away a tear and pulled back.

“Watch after him for me, Kilik.”

“Lotar and the people,” he said. “You have my pledge.”

An hour later, Thalia swept down the narrow stairway. She kept one hand upon the wall, avoiding the open side and a steep drop to the entryway below. Idly, Thalia considered the purpose of the precarious steps. Although the stairway was designed so that a defender of the palace needed to encounter only one attacker at a time, Thalia didn't really think that her immediate concern. The way her heart pounded, she hoped she had the courage to carry out her accepted task. The idea of returning to her rooms and hiding under the covers certainly carried more appeal.

She sighed when she realized the time to hide had come and gone. Thalia shifted the pack on her shoulders and reached up to push the blond locks away from her face. The gesture was more habitual than anything. She caught sight of Kilik standing at the foot of the stairs with a quizzical expression on his face.

“Thalia, what have you done?”

“Do you like it?”

“I don't know. Why did you cut all your hair off?”

Thalia ran a hand through her shortened locks. “It's not all gone. I just cut it short so it wouldn't get in the way. Aren't you the one who told me long hair can be a problem during a physical encounter?”

“Very true. I suppose I'll get used to it. Come, your company waits for you in the courtyard. Saraphax is also there, although I'm unsure as to her purpose.”

“She probably intends to give me some sort of cryptic warning before I leave.”

Kilik chuckled and lifted the pack from Thalia's shoulders. When they stepped out onto the cobblestones, Thalia spotted the requested four soldiers. She noticed that one of them was a woman, surprising considering that Kilik seemed to prefer male guards. Perhaps he'd chosen this female on Thalia's account, to keep her from leading a quest in all male company. Thalia hoped that didn't mean this soldier wasn't up to the mission.

She shook her head, silently assuring herself that Kilik wouldn't endanger her in such a way.

Seven drays stood ready in the courtyard, with five saddled

and readied for the journey. The remaining animals carried their supplies. Kilik approached Thalia's favorite, Farah. The dray instantly snorted and pulled against the groom's grip. Farah pawed the ground with her cloven hoof and swiped at Kilik with the tiny horns on her muzzle.

"I've got it, Uncle." Thalia took her pack and tied it onto the dray's rump, atop the saddlebags.

Someone had already attached her crossbow and quiver to the saddle horn. Thalia's vibria, Emerald, perched atop Farah's rump. Many preferred a falcon or owl on long journeys, but Thalia preferred the tiny green dragon. Currently, Emerald's talons gripped the canvas roll tied behind the saddle. Thalia offered the dragonlet a smile and stroked her dray's neck.

She turned back for any last words of advice. The guards had already mounted and waited patiently. To Thalia's surprise, Kilik stood back with the others. Saraphax faced her, hands folded inside her robes.

"Seer, you have something to add?"

"I know you are frightened, child, but you can do this. Only the one responsible for the king's condition can undo the curse."

Thalia's heart pounded against her ribs when she realized Saraphax knew her secret. Still, she wasn't quite ready to admit to treachery. "You said someone enacted Lotar's spell long ago. How am I responsible for that?"

"It's all right. Your intentions were good, but the result remains. Lotar may have eventually thrown off the spell on his own."

"You know that's not true." Thalia looked at her feet, hesitant to allow anyone to see her emotional reaction. "He has grown more ruthless over time. Eventually, the spell would have meant the death of our kingdom."

"You're right, I suppose. This way, with your intervention, the darkness is revealed, and there is hope. One last thing: begin your quest at the Keechog River."

"Do you mind if I ask why?"

"You will find someone who can help you. Without her, you will fail."

"I apprised Kilik you'd offer some last minute cryptic

advice.”

R'cey sat propped against a blasted tree trunk, her breathing laborious. She managed to retrieve the missing four members of her team. Surprisingly, pulling Brenna out from under the deck plating wasn't the most difficult. Hauling Teles's body up from a ravine and getting Melousa out of a tree proved equally problematic. R'cey's busted leg made retrieving the two almost impossible.

She clenched her fist, clasping identification chips and looking at her dead crew members. R'cey had positioned them close together in the clearing, arranged in a star pattern with their heads at the center point. She still had to set their bodies on fire, but she required rest first. She refused to die until she paid them that honor.

“Warning, blood pressure falling. Recommend immediate transfusion.”

R'cey attempted to laugh but only coughed. She caught her breath and prepared to stand one final time. She could either sit on her ass and die or finish her goal. She'd already lost the mission to bring Zolla to justice. Eventually, someone from the Amalgam would come looking to complete their task and discover the hunters' fate.

She put her weight on her right foot and tried to stand but fell back down. R'cey realized she was simply too weak to keep going. She considered firing an explosive toward her people but rejected the idea immediately. An explosion wouldn't guarantee full incineration. With her luck, she'd merely scatter them around the area once again. She cringed at the thought.

Before she could decide which course of action to take, R'cey heard voices approaching. At first, she thought the Amalgam had sent out a rescue team. Then she realized it was far too early for that. It would take at least three days before Celetron authorities could receive and respond to their emergency beacon. That left only one alternative.

R'cey quickly lowered the visor on her helmet. Although she wasn't much of a threat with her injuries, the suit would

make her appear more formidable. Regardless of her actual physical structure, the skin suit gave the wearer the look of heavy musculature and concealed her gender. With her features in question, the indigenous people should think her a powerful foe. At the last second, she realized it would probably also frighten a stranger into a violent reaction.

Out of instinctual self-preservation, R'cey raised her left arm. She balled her hand into a fist and aimed toward the area where she heard the voices. "Arm all weapons systems," she said into the helmet.

The computer responded by bringing up the HUD. All missile indicator lights quickly activated, shaded red to indicate their readiness. R'cey prepared to fire as horse-like creatures bearing riders lumbered into the clearing. Her vision swam and her aim wavered, but she recognized their words. A small corner of reasoning wondered at the possibility of hearing English on an alien world, but the bulk of her mind centered on the implications.

"Princess, take cover! A demon!"

Someone brandished a sword. R'cey couldn't really see the person, only the glint of sunlight on metal. Another rider raised a bow. Her vision swam, and her arm dropped back to her side. She hadn't the strength to continue the fight. R'cey said a quick, silent prayer that her death would be sudden and that someone would treat her crew with honor.

Chapter Five

“Lady Thalia, look there! What is it?” Henry, one of the guards called out.

Thalia reined in her mount and glanced overhead. The northern sky revealed a fireball streaking toward the horizon. She experienced the same fear and uncertainty that she heard in Henry’s voice. She couldn’t imagine an experienced scout and tracker easily shaken, but she hadn’t the same luxury. These people looked to her for guidance.

“I’m not sure. I’ve heard of fiery rocks falling from outside our world, but I don’t believe that’s what this is.”

Henry rode up beside her. In profile, the most prominent of his features were the long black sideburns and carefully trimmed beard. The beard was really more like heavy stubble. “What could it be then?”

Thalia hesitated, but another answered in her place.

“It’s nothing we need worry about,” Commander Bergen said.

The surly guard maneuvered past them to take the lead. Thalia didn’t care for the man, but Kilik had insisted on his presence. Bergen’s clean cut, reddish-blond appearance seemed in direct counterpoint to his sour attitude.

“And why exactly is that?” Thalia asked.

“Because it’s not coming our way, Princess. Therefore, it is not a threat.”

“Perhaps a bad omen,” Lieutenant Kahlan Bethell suggested.

The woman spoke from behind, maintaining her post of guarding the rear. The final Enforcer, Pax, kept silent and waited for a response.

As much as Thalia appreciated another woman in her company, she didn’t care for ignorant superstition. She also didn’t welcome Bergen usurping her authority. The condescending way he spoke to her made Thalia sound like an inexperienced child. That she felt like one remained wholly beside the point. She had to take charge now, or Bergen would

happily wrest all control from her.

“Perhaps not, but we shall investigate it all the same.” Thalia spurred Farah into motion, overtaking Bergen and setting out through the trees.

“Princess, I must protest. Captain Dumont sent me along to keep you safe. This...mystery...is not a part of our mission.”

“That’s for me to decide, Commander. The way I see it, you have two choices. You can either keep up or head back to the palace.”

All four of the Enforcers pressed closer around Thalia, positioning her in the middle. Bergen failed to respond, but his expression darkened further. Thalia felt the unease in the air. Even their animals began to snort uneasily.

In order to reassure her guards, Thalia offered them a brief explanation. “Elder Saraphax stated we would find someone near the Keechog River to aid in our quest. That fireball went down very near the river. I don’t see it as a dark omen, merely a sign that we travel the correct path.”

The group seemed slightly relaxed after Thalia’s comment. They rode in silence for a few more hours, but Thalia noticed everyone remained alert. Eventually, Thalia smelled smoke from burning greenery and another completely unfamiliar stench. The odor carried a bitterness that Thalia had never before experienced. Her brow furrowed, and she reached for the crossbow at her knee.

“Emerald,” Thalia whispered, “scout ahead.”

The tiny dragon launched herself from the saddlebags. Her leathery wings brushed Thalia’s hair as she took flight. In seconds, the vibria disappeared into the trees. The guards moved up into defensive positions, crowding Thalia behind them.

“There is a clearing just ahead,” Thalia said. “Emerald sees some type of crash sight.”

“You mean someone overturned a cart or wagon here?” Pax asked.

Thalia frowned. Through her link with the dragon, she attempted to interpret what Emerald communicated. “No. There was something within the fireball, not a boulder but some type of metallic craft.”

“Demons,” Bergen insisted.

“Perhaps, but we won’t find out by standing here debating the issue. Move on.”

Fear left a bitter taste in Thalia’s mouth. She swallowed and gripped the crossbow more tightly. Thalia kept her finger off the trigger, afraid she’d accidentally shoot one of her soldiers. Through her link, she continued to provide pertinent information.

“Most of the fires are out. Emerald doesn’t see anyone alive, but there are four bodies near the center of the clearing. They are strangely arranged.”

“Arranged?” Pax asked. “That suggests someone moved them.”

“Yes, wreckage would leave them scattered. Emerald doesn’t see anyone, but you must all stay sharp. We’re nearing the tree line.”

The last remark wasn’t strictly necessary. Thalia saw the edge of the clearing through the thinning limbs. Ahead, Commander Bergen and Kahlan breached the boundary. From there, several things seemed to happen at once. All merged into a jumble that left Thalia reeling.

“Demon!” Bergen pulled the sword from his sheath and spurred his mount forward.

Kahlan nocked an arrow into her bow. “I see it. There, against the tree.”

Thalia strained to see anything past the charging soldiers. Surging bodies prevented her from deciphering anything clearly. She could only make out a flash of coal black. Desperate to understand their situation, Thalia drew on every ability she possessed. She concentrated on pulling magical energy from the planet into her body. At the same time, Thalia focused through Emerald’s sight. Finally, she saw it all.

Emerald had taken roost in a high tree behind the crash site. The four Enforcers rushed into the clearing on their steeds, headed for something directly beneath the dragonet. A black-clad figure raised its left arm, aiming toward the Enforcers. At first, it seemed a gesture of greeting.

Other than the unfamiliar garment, this stranger resembled a normal person, but then the arm dropped, and the being

ceased all movement. The soldiers were halfway across the clearing now. Thalia sensed when Kahlan was about to release the arrow. Another second and the stranger would die.

“Stop, do not attack!”

Thalia dispatched a mental command to Emerald. The dragon dropped from the trees, directly into the path of the oncoming charge. An arrow barely missed her three-foot wingspan before sailing harmlessly into the trees.

Drays veered aside or reared up. Bergen almost lost his seat. In seconds, everyone surrounded the unmoving creature. All weapons aimed toward the stranger, but the soldiers waited. Thalia approached more slowly. She passed her crossbow to Henry and dismounted.

“Princess.”

Thalia ignored Bergen’s warning tone. She noticed the slow rise of the stranger’s chest. This person barely breathed. Then Thalia noticed something else. “This creature is badly injured.”

“Good, allow it to expire,” Bergen said. “We know not what it is.”

“Precisely, but let’s find out.”

Thalia knelt beside the stranger. She hesitated for a moment before placing a hand upon the creature’s shoulder. Thalia detected a slight tremor beneath her fingers but nothing more. Encouraged, she briefly touched the black material on the stranger’s left thigh. Her fingers came away streaked with red.

“It’s blood. What demon have you ever heard of that bleeds like a human?”

“Then how do you explain the strange flying craft?”

Others nodded, and Thalia rushed to make her point before they took matters into their own hands. “That we know of. Triana is a large world, Commander. Perhaps someone in a faraway land has developed such wonders. What we do know is that this person has suffered a great tragedy. The proof of that lies all round us, or have you not noticed the bodies your mount leapt over as you rushed to murder this one?”

Bergen glanced away, clearly uncomfortable from his hasty actions.

Thalia pressed her advantage. “We should attempt to render

aid. Assuming this creature survives, you may have the answers that you seek.”

Unexpectedly, the stranger coughed. The noise sounded odd, as though funneled through a deep cavern.

Thalia flinched and pulled away. The anticipated attack never came, and she relaxed slowly. “Easy, no one will harm you. Do you understand?”

R’cey waited for Triana’s ignorant inhabitants to end her life. Their actions clearly telegraphed their intent. For some reason, these people spoke standard Amalgam. She didn’t question how and focused instead on the word *demon* that one of the men uttered moments prior. At least their mounts avoided stepping on R’cey’s dead crew members when they rushed toward her.

Her arm fell weakly to her side. Her death wouldn’t be honorable since she couldn’t even defend herself. She simply didn’t have the strength. R’cey took comfort from the fact that these people couldn’t peel her out of her suit. Only her living DNA could do that. These savages could continue to think of her as something out of hell.

“Stop, do not attack!”

R’cey watched a small woman with shorn blond hair ride forward. A short conversation ensued between her and the others, but R’cey had difficulty concentrating and could hardly keep her eyes open. Her heart pumped in a strangely offbeat rhythm, and she understood the cold truth. It wouldn’t be long now.

Suddenly, the stranger knelt beside her. R’cey felt a gentle touch upon her thigh. She’d have expected pain from the compound fracture. Instead, R’cey experienced only numbness. More words passed between the others, but R’cey caught only a few. She attempted to focus when she realized the woman had directed a question her way.

“Do you understand?”

R’cey was sure the stranger had said something else, but she couldn’t remember what.

“I’m going to help you. Please try not to move.”

“Princess Thalia, this isn’t a good idea.”

“Keep your peace or go stand watch, Commander Bergen. The decision has already been made.”

The woman, Thalia, placed her hands on R’cey’s leg. She bracketed the leg wound between her hands and then stared down at the spot. R’cey watched her, strangely mesmerized. She couldn’t imagine what this woman thought was going to happen.

Slowly, R’cey realized the skin on her leg had started to heat up. The warmth wasn’t intense, only a few degrees. It felt good for a few seconds, and then her flesh began to itch. Thalia must have used some kind of medical instrument to induce healing. R’cey had missed it because of the dizziness swimming in her head.

The HUD inside R’cey’s helmet showed a steady improvement in vital signs. Readouts indicated the wound had closed, and the bleeding stopped. Too bad this Thalia person couldn’t replace the blood volume R’cey had lost. Maybe then, this world would stop spinning.

R’cey gasped as the bone snapped back into place. She stifled her scream and writhed in pain. Two of the soldiers, one male and one female, held her down as Thalia continued to work. The one called Bergen was not among those who assisted. The pain faded quickly, leaving R’cey in wonder that these people had actually risked touching her. She had understood the inhabitants of the world to be xenophobes.

“You will feel sleepy until your strength returns.” Thalia stood and addressed her troops. “Make camp. We’ll stop here for the night. Make preparations to bury the dead.”

“No.” R’cey opened her helmet. She still wasn’t comfortable allowing these people to see her features, but she couldn’t allow a burial. “Our customs require burning of the dead. Burial is a sacrilege.”

“So there is a person in there.” Thalia smiled down at her before nodding toward the deceased hunters. “We’ll see what we can do. Do you have a name?”

R’cey hesitated to respond. Finally, she decided it didn’t matter. Now that she would recover, she still had a mission to

complete. The Amalgam would eventually send another team to finish what she'd started. When they arrived, R'cey intended to have him already in custody. She'd never see these people again.

“R'cey Hawke.”

Thalia bent slightly at the waist. “I am Princess Thalia Dumont of the Western Kingdom. These are my royal Enforcer guards, Commander Bergen, Lieutenant Kahlan, Henry, and our scout, Pax.”

R'cey didn't bother to memorize the names. She planned to take off as soon as possible, so she figured it wasn't necessary.

“Someone bring water.”

A female soldier rushed to obey Thalia's command after handing off her bow.

Thalia took the water skin but halted quickly. She shook her head in a perplexed fashion. “I'm sorry, but I cannot offer you water around your headgear. Perhaps if you removed it?”

R'cey hesitated once again. While they could see the upper part of her face, R'cey didn't want to give away any more information than she had already. The helmet still covered her cheeks, mouth, and chin. Then again, she really hadn't any other choice. R'cey's body desperately required the fluids.

“Open oral slit,” R'cey mumbled inside the helmet.

Instantly, the panel slid aside. No one commented or pounced unexpectedly at the minute revelation. The suit still blurred most of her features and continued to project a mechanized version of her voice. R'cey relaxed a little as Thalia extended the canteen. She swallowed a few long mouthfuls before indicating she'd had enough. The water felt heavenly as it slid down her throat. It cooled her empty stomach and eased the ache she hadn't previously noticed. She wanted to drink the canteen dry but couldn't afford to make herself sick in the process.

“There, that's better.” Thalia stood and began issuing orders to set up camp.

R'cey kept watch as the others obeyed, though some didn't appear enthusiastic about the idea. Bergen, in particular, seemed to keep track of Thalia's every movement rather than rushing away to gather kindling or anything useful. R'cey

thought he could just be somewhat overprotective of his princess. It was certainly possible, but somehow she didn't think that was the answer. In truth, R'cey didn't really care as long as they left her hunters' bodies untouched.

Thalia interrupted R'cey's thoughts by dropping an armful of small twigs and branches at her feet. She squatted very near, almost back-to-back. R'cey found the blatant show of trust amusing as well as calculated. Thalia snapped twigs and arranged them into a pile.

"Kahlan, could you find some stones for the fire?" Thalia glanced over her shoulder at R'cey. "If you arrange the rocks in a circle around the fire, they reflect the heat."

"I know how to construct a campfire," Kahlan said and stormed off to gather stones from a nearby rock pile.

Thalia nodded and kept working. With her eyes on her chore, she asked, "Can you remove your head covering, or will it harm you to do so? It's just that I find you difficult to understand with the armor in place."

"Are you sure you don't find my voice disconcerting?"

"I'll admit, it does sound somewhat strange." Thalia wiped her hands on her knees and settled into the dirt, facing R'cey. "Do you always sound this way?"

These people were so transparent that R'cey found it staggering. In twenty minutes, she knew all she needed to know about their dynamic—who was in charge, who followed orders blindly, and which individual seemed to carry some type of grudge. They were superstitious yet oddly childlike in their innocence. Thalia had just proved as much by openly asking such a question.

R'cey's stubborn side caused her to consider declining Thalia's request. There was no need for them to know anything about her, and the Amalgam's regulations about interacting with the population remained in force. R'cey had absolutely no reason to foster goodwill since she'd soon be on her way...her separate way.

A tingling sensation in her thigh reminded R'cey that she owed Thalia a debt. The woman had saved her life, and R'cey lived by the hunter's code. That code demanded that she conduct her affairs with honor. Being forthright about her

appearance wasn't really too much to ask.

R'cey unsnapped the neck latches that connected the helmet to the skin suit. She heard a slight hiss before she lifted the helmet away. Cool air tossed auburn bangs away from her forehead and cooled the sweat on her brow. R'cey hadn't realized how warm she felt with the full suit in place until that moment. Then she caught sight of the surprise so evident on Thalia's features.

"What?" R'cey couldn't contain her smile.

Thalia blinked. "From your voice, I'd never have guessed you were a woman. A pretty one, too."

R'cey bypassed the compliment to focus on more pertinent details. "The computer interface modulates the wearer's voice to help conceal identity and gender."

"I'm not sure what your words mean, but I take it that is a good thing."

"It's tactically useful at times. Now, I was wondering if you'd tell me how you healed my leg. I'm still a little groggy from my injuries, but I haven't seen any advanced technology. How did you realign the bones?"

"I used magic, of course. I lack the strength to force the large bones together with my bare hands."

R'cey chuckled at the jest. "Good one. Come on, you can tell me. It's okay. I'm not going to try and steal whatever it is."

"I assure you that I do speak the truth. Did you not witness this event for yourself?"

R'cey stopped laughing. "There's no such thing as magic."

"But you saw me..."

R'cey shook her head and took a moment to recover from the ensuing dizziness. "I didn't see anything. Blood loss will do that to a person. It's okay, though. Keep your secret. I wouldn't give away tactical information to a stranger either."

Thalia's eyes centered on the ground between her feet. She seemed uncomfortable and wouldn't meet R'cey's gaze. Maybe Thalia was embarrassed that she tried to convince R'cey that magic healed her. Then again, maybe Thalia really believed in that sort of stuff. For many centuries, before they evolved, R'cey's own people confused science with magic. The possibility of such a childish belief reinforced R'cey's previous

assessment of Thalia and the other Trianans.

“I’ve never met anyone who didn’t believe in magic. It’s all around us. We use it every day.”

“Well, if it makes you feel any better, I believe that you believe.”

“I wonder, does this mean that you are not from my world?”

R’cey froze. There was that damned protocol rearing its ugly head again. R’cey had almost revealed too much simply because she underestimated these people. If Thalia discovered her secret, the results could be catastrophic. She remembered that Brenna thought the Trianans to be highly xenophobic. Although they had helped her, Thalia and her soldiers could just as easily turn against her.

To R’cey’s great relief, Thalia apparently didn’t expect an answer. She dusted her hands off on her thighs and then stood. “You’re welcome to guard your secrets, R’cey. We all have them.”

After her somewhat cryptic remark, Thalia looked into the trees above R’cey’s head. She made a beckoning motion. Something fluttered in the limbs overhead. Whatever it was, it sounded heavy—and lethal. R’cey instinctively ducked and leaned to the side. Weakness from the recent ordeal almost caused her to topple over completely. She caught herself and looked up in time to see a creature swoop past where she’d recently rested. The thing had a wide span, the wing shape reminiscent of a bat. When it lighted on Thalia’s forearm, R’cey noticed the beast’s blackish green hue. The hide appeared tough and leathery.

Reptilian eyes swiveled in R’cey’s direction. The long beak cracked open to reveal pointed teeth—teeth clearly made to rend flesh. A forked tongue flicked out to taste the air. Thalia reached up to stroke the pointed head, and the thing actually cooed. A reddish glow emanated from the beast’s belly.

“What the hell is that?”

Thalia frowned. “This is Emerald. She’s a vibria.”

At R’cey’s look of confusion, Thalia elaborated. “Emerald is a dragonlet, but she’s domesticated. Near my home is an island of such winged serpents. Some are large and quite dangerous. Others, like Emerald, have proven most useful.”

“You have a dragon for a pet? I can’t believe what I’m saying. Magic and now dragons? This is like a dream.” More like a nightmare, R’cey thought.

“Emerald isn’t a pet. She’s a friend and hunting partner. I’ve known people to use hawks or falcons, but vabria are more useful because of their fire breathing ability. Also, you can’t link to a simple bird.”

“Link? Never mind.” R’cey raised a hand to prevent Thalia from speaking. “I don’t need to know. Let that be *your* secret.”

At that moment, two of Thalia’s soldiers entered the clearing. R’cey recognized Kahlan and the man who resembled her idea of a pirate. He only needed an eye patch and a hook for a hand. Kahlan dropped a load of cut logs while the man carried a dead animal. He squatted a few feet away and silently began skinning the creature.

“Henry,” Kahlan sounded almost bored. “Would you mind doing that elsewhere? I don’t relish sitting in bloody bits while I eat.”

Henry grinned and vacated to the edge of the woods. R’cey got the feeling he was new to roughing it, much like his princess. So far, none of the soldiers had glanced at R’cey or spoken to her since the initial attack. R’cey kept quiet as well, waiting to broach her primary concerns about her crew.

“Where’s Bergen?” Thalia asked.

“He and Pax are setting up a perimeter and securing the drays,” Kahlan said.

“Why don’t you assist with that while I get the fire going?”

Kahlan hesitated. “Princess, we need to do something with these bodies. Ghosts walk at night, and sundown approaches.”

Thalia turned to R’cey. “She’s right. I wanted to wait until we were alone...”

“No, it’s fine. I just needed to rest a minute, but I’ll take care of it if I can have some privacy.”

R’cey hoped these people would take the hint. Henry could clean his kill in the forest. She didn’t care what the others did. R’cey had already broken protocol by interacting with them at all. She couldn’t have these backward savages see how she disposed of her dead.

“I understand your need to grieve alone, but you require

help to bury your friends.”

R’cey bristled and tried to remember Trianan ignorance. “I told you, hunters aren’t buried. I must burn the bodies in order to release their ghosts. I won’t bury them for scavengers to dig up.”

“Princess, we don’t have time to build pyres,” Kahlan said. “We have a mission to pursue. Why don’t we leave them here, all of them, and find a new campsite? I confess I’m not comfortable with all this burning metal. It smells strangely. It is unnatural.”

“Go assist Bergen and Pax. I’ll see to this.”

Kahlan thumped a fist across her chest. She didn’t seem happy about her orders and cast a subtle glance at R’cey before hurrying away. A nod from Thalia in Henry’s direction sent him into the trees in the opposite direction. R’cey felt relieved not to witness his bloody display but had a feeling this discussion would become awkward quickly.

“You have no plans to build pyres for your friends. Do you?”

“You’re perceptive, but they’re not my friends. They were my subordinates. These people were under my command.”

“Care to clarify?”

“Not particularly. No offense. I appreciate what you’ve done, but I can’t have you involved in this.”

“Is that because you will need to use your...technology?” Thalia hesitated when she spoke that word. That she knew it at all surprised R’cey.

“Exactly what do you know of my technology?”

“More than you would believe. R’cey, I suggest we speak plainly. I know you have no reason to trust, so I will go first. Then you may decide what you wish to share.”

“All right, that sounds fair.”

“Most Trianans are unaware that other planets hold life, though many suspect. They are content to believe in this myth. It gives the people a feeling of superiority. Having said that, the leaders of this world know differently. I can help you.”

R’cey already knew as much, and having Thalia aware of advanced societies made her situation easier. She still couldn’t share everything, but at least she could relax a little around this

woman.

“I don’t need your help. At least not with my people. I just need you to keep everyone away while I take care of them.”

Thalia lifted her arm and urged Emerald to take flight. The vibria launched into the trees and disappeared.

“She searches for her dinner, but I suggest you act quickly. The Enforcer guards will not leave me alone for long.”

“You’re staying?”

“As I’ve said, I already know the truth.”

“Do you?”

Somehow, R’cey suspected what she had planned would shock Thalia. She deliberately held Thalia’s lavender gaze in silent challenge. R’cey noted the odd color for the first time. While all of her group carried the same strange eye color, Thalia’s fixed regard seemed softer somehow. R’cey realized she’d become slightly distracted and focused on the task of staring the princess down. Locked in the peculiar gaze, R’cey found it difficult to look away. Thalia quirked her eyebrow, and a smile teased the corner of her thin lips.

“Fine, if you’re not going to leave, then make yourself useful. Help me up.”

Thalia grinned and offered a hand in assistance. “I’m unaccustomed to being spoken to in such a manner. I find it refreshing.”

R’cey grunted as her weight came down on the injured leg. The bone still ached, but it held, and at least the pain distracted her from her confusing reaction to the princess. R’cey waited for the brief dizziness to pass. She realized she had gripped Thalia’s hand tightly and quickly released the warm grasp.

“Yeah, well, I’m glad you like it, your majesty. I’m not exactly the reverent type.”

R’cey slowly shuffled toward her fallen crew. For a few moments, she stood and silently mourned their passing. Gentle Melousa would never keep her date with Tasia. She’d barely started her life, and now it had ended. Then there was Brenna with her humor. R’cey would miss her smile.

“Could you bring my helmet?”

She had forgotten it and needed the built-in targeting computer. Having Thalia retrieve her headgear gave R’cey time

to get her emotions under control. Thalia returned a little too hastily, and R'cey released a quiet sigh. She jammed the helmet on and closed the faceplate. Thalia would not hear the quiet words spoken into the helmet.

“Calculate trajectory for full cremation.”

Numbers rolled up the HUD, advising R'cey what to do.

“You might want to move away.” She spoke up so that Thalia would hear her.

Thalia took a few steps back, and R'cey raised her left arm. She closed her fist and aimed at the center point of the bodies. R'cey could have fired a missile with a single mental command, but this required more finesse. By using the control panel on her wrist, R'cey typed in a series of commands. Flames shot out from the nozzle over her hand. Enhanced by high yield gas, the flames burned in excess of fifteen hundred degrees.

A single tear tracked down her cheek as her former crew incinerated before her eyes. Safely concealed inside the helmet, she allowed her grief to show. As the fire roared, R'cey imagined she saw the ghosts rise in the smoke. The smoke would carry her friends to their final reward.

“What sorcery is this? I told you, this creature is evil.”

R'cey instinctively turned and prepared to shoot Bergen. His was one name she already knew because he was the one who insisted on speaking nonsense. She also suspected Bergen would love nothing more than to kill her without question.

Thalia stepped closer to R'cey. “Stop, both of you. Bergen, can you not just accept that R'cey is from a place that is different from our own? If she were this evil demon that you expect, she would already have killed us.”

“You can bet on that,” R'cey said after opening her visor.

Bergen didn't seem convinced. The sour expression on his face made him even more distasteful to R'cey than before. She didn't really care for men to begin with, and he seemed intent on proving her point.

“I do not trust her, Princess Thalia.”

“Then trust me. If you find you are unable to do so, then you may consider it an order.”

R'cey smirked beneath the helmet, impressed by Thalia's show of strength. It seemed odd that the slightest show of

obstinacy generated such a visceral reaction. R'cey absently wondered what Thalia would be like under more intimate conditions.

“I will do as you command, but I will kill this creature if I deem her a threat to you at any time. Mark my words.”

“Consider them marked. In the meantime, continue organizing our camp.”

Chapter Six

R'cey stood at the outer edge of the campfire's light. She faced into the alien woods. Even with five strangers behind her, R'cey felt very alone. As a bounty hunter, loneliness didn't bother her. It was all a normal part of her job. The pain of losing her team, however, proved a new and unwanted sensation.

"Hemotide injection required."

R'cey sighed. Perfect timing. At least the automated reminder provided a distraction.

"Proceed."

As the oxygenating agent hissed into her bloodstream, R'cey heard a twig snap. From the light footfalls, she guessed the visitor's identity. Not the soldier, Kahlan. The men lumbered about like drunken elephants. That left only Thalia. Of course, who else? The soldiers all feared her.

"Are you required to wear the helmet?" Thalia asked as she approached R'cey.

R'cey removed the helmet. "No. I suppose I just feel more comfortable with it on while I'm on an alien planet."

"Technically, you are the alien."

"You make a good point." R'cey smiled and turned to face Thalia. Even in the shadows, R'cey was mesmerized by the pastel gaze. Lavender eye color seemed so unusual.

R'cey found Thalia so alluring that for a moment, she was tempted to lean in for a kiss. As a norm, she didn't usually hesitate, but Triana was well outside her stomping grounds. Thalia seemed friendly enough, but R'cey didn't want to start an interplanetary incident. The excuse sounded good in her mind, but R'cey had to admit there was more. She had noticed the quiet tenacity in Thalia's manner and found it alluring. The last thing she wanted was to drive this woman away, although eventually, she needed to do exactly that. Her mission required it of her.

Thalia stepped farther into the forest, shattering the spell. She settled on a fallen log and patted the spot beside her.

R'cey accepted the silent invitation, waiting to see what

Thalia wanted. “Where are your guards?”

“Either sleeping or standing watch.”

“And they permitted you to speak with the monster alone?”

Thalia laughed. “In truth, they are unaware of my activities. Bergen believes me also to be sleeping.”

“Then I take it you need something?”

“Perhaps I am merely curious. I’ve never before met someone from another world. What’s it like?”

R’cey shrugged. “Not much different than here. People are pretty much the same wherever you go, at least on the inside. Most places have more gadgets than Triana though.”

“Gad-jets?”

“Technology. Things that make our lives easier.”

“Like your suit?”

“Yes. It contains everything I need for a mission. I have weapons, some medications, and stun grenades. It can even supply liquid nutrients for a short time.”

“That sounds...perfect.”

R’cey’s eyes narrowed, and her suspicious nature perked up. In her experience, no one provided assistance without expecting something in return. Thalia had helped R’cey and saved her life. Apparently, the time had come for Thalia to ask a favor of her own now.

“Perfect for what?”

“Why are you on Triana? You said those people were under your command. It stands to reason that you are a part of some sort of military unit.”

Thalia’s question, as pointed as it was, proved valid. She was one of Triana’s rightful leaders. As such, R’cey owed any legitimate authority on this planet some explanation for why she was here.

“We were in pursuit of a dangerous criminal. Zolla escaped the Amalgam and took refuge here. Don’t worry, though. He landed a long way from where we are now.”

“What is this Amalgam?”

“A consortium of six planets that banded together in the system. The planet I come from is Celetron. Our world is rich in metals and minerals. Then there’s Eta. It’s directly opposite Celetron. I’m surprised weeds grow there. We also have Iota,

Omicron, Piscium, and Eridani. I admit I'm biased, but Celetron is the most beautiful of the six. Apparently, the Amalgam agrees since they stationed the headquarters there. We all share supplies and provide protection for one another."

"I see. It all sounds quite impressive, but what will you do now that you have lost the means to find this...Zolla?" Thalia's questions sounded random, but R'cey had great instincts.

"Why don't you just say what's on your mind, your majesty?"

"There's that irreverence again." Thalia smiled, but R'cey didn't respond. "As you wish. You have lost your team and your vessel. You have no means of transportation."

"Not at the moment, but someone will come for me. If not for me, then for Zolla. When that happens, I'll make contact and hitch a ride."

"I believe I follow your meaning, but what will you do until then?"

"I take it you have something in mind?"

"Yes, I would like to offer you a contract."

R'cey wasn't above making a little money on the side. If she had to be stuck on this planet, a short task might provide her with some local currency. She currently had a money pouch stashed away in her suit for emergencies but no wish to use it if she didn't have to. The Amalgam provided hunters some funds when conducting off-world captures just in case.

"What sort of job and more importantly, what are you offering as payment?"

"My soldiers and I pursue a quest of the most vital nature. We seek a sorcerer in the Southern Isles. It is my hope this mage will provide a counter spell for the dark curse under which my father lies."

"Magic again," R'cey scoffed. "And the payment?"

"Your weight in gold once we return to Honui. Honui is the capitol of the Western Realm."

"Realms and magic. Now I know why this sounds so familiar. Earth people once believed in dragons and monsters, back in the Dark Ages."

"Earth is your home planet?"

"Not for many centuries, but that's not important. I

appreciate the offer, Princess, but I have to say no. Gold is heavy, and I can't carry that kind of weight around. Besides, I still have a mission to complete, even if I have to walk the whole way."

"You sound angry, R'cey. That is not the voice of justice but of vengeance."

R'cey's ire spilled over at Thalia's condescending tone. "In this case, it's the same thing. Zolla is charged with treason, numerous counts of murder, and arms trafficking. That part was in our mission briefing. Since I've been in orbit on this dirt ball, Zolla has murdered four skip tracers and shot down a sanctioned pursuit craft. That much I've seen firsthand. All without the slightest attempt to communicate first. He deserves to die."

"It should never be so easy to take a life."

"Tell that to Zolla."

"What proof do you have that this man is the one who fired upon you?"

"The fact that Triana doesn't have fusions cannons is good enough for me. All of that aside, your majesty, how would your guards react to having me around?"

Thalia gazed back toward the camp, her expression thoughtful as she responded. "I fear the Enforcer guards are ill suited for this task. They are trained as fighters and peacekeepers, not to encounter unknown dangers in strange lands. Henry worries more about who will care for his mother in his absence."

"That explains a lot. He has gentle eyes, too gentle."

"You're quite observant. That quality could prove tremendously useful."

"Thanks, but I still can't help you. I would, however, appreciate a ride to the nearest village. I'll arrange my own transportation from there."

"That decision is entirely up to you. I suggest we return to camp before Bergen begins a search."

R'cey's hips and knees hurt. She'd ridden many creatures

on countless worlds in the pursuit of bounty, but none like these drays. At first glance, they resembled horses. They bore the same general characteristics, such as body and head structure. The differences, such as the muzzle horns, shaggy coats, and cloven hooves, seemed minor. Despite that fact, drays carried a much wider girth. R'cey's long legs seemed incapable of accommodating the width. Her new acquaintances had redistributed their supplies in order to give R'cey the mount. As kind as she found that gesture, R'cey had to grit her teeth to stifle her discomfort.

Finally, R'cey removed her left foot from the stirrup and crossed it over the front of the saddle. She felt relief on the outside of her knee immediately, and the ache in her recent injury subsided. The new position forced her to lean back slightly. R'cey's helmet provided a bit of a backrest. She'd grown too hot in the full skin suit and tied the helmet behind her.

"Careful," Thalia said with a laugh in her voice. "If he spooks, you'll hit the turf."

"I'll be fine. How much farther?"

Thalia glanced over to Bergen, and R'cey followed suit.

"A candle mark, two at the most." Bergen kept his eyes on the trees as he spoke. "First, we must cross the Keechog River and then pass through the Swamp of Despair. I shall ride ahead and scout the area."

"Nice name. Why couldn't it be Rainbow Cove or Happy Harbor?"

They rode in silence for a time, headed directly toward the sun. A slight breeze ruffled R'cey's bangs. She found it relaxing to ride like this, with the sound of the wind in the trees and the steady rocking of the beast beneath her. The heavy scent of foliage completed the scene, allowing her to fully unwind. R'cey trusted the dray to follow the others, like every other beast of burden in her experience. In case it didn't, she'd still be awake to hear any problems that arose.

"Are you sleeping?" Thalia asked.

"No, just resting while I can. Conserving my strength, you could say."

The excuse sounded good to R'cey, but it wasn't the whole

truth. She'd slept better than expected the night before but still felt tired. R'cey blamed it on her recent ordeal and the blood loss. Whatever the cause, she needed to take advantage of the quiet time while she could. Once she set out after Zolla on her own, all of that would change. That troubling thought made R'cey open her eyes.

Resting was one thing, but she couldn't afford to tune out entirely. She should take advantage of this time to familiarize herself with the planet. Zolla already had the benefit of months on Triana. She could do that by talking with Thalia.

"How far do you have to go to find this...sorcerer?"

"We intend to reach our destination inside a fortnight. My uncle says it will take seven days longer, but if we ride hard, I believe we can make it."

"That's a little ambitious, isn't it? You don't even know what you're going to run into."

"As I said, Bergen has experience outside the kingdom. He is an experienced scout as well as a commander with the Royal Enforcer Guard."

R'cey dropped her leg down from the saddle. She left her foot out of the stirrup as she raised the opposite leg to relieve her knee. "What makes you think this guy has a cure for your father?"

"He must. This mage is our only hope. King Lotar lies under powerful dark magic, and it requires someone of equal strength to break it."

R'cey felt like they were going in circles. She'd already heard all of this.

"But why *this* guy? You must have some reason."

"Danielle, a member of the royal council, told us of him. He resides on the uncharted Southern Isles, and word of his wondrous power has spread to her spies. He commands a flying lantash of massive proportions. The creature has pincers in front to grasp and crush attackers. The tail is capable of firing great bolts of light to destroy the enemy."

The physical description sounded like a scorpion, but the abilities belonged to an advanced flying vessel. Not only that, but R'cey thought it sounded like an Amalgam mining ship. The so-called pincers were nothing more than grapple clamps.

Such a vehicle was not something indigenous to Triana. Her superiors had told her Zolla stole a luxury cruiser and killed all of the crew and passengers, but who else could it be?

“Anything else?”

Thalia pushed a tree branch out of her face and ducked under the swinging bough. “I’ve heard he has cast an enchantment to raise a protective sphere over the entire island. Surely, someone so powerful will have the counter spell we require.”

“Right.”

R’cey couldn’t help wondering about what she’d learned. This so-called magician resided in the south. From the coordinates in R’cey’s computer, she’d find Zolla in the same general location. Magic didn’t exist, and these “abilities” were more like advanced tech. It wasn’t much of a leap to conclude the sorcerer and Zolla were one and the same. In addition, he’d apparently erected a dome over the island to bar unwanted visitors. At least she’d gained some valuable intel by riding with these savages for a while, but she couldn’t figure out how the Amalgam Parliament had gotten the details so wrong.

“Milady,” Bergen said.

R’cey heard him before he emerged from the trees. His mount trotted toward them, and he reined in the animal a few paces away.

“What is it, Commander?”

“The Keechog River has crested its banks. It has destroyed the bridge. I fear we shall not be able to cross.”

“Ill news, indeed. How long until we reach the river?”

“It lies very close, Princess. Half a candle mark at most.”

R’cey translated that to mean they’d reach the river in half an hour. She perked up and watched more closely as they approached their obstacle. A single glimpse of the Keechog proved enough to make her grateful she’d conserved her energy. Water crashed through the riverbed, pounding over hidden objects and throwing spray into the air.

She couldn’t hear her own heartbeat over the din. From what she could tell, the river stood more than twelve feet past the banks. Rough-hewn planks from the bridge lay about in scattered ruin. There wasn’t much left. In all likelihood, a flood

had carried most of the structure away.

R'cey placed both feet into the stirrups and rested her elbow across the pommel. "This could be a problem."

"What are your orders, Princess?" Kahlan asked.

Thalia shook her head. "Bergen, is there another place where we may cross safely?"

"Not without a significant delay. There is a landing four days north, but taking such a route would add more than a week to our journey."

"Barring any complications," R'cey said. "Does your father have that kind of time?"

Thalia nudged her mount forward in response and stopped at the water's edge. She surveyed the wreckage for a moment before staring into the distance. "The ropes must have snapped when the bridge gave way. I believe I see them tangled against the far bank."

"Let me see that." R'cey jammed her helmet on and zoomed in on the far shore. She located what remained of the landing. Rope supports lay tangled in the reeds, their ends trailing into the water. "It's there all right, but it doesn't matter. Even if we could reach the lines, they might not be long enough. We don't know where they snapped or if they're in any condition to hold a new structure."

"I thought you a warrior," Bergen said. "How is it you surrender so easily?"

"I never said anything about giving up, but dying won't help your cause."

Bergen sneered in response. "Princess Thalia, with your permission, I will swim across and retrieve the ropes. Perhaps we may use them to construct a crude passage."

"No, the river is too strong. You would surely perish. I have another idea."

Thalia enlisted Emerald's help. R'cey watched the dragonlet take wing and zip across the river. Thalia closed her eyes, and her body tensed. From what Thalia had told her, R'cey knew she saw through the creature's eyes. Despite the link, R'cey didn't think the vibria could do anything more than observe. Emerald lacked hands and the motor skills necessary to untangle the lines.

“You underestimate her.” Thalia’s eyes remained closed, but R’cey felt sure whom she addressed.

“Are you psychic, too?”

“I cannot read your mind, but doubt pours from you in waves. Ah, she is there. The rope is not as badly snared as we feared.”

The blackish-green dragon hopped around the bank for a few minutes. With aid from the helmet’s visor, R’cey watched as she used her beak. Gently, Emerald bit down on the wet line and loosened it from a boulder. Bits of grass and mud clung tenaciously but didn’t seem a hindrance. Emerald’s wings lifted her a few feet off the ground. She drifted backward to pull the rope from the water.

“Did you tell her to do that?”

“Yes.” Thalia hissed the word softly. Moisture beaded upon her brow and above her lip.

R’cey thought the dampness was caused by the humidity until she noticed Thalia trembling. Clearly, this link took a toll. Awareness of such tiny details made R’cey good at her job, but she didn’t like the way she suddenly cared about an ally’s feelings.

Emerald drew her attention by launching herself back across the river. She carried the tail end of the rope between her powerful jaws. R’cey expected Emerald to run out of length halfway back, but she made it the entire distance and dropped her prize at Thalia’s feet.

R’cey studied the end of the rope. “Not to point out the obvious, but you do see how frayed that thing is?”

“I dislike agreeing with the stranger, but she does make a valid point,” Bergen said.

R’cey shot Bergen a glare. “She also has a name. Call me R’cey or Commander Hawke.”

Bergen ignored her. “We cannot hope to construct a crossing with a single line, and the river is against us. The locals constructed the original bridge at the height of summer, during the lowest water level.”

“You’re right, of course,” Thalia said. “We cannot hope to build a bridge, but we can still cross.”

“Oh no,” R’cey said. “I see where this is going, and just

how do you plan to get the drays and supplies across? We can't carry them on our backs."

"We shall have to release the animals to find their way home. Enforcers, offload our supplies. We shall carry only the essentials in packs. Bury the rest for our return."

"Princess, exactly what is it you have in mind?" The other soldiers kept quiet, allowing Bergen to speak their questions. "Even with the line tied off and used as an anchor, we cannot walk across. The rapids would sweep us off our feet. All would die."

"Not if we stay above the water."

R'cey picked up the conversation. "You want us to shimmy across like a spider. We could do it, but that's a fair distance, and the packs will weigh us down."

"We have little choice. It is either this, or we turn back. We cannot afford to add another week, and I refuse to return empty handed. We shall obtain new mounts at the next village."

Thalia issued her orders, and the soldiers rushed to obey. Someone distributed essential supplies into six packs with both R'cey and Thalia expected to carry their share. Henry unsaddled the drays and released them while Pax began digging. Emerald joined him, her claws ripping easily through loose soil. Bergen climbed a branching tree and tied the rope around the trunk.

R'cey approved his positioning of their anchor. It needed to be as high as possible since their body weight would cause the line to sag. If it dipped low enough with someone on it, the river wouldn't hesitate to tear them away. As a final measure, R'cey scaled the tree to double check the knot.

"You've done a good job. Seems sturdy enough."

"So pleased you approve."

She shook her head and dropped to the ground. "It'll hold."

"Then let us begin," Thalia said. "Henry first, followed by Bergen. Kahlan, you and R'cey next. Pax, you shall go after them, and I shall go last."

"Princess, I must protest," Bergen said.

R'cey spoke at the same time. "No way in hell."

Bergen appeared surprised that they agreed. R'cey felt the same but didn't waste time commenting on the fact. Instead,

she rushed to convince Thalia of a better choice.

“Let Henry and Bergen go first, just as you said, but you need to go after them. That way we can come from both sides if you fall in. Let’s face it, your soldiers won’t have a quest without you.”

Thalia argued, but the others stood by R’cey’s suggestion. They refused to budge even though she threatened to charge them with treason. Finally, Thalia had no other option but to give in.

“Good,” R’cey said. “I’ll go last. If the river takes me, you haven’t lost anything.”

“Agreed, let us begin,” Bergen said, seeming almost happy at the suggestion.

The soldiers started lining up without comment. R’cey realized she wasn’t one of them, but the attitude still stung.

“Thanks for your concern,” R’cey shook her head.

Thalia placed a hand on R’cey’s shoulder. “They mean well. They are simply occupied with their own fears. I’m sure they will rush to your aid should you actually lose your grip.”

“That makes one of us. I don’t think Bergen likes me very much.”

“I am certain Commander Bergen cares for no one, except perhaps himself.”

Thalia gave R’cey’s shoulder a final squeeze and strode toward her people. It took a second for R’cey to recover from the simple gesture. Her padded skin suit numbed her to most contact, but R’cey had felt every nuance of Thalia’s touch.

“Nerves,” R’cey muttered. “I’m just nervous about this hare-brained scheme.”

Everyone shouldered their packs and prepared for the crossing. Henry stopped at the water’s edge and then faced them. He seemed completely sure as he reached up to grasp the line. Then he kicked his feet up and crossed his ankles over the rope. The pack hung toward the water, but he had at least three feet of clearance.

He took off, pulling with his hands and alternating his feet. To R’cey, it took forever for him to make the trip. He made it look easy, but she wasn’t so sure. Her skin suit usually did most of the heavy lifting by enhancing her strength. She hoped the

same would prove true this time. She simply didn't know if she had the physical ability to make it that far on her own.

Once Henry dropped safely to the other side, the soldiers cheered. They teased and wagered on who could make the journey the fastest. Bergen set out moving as quickly as he could in an effort to win the bet. Thalia went next, and R'cey had to remember to breathe.

It didn't make sense to feel more concern for her than the rest, but R'cey couldn't deny it. At least the dragonlet stayed with Thalia, flying around her and crossing the river with her. R'cey hoped the powerful little beast could pull Thalia to safety if necessary.

Thalia made it without incident, and Kahlan hopped up on the line. Now there were only three. R'cey started planning her next move. According to Bergen, the village Atola lay just beyond the river. She'd originally planned to acquire transportation there and set out on her own, but the situation had changed.

R'cey now believed she and Thalia sought the same man, though for very different reasons. It wouldn't hurt if she stayed with this group, ostensibly by accepting Thalia's offer of employment. They knew the planet, and she needed a guide. Thalia didn't need to know that R'cey planned to kill her magician on sight. Since magic didn't really exist, it wasn't as though Thalia would lose anything by the loss of the spell caster.

"Kahlan!"

Pax stood so near that R'cey's ears rang when he shouted. She looked up in time to see Kahlan disappear beneath white water.

"Oh, crap," R'cey muttered.

People on both banks sprinted down the water's edge in pursuit. Many shouted suggestions for Kahlan to swim to shore or grab onto floating debris for support. R'cey doubted Kahlan heard any of them since the crashing water was loud from where she stood on the bank. Caught inside the raging torrent had to be so much worse. As much as R'cey hated wasting her suit's resources, she couldn't let Kahlan drown.

R'cey also pelted down the riverbank, but she didn't try to

keep pace with Kahlan. Instead, she raced as fast as she could, attempting to draw ahead. The skin suit gave her an extra burst of speed that actually made that possible.

“Warning, blood oxygenation at sixty-two percent. Recommend hemotide injection.”

“Not now,” R’cey mumbled. “I don’t have time for this.”

Kahlan headed directly toward a waterfall. R’cey didn’t know the exact distance of the drop, but plunging into the basin below would be like falling into a washing machine. The churning water would drag her down. Kahlan would drown.

R’cey shoved the pack off her shoulders and let it hit the ground. She took one more pounding step and then slapped the controls located on the outside of each thigh. Rocket boosters fired on the bottoms of her boots, propelling her into the air. Not intended for flight, the boosters provided short bursts to leap obstacles. Now, they shot R’cey out over the water. She dropped right behind Kahlan and caught her around the chest.

“Computer, continue firing boosters.”

R’cey found it almost impossible to maintain her grip. The pack Kahlan wore kept R’cey’s arms from encircling her completely. Instead, she grabbed the front of Kahlan’s shirt and angled their bodies toward the distant shore. The turbulence of the water kept R’cey from feeling the thrusters, but she had to accept that they worked properly.

Water didn’t provide the same density as solid ground. The boosters weren’t as efficient here, but they sent them in the right general direction. R’cey couldn’t help tracking their proximity to the waterfall, at the same time attempting to keep her head above the torrent.

“Increase booster intensity.”

“That course of action is not recommended,” the mechanical voice stated inside the helmet.

“Do it!”

R’cey heard the computer beep in acknowledgement. She tightened her grip as they shot toward the river’s edge. Muscles began to strain, and R’cey attempted to lock her legs in position.

“Warning, five seconds to booster overload.”

Reeds slapped against them. Even through the suit’s

protective padding, R'cey felt every blow. Her recently injured thigh struck a concealed object, and she cried out in pain. R'cey imagined how Kahlan must feel without any shielding.

Suddenly, they were safe. The boosters had already burnt out, but inertia carried them halfway out of the water. R'cey allowed her muscles to relax and took stock of her condition. Her feet stung from the continual booster burn, and her thigh ached. Steam rose from the water where the boosters had overheated. She seemed fine otherwise. The helmet had kept her from inhaling water.

“Kahlan,” Thalia said. “R'cey.”

Hands turned her over, checking for injuries. R'cey pushed them away, sitting up and moving the visor aside at the same time. “I'm okay, check Kahlan.”

Bergen was way ahead of her. His fingers searched for the pulse point on Kahlan's neck, but her eyes opened suddenly. She panted for breath and had a lump on her temple, but she was alive. Bergen helped her to sit.

Kahlan reached out to grasp R'cey's gloved hand. “You saved my life. I am in your debt.”

“You don't owe me anything. Just don't do that again.”

Chapter Seven

“Your uniform is damaged,” Thalia said as she stepped closer to R’cey.

“Really? I hadn’t noticed. “R’cey didn’t bother to stifle the sarcasm. She’d missed the last hemotide injection while saving Kahlan and felt worse than she’d expected.

Dispensing the medication after the daring rescue hadn’t seemed to help. R’cey felt exhausted and heavy, like the planet’s gravity had somehow increased. On top of all that, she’d ripped her suit in several places. The worst of the tears left her recently injured thigh exposed.

“How much farther?” R’cey clenched her teeth to halt complaints of walking so much.

“Not far now,” Kahlan answered for Thalia. She’d insisted on carrying R’cey’s helmet after leaving the river and swung it by the chinstrap. “The village lies over the next rise. Your limp grows worse. I could run ahead and bring back assistance.”

“I’m fine.”

“You are stubborn,” Thalia insisted, her tone angry and direct. “I have already offered to heal your wound.”

“I just need some rest, not more voodoo.”

All this attention made R’cey uncomfortable. As a result, Thalia’s offer of healing made her grumpier, and she’d started to regret rescuing Kahlan. The woman hadn’t left her alone since.

“It is unfortunate you lost your share of the supplies,” Bergen said. “Most of the dry rations were inside that pack.”

“Thanks for pointing out what’s important. It’s not like I don’t feel bad enough.”

“It matters not. We shall reach Atola shortly,” Thalia said.

Thalia’s comment seemed enough to quiet everyone. R’cey reveled in the silence, concentrating on walking as the ground began to rise. Sharp pain lanced through her upper leg with each step. Her breath came in pants, though she did her best to silence any resulting sound. The group stopped when they reached the crest.

R'cey wiped the perspiration away as the others assessed the situation. "Well?"

"There it is." Bergen pointed over the treetops. "You can see the roof to the storehouse."

"Yippee. Let's get this trip over with."

By the time they reached Atola, R'cey was spoiling for a fight. She pulled the anger over her like a cloak, using it as a shield against exhaustion. Her ire simmered higher when she saw the condition of the settlement. It more closely resembled a large camp than a town. Atola boasted a single muddy street. Clapboard establishments lined the road and had definitely seen better days.

Thalia headed directly toward a two-story structure. "Kahlan, Pax and Henry, stay outside until I can arrange lodgings."

R'cey followed Thalia inside, observing the inn's condition as she did. From the gaps in the frame, she figured they'd be better off sleeping in a barn. One glimpse of the patrons inside reinforced that idea. Three dirty men occupied a corner table along with a single unkempt woman. Uncombed hair and torn clothing added to the scene.

"Great. We'll probably end up with fleas the size of a dog."

Thalia glanced over her shoulder. "Did you say something?"

"Forget it."

They approached the bar where an overweight man wore a soiled apron. He used a dirty rag to absently wipe a glass. R'cey leaned an elbow on the rough wooden surface. It felt good to take some weight off her leg. Thalia brushed against her as she reached under her shirt and pulled out a moneybag. Coins clinked, and the proprietor's eyes widened.

"I am Olan, the owner of this establishment. What can I do for you fine people?"

"We require rooms and a meal," Thalia said.

"Of course, only the finest in the house for you. I have a fresh stew going as well. Lots of bread and cheese served with that, too."

R'cey's eyes narrowed. This guy was far too friendly. She recognized an opportunist when she saw one. Apparently, she

was the only one. Bergen wasn't watching as he drifted over to warm himself in front of the hearth. Thalia had already started counting coins. With each tinkle of gold, Olan's smile grew.

When Thalia inquired as to the cost of the rooms, the response startled R'cey.

"Ten gold coins for each. Meals cost extra."

R'cey reacted without thinking. She grabbed Olan by his food-encrusted collar and slammed his head onto the bar. The glass he'd been wiping shattered on the floor.

"What are you doing?" Thalia demanded.

R'cey focused her attention on Olan, disregarding both Thalia's remark and Bergen's hasty approach. "Don't you know it's not nice to steal from your customers?"

"I have no idea what you mean. Please, do not hurt me."

"I'm talking about the price of those insect infested rooms. You jacked up the cost when you saw the lady's money, didn't you? Now be a good boy and tell us what you usually charge."

"T...two silver coins. That includes the food. Please, I don't want any trouble."

He sounded like he would cry. R'cey released him and wiped her hand on her trousers. She noticed Thalia's irritation as Bergen turned away to hide a grin, his eyes dancing merrily.

"What? Next time, don't show your money before you reach an agreement."

"Noted."

Olan took the coins with a trembling hand. He cast R'cey a few worried looks but seemed mollified when Thalia dropped a few extra into his grasping mitt.

"Can you show us the rooms now?" R'cey asked. "I'd like to lie down."

"Do you not wish to eat? I could ingest an entire dray," Bergen said.

R'cey felt her stomach roll. "No thanks. Maybe later."

The accommodations were almost as bad as R'cey feared. A few lumpy mattresses and a battered dresser adorned each room. The mattress lay directly on the floor, covered by threadbare quilts. The covers offered only the thinnest comfort. Fortunately, their rooms lay directly above the first-floor hearth. The rising heat made the space quite comfortable, and

R'cey didn't notice any bugs.

Thalia hadn't skimped on the number of chambers either. She'd rented three, consigning only two people to each space. R'cey hadn't understood why Thalia wanted to share with her until she learned of an unwritten royal protocol. Evidently, the rules forbid the princess to share quarters with those beneath her station. Whatever the reason, she didn't really care. At least she didn't have to listen to Henry snore.

Poor Kahlan.

R'cey took advantage of having the space to herself. While Thalia fraternized with her soldiers, R'cey chose the mattress directly facing the door with the window to her left. It wasn't really selfish to choose the best location, she told herself. This way, she could defend Thalia while having easy access to the window as an alternate escape route.

The mattress lured her like a siren's call, promising the heaven of slumber. R'cey practically flopped onto the anticipated comfort. Instead of softness, something hard jabbed into her ribs. R'cey grunted in irritation. The annoying blow reminded her that she needed to check the suit's condition, but first things first. R'cey stuck her hand under the quilt and discovered something that seemed disgustingly familiar. The object felt slightly greasy. Her lip had already curled before she pulled a femur bone from beneath the coverlet. From its appearance, it had belonged to a goat-like creature at one time.

"Oh, gross. When's the last time someone washed these sheets? Best rooms in the house, my ass."

R'cey decided to remain on top of the covers. She tossed the bone into a nearby corner and moved on to checking the suit. She counted four separate rips, most of them almost negligible. The one over her thigh afforded R'cey a view of her leg. Only a puckered scar remained. She knew good and well she'd suffered a fracture after the crash. The scar, no doubt, marked the place where the bone had perforated the flesh.

She'd never seen healing like this before. From the advanced technology R'cey knew, derma-knitters wouldn't leave any disfigurement at all. This resembled an injury that had healed over a period of months.

"What kind of medicine heals instantly but still leaves such

a mark?" The answer blossomed in her mind, but R'cey pushed it away.

The door opened suddenly, and Thalia strode into the room. She tossed R'cey's helmet across the expanse. She held something else in her opposite hand, but R'cey's attention focused on her equipment. "Kahlan insisted I return this to you. Personally, I believe your appearance more agreeable without it."

"Thanks." R'cey dropped the helmet onto the floor beside the mattress. "I'd probably be more comfortable, but this thing gives me a lot of useful information."

"Such as?"

"Oh, atmospheric readings and things like that. It's how I interface with most of the systems on my suit, like the flamethrower in my gauntlet. It's also how I'm going to find Zolla. That's the bad guy I told you about. The coordinates are stored inside the onboard computer."

Thalia's gaze went to R'cey's leg. "How is the condition of your suit? Is it serviceable?"

"For now, but if I keep tearing it, that might change. These things are tough, but there's only so much damage they can take. If I had my ship, I could replace or repair the fabric. I'm not worried, though. I think it'll hold together long enough."

"Perhaps this would help extend the life of your suit." Thalia strolled over and extended the bundle she still held. "If nothing else, I'm sure they'll be more comfortable for sleep."

R'cey held up a soft tunic and a pair of buckskin colored britches. "Thanks again, but I'm not sure that's a good idea. Anything could happen, and then I'd be without my equipment."

Although tactically sound, R'cey's logic helped cover her unexpected discomfort. People didn't typically offer her gifts. She wasn't sure how to handle such a gesture, so she shrugged it away.

"Suit yourself. Olan has saved some food for you in the kitchen. He says you're free to help yourself at any time."

Thalia set about readying for bed, seemingly unmindful of R'cey's presence. She removed her sword belt and placed the weapon over a corner chair. Then she discarded her outer cloak

and settled on the mattress to remove her boots. R'cey noticed that Thalia never hesitated to get comfortable on the dirty quilt. For royalty, she certainly didn't put on airs.

"Did you arrange transportation for the rest of your journey?"

"Bergen saw to it. He also managed to replace most of our supplies. You will be pleased to know that he did so at a substantial savings. Perhaps your brand of negotiating influenced him."

"Now hold on, I was just trying to keep Olan from stealing from you."

"R'cey, I could easily have afforded the price he asked."

"That's not the point."

"That is exactly the point," Thalia said, raising her voice. "These people are poor. Most of them are starving. The royal house has more than enough in the treasury, and if I can help to relieve their suffering, I am duty bound to do so."

"You showed him the money bag on purpose."

Thalia smiled and finished removing her boots. "I may be new to traveling outside the kingdom, but I am not a fool."

R'cey didn't know what to say. This woman impressed her more by the minute. She'd thought about traveling with the company because they knew the planet, but maybe she'd underestimated their usefulness. R'cey couldn't remember the last time someone had surprised her.

"Is that offer of employment still good?"

Thalia currently had an arm thrown over her eyes. She took so long to respond that R'cey thought she'd fallen asleep. Probably not a bad idea. R'cey rolled over and relaxed, attempting to ignore the smell wafting up from the mattress.

"Why?"

R'cey opened her eyes. "Why what?"

"Why do you wish to join us? Why have you changed your mind?"

"Good questions. Here's one for you. How long has this sorcerer been around? You say that rumors just now surfaced about him."

"You believe he is this criminal for which you search," Thalia said, catching onto R'cey's train of thought.

"There's safety in numbers. I stick by what I said before; I

don't need your gold. Couldn't carry it anyway, but I could use the reinforcements. We're both trying to get to the same place, and we're looking for the same person."

"And when we find him? Do you intend to exact vengeance for your friends?"

She was quick; R'cey had to give her that. "My orders are to capture him alive if possible and return Zolla to the Amalgam for justice."

"If I agree to your terms, I will not allow you to change your mind concerning his fate. Regardless of his crimes, I need this man to cure my father. Should you change your mind once we meet with him, you and I will become enemies. My soldiers will not hesitate to kill you in order to complete our objective."

"Wow, I don't think I've ever received such a polite threat."

R'cey grinned, thinking she truly had this simple princess fooled. Regardless of her orders, R'cey's personal mission had changed. Zolla saw to that. The Enforcers didn't stand a chance against her. Bows and arrows couldn't hold up against projectile weapons and stun grenades.

"We leave at dawn."

She watched as Thalia stretched out on the mattress and turned to face the wall. From the tension in her shoulders, she didn't believe Thalia slept. She'd remained on top of the quilt, just as R'cey had. In her case, R'cey had an impression that it wasn't to avoid unwashed sheets. Hormones and lust stirred. If she was wrong, R'cey could apologize later.

R'cey removed her boots and placed them quietly on the floor. She padded on bare feet over to Thalia's bed and settled on the edge. Careful not to touch her, R'cey watched Thalia intently for any sign of reciprocation. Thalia did turn toward her, but not with a welcoming smile. A frown creased the point between her brows.

"Do you require something?"

"Funny you should phrase it that way."

R'cey leaned toward Thalia in one swift move. Thalia's strong hands grasped her shoulders to hold her away, but R'cey managed to capture Thalia's lips in a soft kiss. She tasted sweetness through a startled gasp. For a few precious seconds,

Thalia relaxed and returned the caress. This was going better than expected. R'cey reached behind her neck to release the skin suit fastener. She'd just brushed the mechanism when Thalia finally pushed her back.

"This cannot be. It is forbidden."

R'cey persisted. "I won't tell if you don't. It's only a kiss."

"I believe you desire much more than a kiss."

"Apparently, so do you." R'cey glanced down where Thalia's hands had grasped the suit's shoulders. She held onto her but had stopped pushing her away.

"Your kiss is seductive, but as I've said, our laws forbid it. As a princess, I am not allowed physical relations with those below my station."

"Nice, you just complimented me and called me a commoner in one phrase. I'm impressed."

Thalia released one hand to stroke R'cey's cheek. "There is nothing common about you. If this situation were different, I'd knight you and take you to my bed. Unfortunately, that is not the case."

"So it is what it is. I can understand that. How about we make a deal? I'll let you off the hook for now with the understanding that I'm not giving up."

"Why do you relent so easily? I did not expect you to do so without extensive argument."

"I'll keep arguing if it makes you feel better, but it won't change anything. I'm not in the habit of forcing myself on anyone. I know you want me, but there has to be more than that. When it happens, and it will happen, I don't want you to have any reservations."

Thalia's expression turned serious. "R'cey, I cannot promise that a union between us will ever happen. My duty prevents me from indulging in such exquisite fantasies."

"We'll see."

Chapter Eight

“How long do we need to slog through this muck? The drays are having a hard time.” R’cey watched as her mount, a soft-mannered creature named Lucy, pulled a hoof out of the water.

R’cey couldn’t actually see through the murky water, but there was no mistaking the sucking sound. The mud clinging to the animal’s legs was also a dead giveaway. Bergen had done a good job in arranging their transportation, and R’cey really liked the dray.

“Two full days, unfortunately,” Kahlan said. “Finding high ground upon which to camp will prove most difficult. The drays will be fine. They are most hardy, and we’ve enough grain for them to feed upon.”

R’cey grunted in response. Something about this place bothered her. It wasn’t just the perpetual dampness or stunted twisted trees. It was also the fact that the trees grew only high enough to blot out the sun. Shadows abounded, interspersed with pockets of dappled, watery sunshine.

Although the depressing surroundings could be responsible for her unease, R’cey didn’t think so. The small hairs on the back of her neck stood up, and she suddenly felt that someone watched from the shadows.

“We’re not alone.” R’cey spoke just loud enough for her companions to hear.

Instantly, the Enforcers responded. Bergen drew his sword while Kahlan nocked an arrow against her bowstring. Pax and Henry also pulled their swords. Their actions were those of a well-trained force and not surprising. On the other hand, Thalia caught R’cey off guard. The sheltered and inexperienced princess loaded a lethal steel bolt into her crossbow.

“I see nothing.” Bergen’s skepticism came through clearly, though he remained alert.

“Neither do I, but I know someone’s out there. I feel it.”

Bergen lowered his sword. “Your trepidation is understandable. Many have felt as you do, hence the name of

this unnatural place.”

“The Swamp of Despair, I know, but that’s not it.”

R’cey kept watch on their surroundings as she reached behind her for the helmet. She could use the suit’s armaments without it, but the helmet’s optical tools would help cut through the gloom. Even if Bergen didn’t believe her, she knew he couldn’t take a chance.

“Kahlan and Henry, protect the princess. Stay here. The rest of us shall scout the area.”

R’cey nodded, acknowledging Bergen’s command, and hefted the helmet. Before she could don her headgear, something unbelievable darted into their small clearing. The creature’s inky darkness possessed no form that R’cey could discern. Non-corporeal and black as pitch, it flew directly toward Thalia. Drays screamed and snorted. R’cey’s mount reared, and she lost her grip on the helmet.

“Thalia!” R’cey shouted, attempting to wrestle Lucy under control.

“The Shadow Beast,” Bergen warned.

R’cey squeezed her knees against Lucy’s sides and forced her toward Thalia. The dray responded reluctantly and managed a few steps in Thalia’s direction. Pax was closest to Thalia and reacted before R’cey could get there. He raised his sword and swiped at the creature, but to no avail.

The revenant ghost passed right through Pax, the weapon, and his mount. Pax slumped in the saddle as though shocked. He grimaced in obvious pain. For some reason, R’cey didn’t believe the wraith intended him harm. Rather, it seemed fixated on Thalia.

Apparently, Thalia reached the same conclusion. She fired the crossbow before she could bring it fully to bear. The bolt thunked into a tree trunk even as Thalia dove from the saddle. Emerald lifted from Thalia’s shoulder and flew toward the shadow. The dragonlet inhaled sharply and shot flame out of her mouth. The darkness easily avoided the fire but dipped toward Thalia where she’d disappeared under the murky water.

The creature rose upward and hovered, drifting toward where shadows were heaviest. The entire incident had taken only seconds, barely enough time for the Enforcers to rally. Of

the four, Pax wasn't quite up to par. He wobbled in the saddle but turned to continue the fight. R'cey didn't believe it would matter.

This entity—or whatever it was—passed through people at will. Its incidental contact caused damage, if Pax's reaction told her anything. R'cey couldn't imagine what would happen if it actually reached its target.

Thalia couldn't stay submerged forever, so R'cey prepared to throw herself into the shadow's path. At the last second, she noticed how the creature stayed away from the light. It had also neatly dodged the fire from Emerald. R'cey's idea to release a missile altered with the observation.

“Torches, we need light.” R'cey activated the flashlight strapped to her right wrist. She intensified the beam to the maximum setting.

Emerald fired another blast of flames, leading R'cey to wonder if the dragon had understood her intent. In any case, the creature reacted as expected. It drew inward on itself, shrinking as R'cey approached. Her suit contained reflector lights along the outsides of the arms and legs. The lights were for cave exploration, but she activated them anyway. The resulting brightness caused her to wince and the shadow creature to wink abruptly out of sight.

At the same moment that the revenant vanished, Thalia popped up out of the water. She gasped for air and searched desperately for the attacking entity. R'cey leaped from the saddle, landing in thigh high water.

R'cey grasped Thalia by the shoulders and helped her to stand. “It's all right. You're fine. It's gone now.”

Bergen and the others dismounted around them. They hadn't had time to fire any torches, and all seemed shaken. Pax stood unsteadily but seemed coherent.

“What the hell was that?” R'cey asked.

“The Shadow Beast,” Bergen said.

“That part I got. Did you know this thing was here? You did, didn't you? Why didn't you tell me before it tried to kill us all?”

“Because I do not confide information in strangers.” Bergen's voice was just short of a shout. “I will do whatever is

necessary to ensure Princess Thalia's safety, including withholding information."

"That is enough," Thalia broke in. "I believe R'cey has proven herself trustworthy. Her quick thinking saved all our lives."

Bergen frowned but relented. He spoke to R'cey more civilly. "How did you know the torches would work?"

"The only thing I've ever seen beat darkness is the light. I suggest we keep as much of it around us as we can until we clear the swamp."

"Agreed."

"One thing. That shadow creature ignored everyone else and went straight for the princess. Do you know why?"

Bergen shrugged. "It is a simple creature, without thought. There is very likely no reason."

"No, there's something else going on. I'm sure of it. Maybe it's not sentient, but that thing definitely has intelligence." R'cey turned to Thalia. "What about you, Princess? Any ideas?"

"I am unclear. I am also unsure that it matters. The creature is vanquished. Is that not enough?"

"I guess, but I'm not convinced it's vanquished. Just vanished. Whatever the answer, we're not going to find it by standing here waiting for it to come back. Let's get going. I want out of the swamp as fast as possible." R'cey grabbed Lucy's reins. She had one foot in the stirrup before she realized no one else had moved. "Well?"

All eyes turned to Thalia. The Enforcers clearly weren't going anywhere without orders. Thalia lowered her head and crossed her arms over her chest. She cocked her head to the side and met R'cey's gaze.

Thalia chuckled and shrugged. "You heard R'cey. I can think of no better suggestion. I too prefer dry clothing and a venue in which we may see our surroundings."

R'cey suddenly remembered her helmet. She'd forgotten all about it in the excitement. They spent another ten minutes looking for it before finally giving up. It seemed like her headgear had vanished into thin air. Without the helmet, many of the suit's features wouldn't work. She could still utilize the

wrist controls for many of the systems, but verbal commands were out, and so were the hemotide injections.

She'd lost targeting sensors and the coordinates to Zolla's location. Of all these, R'cey regretted losing the map most of all but couldn't wait around for the shadow to return. Her sole comfort was that these people were also looking for Zolla. At least she hoped that was the case and that she hadn't gotten the whole situation wrong.

Eventually, they reached an area of the swamp too dangerous to ride the drays. R'cey held Lucy's reins as she navigated the safest way through dead trunks and waist high blade grass. The drays' shaggy coats kept the sharp grass from slicing their hides. R'cey's padded suit did the same for her. The Enforcers hadn't the same luxury. They boasted various nicks and cuts upon their arms. R'cey couldn't find it in her to sympathize. She was happy to walk. The movement helped ease the soreness in her hips and knees.

"I regret your loss. I know the helmet was integral to your uniform's function."

R'cey had felt someone approach but didn't realize it was Thalia until she spoke. A cut on Thalia's cheek had already clotted, though blood streaked her face. R'cey noticed how Emerald's claws dug into the shoulder padding on Thalia's heavy jerkin.

"Very. How's Pax feeling?"

"He seems fine. Is the loss of your headgear the reason you haven't spoken since the attack? We could have stayed to find it."

Thalia sounded truly upset to have cost R'cey something of value. At times, she surprised R'cey by her behavior. Thalia didn't act like most royalty R'cey had met. She was more real, a normal person instead of someone adopting airs.

"Don't worry about it. I should warn you, though. There might be a problem."

Thalia stopped moving, but R'cey put a hand on her arm to keep her going. She didn't want to draw attention to their conversation. Emerald took advantage of R'cey's contact. She hopped down from Thalia's shoulder and onto R'cey's forearm.

The unexpected maneuver caused both women to stop in

their tracks. Lucy butted into R'cey's back, but she was too fascinated by Emerald to really notice. She felt the sharp talons grip her forearm, the strength in the clasp, and the weight of the dragonlet.

"She's heavier than I expected."

"Emerald has never gone willingly to another, aside from the palace handlers, of course. She must like you."

R'cey encouraged Emerald to return to her master. "It's more likely she knows I'll do what it takes to protect you." She realized how her innocent remark sounded but wasn't embarrassed. Their shared kiss remained too fresh in her mind for that. "Come on, I want to find that high ground before dark."

They set out again, but Thalia kept the discussion alive. "You were going to say something?"

"Right. My helmet did control some critical systems, but I can get around most of those issues or just elect not to use the functions at all. There is one thing I can't deal with, and I should warn you, just in case."

"And that is?"

"In the Amalgam, we're told that the air on Triana is toxic. Since I've been planet side, I've needed regular hemotide injections. That's a blood oxygenating agent."

"Without your headgear, you cannot ingest more of this medication?"

"That's the gist of it. Look, I already felt sick, even with the hemotide. I'm not sure what's going to happen now."

They traveled in silence for a few minutes before Thalia responded. "Our world also has stories of a toxic atmosphere. The tales are very old, so I cannot be sure of the details. Many centuries ago, people arrived and charted these unknown lands. It is said that more than half of these newcomers grew sick and died."

"What about the other half?"

"Illness raged throughout the land. The plague caused great fevers and difficulty breathing. Once the sickness passed, the survivors gained magical abilities to affect the world around them."

"Magic again." R'cey tried to keep the cynicism from her

response. “Well, I don’t think I’m suddenly going to start flying, but at least I know I have a chance.”

“Perhaps you will not grow ill at all. You say you have partaken of this medication regularly since your arrival. It may be enough to prevent any sickness.”

“I certainly hope so, Princess.”

Pax shouted from where he’d scouted ahead. He’d discovered a good place to stop for the night. R’cey felt nothing but relief as she unsaddled Lucy and helped set up the camp. For the second time in as many nights, she refused dinner. As the others sat around the fire talking and eating, R’cey volunteered to keep first watch. That way, once relieved, she could get several uninterrupted hours of sleep. She had the feeling she’d need them.

R’cey located a relatively dry spot upon which to sit. She’d chosen a place just out of sight from any would-be attackers. As the others consumed their dry rations, some jesting ensued but not to the usual degree. Everyone seemed exhausted from trekking through the muddy water all day. To add to the frayed nerves, they couldn’t have a fire or hot food. The wood in the swamp was far too wet for that. R’cey watched the joviality but chose to stay silent and rest against a tree trunk.

After the others finished eating, R’cey spotted Thalia who appeared to be looking for her. It seemed to be a habit she’d developed. R’cey didn’t feel like talking but couldn’t really refuse since Thalia approached her directly. Who knew, she thought, maybe Thalia could help R’cey stay awake.

“We should exit the swamp late on the morrow, if we stop for few breaks.” Thalia settled on the log beside R’cey and stared quietly toward the others.

“Good news.”

After a few minutes, Thalia removed a boot and shook out a stone. When she sensed that Thalia didn’t seem inclined to say anything more, R’cey rolled her eyes. This wasn’t going anywhere fast, and R’cey didn’t feel like pulling information out of Thalia one piece at a time.

“Something on your mind, Princess?”

“I should have known something was wrong with King Lotar.”

“Come again?”

“My father. You asked why we have undertaken this quest. Why I am here having no experience outside the kingdom. For many cycles, since I was a child, my father grew more and more stern. He cut off trade with our neighbors and crushed the people under the heavy weight of taxes and despotically restrictive law. He became a tyrant. At first, I believed his bitterness stemmed from the loss of my mother.”

“This is the same guy you want to cure so he can be in charge again? No offense, but that doesn’t sound like such a great idea.”

Thalia removed a dry pair of socks from her pack. She placed the bag on the ground and removed her sodden pair before putting her boots back on. She clearly wasn’t in any hurry.

“Hence my guilt when I discovered he’d been under a dark spell for cycles upon cycles. You see, in my ignorance, I contracted a sorceress to remove him from power. Either she was an incompetent, or she did something to ensure his condition came to light. Now, I seek absolution by discovering the counter curse.”

“Why are you telling me this? You have to know how dangerous this information is. I don’t think your people would be very forgiving if they found out.”

“No, such a coup would ensure the loss of my head. Regardless of bloodline.”

“Then why?”

“You risked your life today to protect me. Your quick thinking also ensured none of my people were harmed. Not only have you proven your valor, but you deserve to know everything if you are to continue with our quest.”

R’cey wondered if Thalia felt the same way about her Enforcers. They were much closer to the situation, and their loyalties had to lie with the monarchy rather than any one person.

“Do your soldiers know about what you did?”

Thalia smiled in a sad way and shook her head. “No, and I would consider it a personal favor if you refrained from telling them.”

“Okay, I think there’s more to it than that, but I’ll let it go for now.”

“You are very honest. A noble trait, if somewhat annoying.”

R’cey laughed, and her breath caught when Thalia smiled fully in return. When her eyes crinkled in joy, R’cey realized how astonishingly beautiful this woman was. Under normal circumstances, R’cey would have pushed her more at the inn. In this case, she needed to keep her mind on the job. Maybe there’d be time later...or not. The last thing R’cey wanted was for one of the Enforcers to try and eviscerate her in her sleep if they found out. From the Amalgam’s perspective, sex was a casual endeavor, but maybe Triana was different. She’d hate to be forced into marriage or something equally barbaric for seducing the princess.

“In keeping with the ideals of unfettered candor, let me say that none of this is your fault. You said yourself that King Lotar changed slowly, over time. It wasn’t anything sudden, or you’d have noticed.”

“You believe this was the evildoer’s intent all along?”

“I think there’s something larger at work than causing him to oppress his people. Part of that seemed to involve making his subjects hate him.”

“Who would do such a thing?”

“You tell me. I guess what you should be asking is, who has the most to gain?”

“That would be me.”

“Somehow, I think we can rule that out.” Thalia stifled a yawn, and R’cey decided it was time to end their nightly discussions. “You should get some sleep, but first you should clean that cut on your face. It could get infected.”

Thalia started slightly. “I’d forgotten all about it.”

Thalia cupped a hand over her cheek. R’cey assumed she palpated the injury to determine the severity. Gradually, a glow ignited behind Thalia’s palm. R’cey couldn’t make out a lot of detail in the moon’s light, but she noticed the effulgence. An instant later, Thalia dropped her hand into her lap.

“There, completely healed.”

“No way.” R’cey grabbed Thalia’s hand and felt around in

the darkness, searching for a medical device. She found only soft, warm flesh. “How’d you do that?”

“I’ve already told you. Magic.”

“There’s no such thing. Magic is just a way of describing science we don’t understand yet. There’s always a logical explanation.” R’cey couldn’t deny the hint of panic in her voice.

Thalia shook her head. “Your reasoning is inaccurate, R’cey. On Triana, most have at least some magical ability. It is useful for everyday tasks such as healing small wounds.”

“My leg was no small wound.”

“True, but my gift in this regard is a little stronger than what others possess. Sorcerers, witches, and the like have vastly more talent than I. The abilities manifest at different levels for each individual, such as a talent for drawing. Some are quite gifted while others possess no proficiency at all.”

“I can’t even draw a straight line.”

“You have proven my point.”

Thalia’s insistence on the absurd kindled R’cey’s ire. These people clearly believed in the nonsense, but it made sense they could use spells for more important things.

“If you really have magic, why didn’t you use it to fight that shadow thing? You could have shot fire out of your ass or something.”

Thalia’s shocked bark of laughter made R’cey glance around to see if they’d disturbed anyone. One of the drays snorted, and Pax rolled over on his pad. Emerald cracked a baleful eye before settling back on her perch.

“Why would we develop such a painful mechanism of self-defense?”

“Okay, you have a point, but I still don’t understand. You should be able to do more than heal a few minor cuts.”

“Come, let me show you.” Thalia turned toward R’cey and raised both hands toward her face. “Allow me to heal all the abrasions and bruises you have suffered the last few days. I’d wager you will feel better.”

R’cey caught her by the wrists. “What do you know about how I feel? Have you had to incinerate the bodies of four of your friends lately?”

R'cey didn't mean to be so defensive, but she found the idea of Thalia touching her quite disconcerting. Sex was one thing, but Thalia wasn't talking about a roll in the hay, and R'cey wasn't the type to show her true emotions. She didn't want Thalia poking around in her mind. Not that she bought into all this crap, but in the off chance she was wrong, Thalia might discover R'cey had more than a slight fascination with her. Even worse than losing sight of her mission was the idea of vulnerability. R'cey couldn't have that.

"I won't force you, R'cey. It isn't our way." Thalia jerked her wrists free and stood. She hefted her pack onto one shoulder. "Pax will relieve you."

R'cey didn't try to stop Thalia from striding away. Things were better this way. She finished her watch without incident and awakened Pax. He barely glanced at her as he scratched his beard and took over. R'cey moved her sleep pad as far from the others as she could but still remained on high ground. She fell asleep almost instantly.

After Kahlan awakened her the next morning, R'cey frowned as she glanced toward Thalia. She'd become accustomed to seeing the princess's face when she opened her eyes each morning. Aside from Thalia's cold shoulder and the fog, the first thing R'cey noticed was how sore she felt. Part of her wished she'd taken Thalia up on her offer of healing. However, the terror such a proposition generated easily eclipsed that small portion of her psyche.

"Here's some dry jerky. It isn't much, but we shall eat better tonight." Kahlan placed a couple pieces of jerky in R'cey's hand.

"How do you figure?" R'cey's mind felt sluggish. She took a bite of the jerky and chewed slowly.

"We shall leave this infernal swamp by late afternoon."

"Oh, yeah, Thalia mentioned something about that."

After the scant breakfast, they packed up and set out. The entire company seemed listless. R'cey had slept all night, a deep and dreamless slumber. Still, she stumbled through the

muck with heavy, sluggish steps. Exhaustion beat at the edges of her consciousness. She held Lucy's reins but couldn't really see the point. The beast plodded dutifully along and probably didn't require leading at all.

Slowly, the ground grew firmer. Stunted trees and turbid, muddy water gave way to tall, lush grass. The drays snatched mouthfuls and chewed as they walked. R'cey could have cheered when they left the nebulous mist and emerged into a bright, sunny meadow. She'd almost forgotten the sound of bird song while in the bog.

Thalia called a halt, and R'cey dropped onto her haunches, cushioned by the waist high grass. She released Lucy to graze to her heart's content while Henry cleared a spot and constructed a fire. Bergen actually helped by putting a pot of water over the blaze. In no time, they had a thick stew going. The late lunch tasted like nirvana, but they didn't linger. Passing through the swamp had taken most of the day. With the sun headed toward the horizon, all were motivated to push on. Bergen promised that a small, nameless village lay not far ahead. R'cey looked forward to a nice warm bed. She'd cheer for such a respite, even if Thalia had to pay ten times the cost of the lodgings.

The trees they headed toward now presented a huge overhead canopy of vibrancy and vitality. So much better than the sickly, dwarfish trunks in the Swamp of Despair. The air smelled fresh and clean, but R'cey's chest refused to expand. It was hard to take a full breath. They had just entered the luxuriant woods when Bergen caught R'cey's attention.

"Hold up." Bergen searched the area all around.

Thalia stood beside Bergen and did the same. R'cey knew she was reliant on her technology, but she usually had good instincts even without it. She didn't hear anything and couldn't see any threat.

"What is it?"

"Thought I heard something." Bergen shrugged. "It is likely nothing. Lieutenant Pax, take point but remain alert all the same."

Pax nodded and set out ahead of the others. R'cey rubbed her tired eyes and followed last, not really up to a forced march

through the trees. A sudden scream changed all that. R'cey's head shot up, and she bolted forward, passing Kahlan and Henry.

R'cey reached Pax at the same moment as Bergen and Thalia. "What the hell is that?"

A skink-like creature with four legs had wrapped its serpentine body around Pax's neck. The man sat slumped at the base of the tree, and R'cey couldn't help but notice the snake's hide perfectly resembled the trunk in coloring. Camouflage, no doubt. The animal had buried long fangs into Pax's neck right under his chin. Blood flowed from the wound and ran under the edge of his jerkin.

"A jacular," Thalia said, "but I did not believe such creatures truly existed. They hide against the trees and attack unwary travelers. This is a bad omen."

"Believe it, sister," R'cey said. "Why is everyone just standing around? We have to get that thing off him."

R'cey started forward, intending to do exactly that. A hand on her arm halted her in mid-stride, and she turned to Thalia.

"We cannot help him. There is no cure for the venom of a jacular. Pax will grow weaker with every passing moment until his life force leaves him."

R'cey shook her loose. "Then you can use some of your fancy healing powers. Time to put your money where your mouth is, Princess."

R'cey dropped onto her knees beside Pax. His labored breathing told R'cey the jacular had constricted his airway. The beast didn't react to her proximity. Not for the first time, R'cey was pleased she still wore the majority of her suit. She didn't want to feel the slimy snake thing directly against her skin. With gloved hands, she reached out and grasped the jacular by the head and tail. A taloned rear foot scratched uselessly at her through the synthe-leather.

Pax gave a strangled cry as the jacular tightened its hold, and R'cey applied more pressure. Slowly, she unwound the beast's body from the poor man. Only the fangs remained embedded.

"Someone want to give me a hand?"

Bergen responded, grasping the jacular near its fanged

jaws. R'cey couldn't fault him for being a coward. Together they freed Pax. Gore dripped from the fangs, and the jacular thrashed in R'cey's grip. For such a small thing, it was very strong. She didn't know how long they could hold it.

"Henry, get that sword of yours ready."

At his nod, R'cey and Bergen tossed the jacular toward Henry's feet. Henry lopped off its head before the thing could launch a counter attack at another member of their party. While he continued to cut the creature into pieces, R'cey and Bergen returned to Pax's side. Thalia was already there, but Pax's eyes went to R'cey.

"My gratitude."

"Forget it. If I hadn't been lollygagging in the back, that thing might never have gotten you. Isn't it about time to do your thing, Princess?"

Her expression grim, Thalia raised her hands and placed them against Pax's neck. She didn't hesitate to touch the blood and sweat. Thalia closed her eyes for several long minutes, but R'cey didn't see the same glow as she had the night before. She attributed it to the daylight that must surely conceal such a faint glimmer.

Finally, Thalia released Pax. "I've done all I can."

R'cey sensed what Thalia didn't say. She didn't expect the healing to do any good. As R'cey had suspected, there wasn't really any magical ability going on. It was all smoke and mirrors. Still, their belief in magic might provide the psychological influence Pax needed to overcome his injury.

"Come on, Pax, shake it off. Time for you to ride. In fact, I think we should all ride and save our strength. We've been walking for two days."

Thalia agreed with R'cey's suggestion. As everyone mounted, R'cey stood by while Pax climbed into the saddle. She relieved him of his pack and added the burden to Lucy's saddle where the helmet used to be.

Pax sagged slightly but then seemed to rally. "I am much improved. Let us proceed."

Chapter Nine

The promised village never materialized. Thalia relied on Bergen to guide them on this journey, but his information was apparently not always accurate. Instead of reaching help and a hoped-for cure, Thalia had to watch Pax's condition deteriorate. As she'd feared, he grew worse almost by the minute. By the time night fell, the spark of life had deserted his body.

R'cey's anger was palpable, flowing from her like a dark wave. Thalia couldn't see anything. She wasn't a prophet, but she could feel it. She knew R'cey blamed her for Pax's death. Thalia had tried to explain that her magic wasn't strong enough to counter jacular venom. She found it strange that R'cey professed not to believe in magic yet still expected it to work. For some reason, R'cey's reluctance to give way on any issue made her even more intriguing.

Regardless of R'cey's issues, she couldn't possibly be as angry as Thalia. As her Enforcers buried Pax, Thalia forced herself to watch—to observe his body being put into the ground as she contemplated how the spell on Lotar had set all of this in motion.

Pax's death reinforced Thalia's determination to find the sorcerer who could release the king from his curse. She turned away quietly as Henry dropped the final spade full of dirt onto the grave. Thalia gathered kindling for a fire, and the others followed her example. The camp that night felt heavy with somber quiet. Thalia didn't know if the others contemplated the wisdom of joining her quest. Considering Pax's fate, she couldn't blame them if they did.

The next morning, they continued on, but something had changed. The frivolity had disappeared. They traveled until the sun stood at its apex before stopping for a brief meal. After lunch, Bergen separated the remaining members of their party. Thalia watched him and felt a sinking sensation in the pit of her stomach. He deployed Henry to lead and Kahlan to guard the rear. Somehow, Bergen convinced R'cey to ride their left

flank. Thalia kept her eyes forward as he finally approached.

“Your majesty, a word.”

“What do you want, Commander?”

Emerald hissed at Bergen when his mount stepped a little too close. In deference, Bergen steered the dray a few paces away. Thalia found it amusing that Emerald detested the man when she’d known him all her life. Strange how she’d accepted R’cey in only a few days.

“Permission to speak freely?”

“Have I a choice? What is on your mind?”

“Her.” Bergen’s eyes shot to R’cey.

“I take it you object to her presence.”

“As I have from the start, but there is more now. Your majesty, I believe she is responsible for Pax’s loss.”

“Bergen, you know there is no cure for jacular venom. You also saw the attack for yourself. R’cey had no part in it.” Thalia felt slow anger simmer in her belly. While she understood Bergen’s need for caution, Thalia couldn’t help her reaction. Instinctively, she trusted R’cey. The memory of their chaste night spent together at Olan’s inn rushed through her mind, but Thalia pushed the images away to focus on the moment.

“Please, hear me. Long before yesterday, we all began feeling drained, listless, and weak. I believe this started the day we allowed her into our company. Pax was a very quick soldier. Had he been at full strength, he could’ve avoided the creature.”

“We are all tired, true, but it has nothing to do with her. As a battle-hardened Enforcer, tell me this. Do irregular meals, poor sleep, and long hours riding not create this same result?”

“Yes, but there is more. This R’cey is not from our world. Yet we have allowed her to stand watch while we are at our most vulnerable.” Bergen’s dark gaze shifted to R’cey again and then back to Thalia. “How do we know she is not stealing our life force, somehow sucking that energy from our bodies?”

Thalia almost laughed but caught herself. “A life sucking alien?” She deliberately used the word R’cey had when they first met. Somehow, it seemed fitting. “I appreciate your diligence, Bergen, but I believe what happened to Pax was nothing more than a tragic accident. However, if you wish to inform R’cey she is no longer required to stand watch, I’m sure

she will prove most agreeable.”

“Princess, please...”

“I’ll hear no more,” Thalia said sharply. She realized her personal feelings for R’cey influenced her, but in this case, they simply made her a better judge of the woman’s character.

“Yes, Princess, but you should know I am not the only one uncomfortable with her presence. Just as Henry and I fear she is a threat, so will the entire population of Triana.”

“Then it is fortunate the entire population is not here. She stays. This conversation is over. Instead, perhaps you can say where we go next.”

Bergen dropped the subject of R’cey as commanded, though he didn’t appear happy to do so. “In less than a day, we shall reach the Dark Range. The mountains are high but will only take a half day at most to traverse.”

“Why is that?”

“We need only to cut across the southern tip to head for the coast. With any fortune, we shall not encounter Aamon.”

“Aamon? Grand Duke of the pit? The one who rides a dark, winged horse capable of breathing fire? I thought him merely a story to frighten children.”

“I pray you’re right and that he is a myth.”

“Just like the village we should have found.”

Bergen’s expression hardened, and Thalia immediately regretted her mumbled remark.

“Apologies, Princess Thalia. I regret that not all of the information at my disposal has proven accurate.”

“Forgive me, Commander. You bear no fault. My only excuse for speaking out of turn is that Pax’s death weighs heavily upon my heart. I could ask for no one more steadfast to protect our company. Is that the range?”

Bergen peered ahead to where Thalia scanned the horizon. “Yes, Milady. We should arrive shortly.”

“The Dark Range. R’cey may be an unknown element, but she is right about one thing. The names of these locations are quite ominous.”

Conversation dropped away as the ground began to climb. As animals and riders picked their way upward, Thalia’s thoughts turned to the recent conversation. She didn’t find it

surprising that the others hesitated to accept R'cey. She was an unknown, as frightening to them as any demon or witch. Thalia had an edge on her people. All royalty on Triana knew of other intelligent species in the cosmos. Many leaders traded openly with them while hoarding that knowledge from commoners. Even if she hadn't, Thalia believed she'd have trusted R'cey without hesitation.

In all honesty, Thalia found R'cey quite attractive. Were she not forbidden to engage in a physical relationship with others below her station, she'd eagerly take R'cey to her bed. After their quest concluded, of course. It did surprise her that Bergen had so casually mentioned R'cey being from another world. Apparently, he was far more intelligent than he allowed others to see. She would need to keep a close eye on him.

Thalia's mount, Oberon, stumbled slightly. Emerald shrieked in Thalia's ear and took flight. Thalia winced and focused on the climb. She hadn't even noticed the lush trees growing on the mountainside but did so now. It was so pretty in these dark woods. A winged gray squirrel made her smile when it scrambled up a nearby trunk and then launched itself into the air. Emerald made a playful swipe toward the squirrel and then zipped away. The squirrel didn't find the play nearly as fun as the dragonlet. It screamed, hit the ground, and scampered into a hole.

"Emerald, behave yourself."

"I have discovered fresh water," Henry cried out from up ahead.

They had last resupplied at Atola, and all canteens now ran low. Thalia spurred Oberon forward and eagerly dismounted beside a small stream. The water ran clean and fast. As Thalia knelt to refill her water skin, Bergen dropped onto his belly beside her. He stuck his head under water, generating a small laugh from the others. It wasn't much after Pax's loss but helped relieve the tension.

Emerald lighted on Thalia's other side, her claws digging into the soft loam, then cautiously approached the water. She turned her head and studied the stream with one eye in a bird-like fashion. After a moment, she tipped her beak into the water. Then she tilted her head back to allow the cool liquid to

slide down her throat. Thalia wasn't concerned Emerald would put out the fire in her belly. Vibria had two stomachs; one accepted sustenance, and the other housed a scorch chamber. She reached out to stroke the supple, scaly hide.

Bergen pulled out of the flow and shook himself like a dog shedding water. For the first time since Pax's demise, Thalia felt a little better. The sun beamed delightfully into the glade, warming her flesh and her spirits. Unexpectedly, Emerald tensed beneath her hand. Thalia forgot the sweetly shining sun and the babbling brook. She dove into Emerald's consciousness almost instinctively, easily and without thought. A somber presence slowly drew in around them. Thalia felt it through her link but couldn't determine anything through Emerald's more primitive thought patterns. All she knew was that something evil approached.

"On your guard!"

The words sounded strangled as Thalia withdrew from Emerald's mind. She pulled her hand away simultaneously and reached for her crossbow. The weapon lay strapped against her back, forcing Thalia to reach awkwardly over her shoulder. The crossbow tangled with her quiver, and Thalia struggled to free both.

Enforcers hopped to their feet even as thousands of birds deserted the trees with shrill squawks of warning. The birds took off, streaking away in the same direction, like a dark cloud of prey evading predators. Thalia heard the ring of metal as soldiers withdrew swords from their sheaths. Kahlan screamed in pain. The hair stood up on the back of Thalia's neck and on her forearms as adrenaline sang through her veins.

"I have you." Bergen reached over to help Kahlan. He snapped the shaft from an arrow that pinned Kahlan in place.

The deadly dart had penetrated Kahlan's shoulder and tagged her against a heavy tree trunk. She screamed again as Bergen pulled her free. The arrowhead remained imbedded in the tree. After that, Thalia lost sight of the minute details.

A swarm of tiny devilish imps zipped toward them through the forest. The imps bore the faces of men, complete with black mustaches and pointed goatees. As one, they sported mischievous grins and chuckled like a room full of maniacs.

Thalia rolled to one side in time to avoid an imp ramming her directly in the nose.

Her crossbow went off as Thalia hit the turf. The bolt sailed harmlessly into the woods, but she hadn't any time to mourn the loss. She fumbled for the hunting knife at her waist while sounds of skirmish filled the glade. Movement in the trees caught her eye.

An ebony steed with a glorious sheen stepped into view. The horse's hooves resembled polished onyx and sparked fire as it pawed the ground beneath. A sable mask covered the horse's face, allowing the eyes to show, but armoring the flesh. The eyes drew Thalia's attention. They glowed like embers stoked in the fires of the pit.

As impressive as she found the mount, the beast was nothing compared to its rider. Thalia's blood ran cold as she stared into the face of pure evil. Where she should've found eyes, Thalia gazed into twin pools of inky darkness. A skull peered back at her, but it wasn't one belonging to a man. Rather, the skull appeared to have once belonged to some type of hound. The canine teeth on display bore out that theory. Aamon, Grand Duke of Hell, was no myth.

He carried a trident and wore a blood red cape over black leathers. Thalia lay transfixed as Aamon leveled the weapon toward her. Lightning arced between the triple points.

"Take that one." Aamon's voice sounded like the opening of a tomb, dank and hollow.

His words sent shivers down Thalia's spine. She understood his intent but seemed incapable of movement. Fear and awe had anchored her to the ground.

Devil imps continued flying all around. Emerald caught one in her powerful maw and crushed it into pulp. She dropped the thing and retched before shaking her head to clear the taste. Thalia swiped at another, but the thing dodged away and went for Henry. Slowly, Thalia realized the little monsters had no interest in her. Their sole purpose seemed that of creating a distraction. The terrible truth came to her as another legion of impossible atrocities darted out of the air.

"Harpies!" Thalia shouted.

Too numerous to count, the foul-smelling bird women

dropped from the trees. Breasts sagged—thin and pendulous. Oily feathers molted and drifted but failed to affect any hindrance. The disgusting creatures zipped toward Thalia, single minded in their determination. Claws reached and snagged Thalia by an arm...and then a leg.

Fabric ripped as she rolled from their grasp, trying desperately to fight the harpies off. A burst of flame suddenly engulfed two of the creatures. They screamed and dodged away with wings on fire. Thalia knew harpies hated water and would do anything to avoid it. For that reason, they swooped across the stream and dove into the ground, writhing against the dirt to put out the blaze. Their screams added to the cacophony of battle, and Thalia hadn't time to concern herself with them.

More clutching hands and grasping claws snagged her. Thalia's body left the ground. The harpies turned and started to carry her across to their master, but something snagged Thalia from behind.

“So not happening, you nasty bitches.” R'cey raised her left arm and fired her flamethrower.

Thalia had only seen the weapon once before. At the time, she'd found the device awe inspiring and not a little frightening. Now she felt only relief as two more harpies fell away. These two splashed into the river, carried quickly downstream. When she noticed their charred husks, Thalia knew they were dead.

Imps and harpies alike turned their focus upon R'cey and Thalia. A cloud of death swirled around the two of them. Thalia heard R'cey's grunts and gasps of pain, but she fought like a woman possessed. Another ominous sound drew Thalia's attention. A deep, rhythmic pounding grew louder as she listened.

Bergen and the others seemed not to notice as they attempted to help fight off the demonic army. Imps lay all around, so many of them that the soldiers fought amidst bodies up to their shins. Thalia wondered how much worse it could possibly be. Her answer appeared in the misshapen, lumpish form of two golems. Mud dripped from the seven-foot-high behemoths.

Thalia stopped struggling against the harpies, leaving R'cey

and the others to free her from the deadly grasp. She leaned toward the ground and managed to snag the string on her crossbow with a single finger. Thalia pulled the weapon up and wrestled a bolt into place, firing the instant the missile locked to the rear. Her aim was true. The arrow pierced the closest golem's face, right where its nose should be, if it had a nose. The bolt continued through the animated mass without any impact.

The golems easily crossed the river and waded into the fray. A massive paw swiped at Kahlan. The blow caught her directly in the torso. Kahlan flew backward without a sound and struck a heavy tree trunk. She slumped to the ground and didn't move again. Emerald darted and dipped toward the creatures, shooting out streams of fire that did little good. The only damage Thalia noticed was where a few lumps of mud dried and fell at their feet.

A lightning bolt shot out from Aamon's staff, and Bergen grimaced in pain. His body contorted and shook so hard Thalia feared his spine would snap. Mercifully, he lost consciousness. One of the golems swatted Emerald like a fly. Dirt and bits of grass flew up when the vibria struck the ground. With only two of their number remaining to fight, the legions made quick work of them.

Thalia witnessed the moment Henry's body hit the river. Her heart cried out when both golems smashed R'cey between their muddy paws. R'cey staggered for a moment, still on her feet though unsteady. Thalia saw the determination in her eyes as she raised her arm to discharge her weapons once again. R'cey looked confused and then simply dropped.

Without further impediment, the harpies lifted Thalia and carried her toward Aamon. No matter how she tried, Thalia could hardly move. The harpies' grip proved too strong to escape. Thalia saw what lay directly before her but didn't see the creatures that stayed behind. She thought the imps and golems had vanished. Only the harpies remained to obey their demon ruler's commands.

“What do you want with me? Why did you attack us?”

“You trespass upon my lands. Now you will pay the price. My shadow creature failed, but you have no succor now.”

Thalia heard the words with her mind rather than her ears. The

sound reverberated in her head so loudly that pain howled in her temples. She wanted to curl in on herself and shut out the noise but still couldn't move. Aamon forced her to watch the moment he leveled the trident toward her. Once again, she saw electricity flow between the points. An intense beam shot outward and caught her in the midsection. Thalia's mouth opened to scream, but no sound emerged. Misery like she'd never experienced before sang throughout her body. It felt as if her blood was boiling. Then, mercifully, the world around her disappeared.

Chapter Ten

Even before R'cey was fully awake, she realized her entire body hurt. Her brain felt like a scrambled egg. The large muscles in her thighs burned. Okay, she thought, that part wasn't so new. The greater muscles in her body had ached since she ran out of hemotide.

Something grasped her by the shoulder, and her fighting instincts surfaced in full force. Fueled by recent events, R'cey reacted by grabbing the offending paw. She bit down hard on her assailant, channeling all of her pent-up anger and frustration. All at once, she awakened fully. She felt warm flesh and tasted blood.

"Ow! Damn it all, woman. Release me," Bergen said and yanked his hand free.

R'cey forced her eyes open and groaned as she rolled onto her stomach. "Sorry about that."

"Tis nothing. I appreciate your spirit." Bergen tore the hem from his ruined jerkin and bound the wound.

One glance around the immediate area told R'cey the others hadn't fared so well. Kahlan sat propped against a tree with blood covering her left shoulder and chest. Bergen's hand dripped blood, and his hair stood on end. R'cey could have sworn she saw wisps of smoke rising from the singed ends. All of them sported bruises, cuts, and shredded clothing.

R'cey climbed to her knees and checked all around as she searched for the missing members of their party. "Where are Thalia and Henry?"

Kahlan answered weakly. "I thought I saw Henry thrown into the river."

"What about Thalia?"

Kahlan shook her head. Bergen looked confused. Again, nothing new. R'cey couldn't imagine who decided it was a good idea to put him in charge.

"Well, we'd better find them and get the hell out of here. Something tells me this place is even worse after dark."

"I'm unsure," Bergen said, grunting as he stood, "how

things could be worse.”

“Can’t argue with that. What were those monsters anyway?”

“Imps, harpies, and golems. Aamon commands armies of such vile creatures. Kahlan, can you stand?”

Kahlan grimaced. “It’s only my shoulder. The arrow passed right through, but I believe the bones remain intact. Can you heal the injury?”

“My apologies, but my magic is quite weak when it comes to healing serious injuries. The most I can do is help to speed your recovery.”

“I’m grateful to accept any assistance, Commander. As R’cey said, these woods are not safe. Weakness from an open wound will not further our cause.”

R’cey left the two prattling on about nonsensical healing. Maybe they had medical devices they didn’t want her to see or maybe not. Whatever. As for their recent foes, those were quite real. R’cey found it interesting that Trianans had given the same name to the creatures as Old Earth’s mythological beings.

She considered the implications as she picked her way downstream. If Henry had hit the water, she hoped the stream hadn’t carried him far. By sheer luck, she found him a few hundred yards away. A natural dam of boulders and fallen branches must have caught his body as he tumbled down the riverbed. He lay draped over the mound with his back toward her. From her angle, R’cey couldn’t see Henry’s face. She jogged the last few feet, splashing heedless into the water.

When she got near enough, R’cey placed her hand upon his back to feel for signs of life. The anticipated readouts on the HUD never materialized. R’cey cursed when she remembered she’d lost the helmet. Apparently, she’d also lost a glove. Her naked palm connected to Henry’s wet tunic, and all she felt was the cold. For an instant, she feared the worst. R’cey grabbed him by both shoulders and leaned forward to see his face. His eyes were open.

“Henry, are you all right? Where are you hurt?”

“Is it over?” Surprisingly, Henry sounded fine.

R’cey frowned when she noticed Henry’s condition. His body trembled but not solely due to the water’s temperature.

His hands clutched at the debris beneath him, like a drowning man clinging to a lifeline. The tension in his shoulders was unmistakable. On top of all these factors, R'cey recalled Henry falling into the water early on in the fracas. It made sense that the river carried him to this point in seconds. He'd had more than enough time to race back into the action.

Henry seemed frozen with fear.

"It's okay. They're all gone," R'cey said in a gentle tone and helped him to stand in the knee-high water. "Damn, Henry, you're just a kid. You shouldn't even be here. How old are you anyway?"

"I am nineteen cycles. Old enough to help my people and my future queen."

R'cey released him at the water's edge. He dropped down onto the riverbank and then sat with his knees drawn up. Henry covered his face with both hands so that R'cey had a hard time hearing his mumbled words.

"I wanted to go back, truly, but I couldn't move. I've never felt so frightened."

"Don't worry about it. I was plenty scared too, and I have loads of experience. You'll do better next time."

Henry looked at her aghast, and R'cey wished she hadn't said anything about a next time. She left him rocking and shivering as she returned to the others. Kahlan was on her feet, and some color had returned to her face. She looked much better, but R'cey noticed that Thalia remained absent.

"Where's Bergen?"

"Searching the woods for Princess Thalia. She may lie unconscious nearby."

"He won't find her. Now that my brain's working right, I remember those harpy things carrying her across the river. We need to check the other side."

Kahlan nodded, her expression grim. "You begin while I retrieve Commander Bergen."

"Round up our mounts and supplies, too. Oh, and see if you can find Emerald. Maybe the attack spooked her."

R'cey waded across the river to look for Thalia. She didn't care if Kahlan followed her orders or not. Thalia was more important. R'cey had a hard time admitting how worried she

was. She wanted to believe her feelings were normal concern for a teammate, but she made it a policy not to lie, especially to herself. She typically kept everyone at arm's length physically and emotionally.

In her line of work, falling for someone could get her killed. Somehow, subtly along the way, Thalia managed to slide past the chink in R'cey's emotional armor. It frightened her how worried she felt for Thalia.

Using every skill she had as a bounty hunter, R'cey scoured the opposite bank. She found hoof prints and trampled grass. Putrid smelling scat that had to belong to the harpies littered the area. R'cey coughed at the stench, and her eyes watered. She had to breathe through her mouth to function at all.

Eventually, Kahlan and Bergen joined her. Henry meandered up some time later, leading the drays and informing everyone that he couldn't find any sign of Emerald. He managed to obfuscate any lingering trace of evidence that could have led to Thalia's whereabouts. R'cey wanted to slap him on the back of the head, but Bergen beat her to it. He gave Henry a scolding that could've peeled paint from *Cyrene's* hull.

R'cey finally had all she could take. "Enough, Bergen. Let it go. He gets the message."

Kahlan spoke into the resulting silence. "The princess is not here."

"No, he's taken her." R'cey picked up Thalia's crossbow from the ground and slipped it over her shoulder. "Why doesn't really matter. We need to know where. Bergen, any ideas?"

"There could be only one place. The Land of the Dead."

"Of course, silly me," R'cey muttered. "Where else would a demon hang out? Okay, how do we get there?"

"We head due south, directly to the coast. From there, we procure a ship and sail west."

"West? That's directly back the way we came from."

"Aye, the Land of the Dead lies south of King Lotar's kingdom. That is how I know of it. The region is not charted for obvious reasons, but all know that the demon maintains a stronghold there."

"At least he hasn't much of a head start. Maybe we can catch up before he gets there."

“No disrespect, R’cey, but he may already have arrived. Aamon’s mount, Tempest, has wings.”

“Oh, for the love of...” R’cey couldn’t imagine what else could go wrong. Despite the facts, she was determined to rescue Thalia. She wouldn’t leave such a magnificent woman in the hands of such a foul creature. “Then let’s get to it. It’ll be dark in an hour, but we don’t have time to make camp. Every minute counts.”

“Agreed.” Bergen stepped into his saddle. “If you’re hungry, eat dry rations as you ride.”

“What of our quest? Would the princess not wish us to continue?” Henry asked.

R’cey was starting to think Henry was more cowardly than inexperienced. “Without her, there is no quest.”

The remaining trek through the Dark Range proved uneventful. R’cey and her companions pushed the drays through the night and arrived at a small fishing village right as the sun crested the horizon. She stood by while Bergen bartered their animals for breakfast and a small skiff. The boat’s owner assured Bergen that while slightly battered, the vessel would easily make the voyage.

Sooner than she’d have believed, R’cey stood at the prow as the boat skimmed through the water. Fear was a constant companion as she worried for Thalia. What was she going through? Would the demon eat her? Would he torture her and then eat her? Why did he take her at all? Maybe Emerald had tracked Thalia and already helped free her.

Kahlan proved quite apt at sailing. Bergen surprised R’cey by how he graciously released command to the female soldier. He and Henry carried out Kahlan’s orders while R’cey kept lookout and fretted over Thalia. All of them were tired, but at least Henry had stopped complaining.

R’cey turned to face the west and looked for signs of land. The sun warmed her from behind. She closed her eyes to picture Thalia’s face but then started to cough. For a few seconds, she thought she’d spit out a lung. The spasm passed, but her chest still hurt. R’cey felt her forehead and thought she detected a slight fever. That damn harpy stink had probably burned her lungs.

Sailing across the water took hours. Henry and Bergen finally settled down to nap while Kahlan steered the ship. The wheel reminded R'cey of an ancient pirate's vessel, old-fashioned and with points along the outside for handles. R'cey thought she'd heard these handles referred to as spokes. Kahlan seemed in her element, catching a second wind as the salt air warmed her skin. R'cey envied her the simple pleasures of sailing the open sea, the dire situation notwithstanding. Despite the attempt to distract herself with such thoughts, R'cey's mind insisted on returning to Thalia.

Thalia had a quiet strength that had drawn R'cey in without her even knowing what was happening. Once, she'd thought of bedding Thalia but without any emotional resonance. Now, the idea of a physical connection was secondary. All she wanted was to see Thalia, to know she was safe and unharmed. If she never had a chance at all for anything more, that would be enough.

R'cey felt the loneliness of such a possibility to her soul. Life as a bounty hunter involved days of solitude and a necessary distance from humanity as a whole. Here on this planet, surrounded by these people, she missed the single-minded purity of being a hunter, of focusing on her mission to find Zolla. The most threatening thing about life as a hunter was the loneliness. The silence was the loudest. R'cey didn't want that silence anymore. She wanted Thalia. If that didn't happen, she could at least return the crossbow.

She chuckled when she realized how amusing the Amalgam's hunter forces would find that truth. The great R'cey Hawke, knocked off her game by a woman on a backward planet.

"Look lively!" Kahlan shouted. "Land ho."

The woman even sounded like a ruddy pirate. She had the bearing, and Henry had the appearance.

"Kahlan, you missed your calling," R'cey said and laughed.

"Excuse me?"

"Never mind."

"R'cey, one final suggestion," Bergen said as he stood. "It will be some time before we reach the shore. Perhaps you should change clothing. I took the liberty of acquiring some items for you

at the village. My way of showing gratitude for all you've done for the princess. You should know that I have watched Thalia grow from a small child into the woman she is today. I love her like family. I am grateful for your kindness to her."

"Uh, thanks, Bergen. I don't know what to say."

He offered her a pack that R'cey noticed when they boarded the skiff.

"I witnessed your ferocity in defending Thalia, how you risked your life without hesitation. I was wrong about you. My hope is that these garments, however meager, will repay my transgression."

Until Bergen pointed it out, R'cey hadn't noticed how tattered her suit was. The upper left thigh was completely missing, and she had gaping tears in both sleeves. A rent exposed her stomach, and the flamethrower mechanism had somehow disappeared from her left wrist. Her suit was practically useless and barely provided any modesty.

"Thank you."

She accepted the unexpected gift and disappeared below decks to a small compartment. The previous owner had installed a compact bed with dirty, rumpled covers. It didn't matter since she wasn't planning on sleeping. Instead, R'cey delved into the pack, shocked by what she discovered. Bergen must have traded something special to come up with this outfit.

R'cey donned soft, padded leathers that seemed to hug her frame like a lover. The material outlined her well-developed abs and hugged her biceps. Warm without being overly uncomfortable, the leathers felt like a caress over her entire body. The raised neckline of the tunic and the extra padding in the torso would protect her from this world's archaic weaponry. Most surprising of all were the boots. They laced up the front and stopped just below her knees. Somehow, Bergen had managed to find the right size. She didn't know if his magic lay in knowing such things, but she was impressed in spite of herself.

The outfit felt good, more comfortable than her skin suit. R'cey thought the doeskin color complemented her bronzed complexion as well. Now if only she didn't smell like yak butt. There'd been precious little time to bathe on this expedition.

Hopefully, when next she saw Thalia, the princess wouldn't mind. R'cey briefly entertained the fantasy of a grateful hug after a daring rescue.

The hatch above opened, and Henry poked his head through. "Are you prepared, R'cey? Land approaches."

"I'm coming."

"You appear quite fashionable."

"Thanks, I think."

R'cey climbed the steps and emerged topside just in time to duck as a sail swung toward her head. Kahlan giggled and apologized, though she didn't sound very sincere. R'cey settled for a scathing look and headed toward Bergen.

"Thanks again for the outfit, Bergen. I'll pay you back. Somehow."

"Nay, simply promise me you will help to retrieve Thalia."

"You have my word. Now if only we had a plan."

"I have an idea, but I will speak with everyone as a unit once Kahlan lands this vessel."

"Easier said than done, Commander," Kahlan said. "We shall need to anchor in deeper water and take the longboat into shore. Once we retrieve the princess, we'll have an avenue of escape. If I beach the ship, we'll lose our means of egress."

"Smart thinking," R'cey said. "Tell me where the anchor is and when to drop it."

Kahlan navigated the ship a few yards from shore and then gave the word. While R'cey dropped the anchor, Bergen and Henry prepared the longboat. R'cey took a moment to gather up Thalia's crossbow and quiver. A few minutes later, they were ready. Bergen lowered the boat, complete with oars, into the sea. He and Henry climbed down first and then assisted R'cey inside. She almost pitched over the gunwale when the sea tossed the tiny craft but managed to catch herself just in time. Kahlan joined them a moment later.

"Assist me, Henry," Bergen ordered.

Bergen and Henry rowed with their backs toward the shore. R'cey took the opportunity to inspect the crossbow's firing mechanism. She'd never shot one of these devices before, but it didn't seem too complicated. Still, she'd rather be prepared for every contingency.

“Hey, Bergen, once we reach shore, will there be time for you to show me how this thing works.”

“I’m happy to do so. I’m also pleased that you asked. You are quite skilled as a warrior, R’cey. You know the value of planning.”

“Well, that’s what I do for a living. I’m what’s called a bounty hunter or a skip tracer. On my world, a bounty hunter is a specially trained operative used to hunt down and retrieve criminals. I’ve had a lot of practice.”

When Bergen and Henry both frowned, R’cey realized she’d slipped. She maintained the commander’s gaze, a little too nervous to check out Kahlan’s reaction. Thalia knew R’cey didn’t belong on Triana, but the others thought her merely from a different region.

Bergen shook his head and continued to stare at R’cey. “I knew you were not of this world. We saw a fireball in the sky the day we found you.”

“You don’t seem surprised, or very upset for that matter.”

Bergen shrugged. “I am no fool, R’cey. Your equipment is far too sophisticated.”

“You knew?” Unlike his commander, Henry sounded just short of panic.

“Calm yourself, young lieutenant. Are you so foolish to believe the stars devoid of life? Since this world holds intelligence, why should others not do so as well?”

“Commander Bergen, please remind me not to underestimate you ever again.” R’cey addressed him by his title for the first time since knowing him. She hoped Bergen understood by her words and tone that she had just garnered new respect for him.

“I am sure I will have occasion to remind you of it often.”

“Was that a joke? I didn’t think you even had a sense of humor.”

Bergen smiled and continued to row. R’cey felt like she’d just forged an entirely new relationship with him, but now Henry seemed terrified of her. He kept shooting cautious looks her way and alternately looking over his shoulder toward the shore. Kahlan said nothing. R’cey filled their final few quiet moments figuring out Thalia’s weapon.

Breakers tossed the craft as they finally approached the shore. When the bottom of the boat scraped the sand, R'cey didn't hesitate to bail over the side and guide it the rest of the way in. Kahlan followed her example, and soon everyone stood on dry land.

Bergen headed into the trees immediately but stopped when R'cey suggested they camouflage the longboat. Once they'd gathered enough brush from the nearby forest and completed the task, they headed for cover.

Bergen remained a few paces ahead of the others. "The mountains present the most likely location for a stronghold. We should reach the base of the range before late afternoon."

R'cey saw the peaks over the treetops and agreed with Bergen. She knew they'd have to rest and make a plan before storming Aamon's sanctuary. They couldn't act in full daylight anyway. Such an action would be just short of suicide.

It took only another hour to reach the base of the range. R'cey found it odd that a demon lord didn't have sentries in place but happily accepted that small blessing. They erected a crude camp and settled in to wait. With the sun overhead, they didn't need a fire. In any case, the smoke would give away their presence. How R'cey missed the glow of Emerald's belly fire. They might not need a fire, but a little light to disperse the shadows cast by the forest wouldn't hurt anything.

Henry made one final attempt to plead his case. "Shouldn't someone survive to return and apprise Captain Kilik of what happened to the princess?"

"Let me guess," R'cey said. "You volunteer to be the one to turn back."

Kahlan cut off the discussion. "No, Henry. How do you think the captain of the guard would respond should he discover we left Thalia to her fate? Do you suppose he would simply pat you on the head and send you to guard the wall? Especially if he discovered we hadn't even made the attempt to rescue his niece."

"I say we attack now, while we have the element of surprise," Bergen chimed in.

"As much as I appreciate your run and gun enthusiasm," R'cey said, "I think we need a plan. We should also wait for

dark as we've already discussed. As for the princess, we can't just leave her in there. We have to help."

"There is more at stake than the life of one woman, even a princess. She'd want us to continue the quest." Henry's argument was weak at best.

"It's settled then," R'cey said firmly. "We break her out at sundown."

R'cey turned her back on everyone. Kahlan and Henry drifted away to rest while Bergen showed R'cey how to use the crossbow. After R'cey mastered the mechanics, Bergen joined the others. R'cey got in a few practice shots and kept watch. She continuously tracked the sun, watching its slow progress. With so few clouds in the sky, she could see Triana's largest moon.

She loved this world's gorgeous night sky. At midnight the smaller moon, Solis, would make its appearance. From having orbited the planet, R'cey knew Triana actually had five moons. Only two were visible from the surface. One day, when she grew too old for the hunt, R'cey thought she could settle here. As long as she had a shuttlecraft and her technology, that is.

When Bergen relieved her a few hours before sunset, R'cey happily reclined on her pad. Her fever seemed worse, and she'd started to perspire. Her chest still felt tight, but the cough had abated for now. Tactics would require her to stay behind otherwise. She couldn't chance giving away their presence later by suffering a coughing fit.

R'cey shivered and curled into a fetal position as she attempted to stay warm. As the sun descended, shadows crept in, and she wished for the fire. R'cey managed to catch a few hours of fitful slumber before Kahlan shook her awake. She saw the final streaks of red and yellow as the sun sank below the horizon. They had concealed most of the supplies along with the boat, so they didn't have much in the way of packing up. Carrying only weapons and their wit, the four approached what they hoped was Aamon's fortress.

"Last chance to change our minds," Henry dutifully pointed out.

R'cey had heard enough. She pointed the crossbow directly at his chest. "You're going in, just like the rest of us. If you

endanger this mission or don't do everything to save Thalia, you won't leave this land alive. Do you get me?"

"Look not to me," Bergen said as he stalked by Henry. "I already would have shot you."

R'cey stood at the edge of the tree line and gazed at a crevasse cut into the mountainside. The rupture seemed especially dark and foreboding. Not surprising, considering the late hour and the sinister creature for which they searched. It was at times like these that R'cey wished for her helmet. The built-in optics would assist her in making out any threats that waited.

"Do you see anything?" R'cey kept her voice low.

"Nothing," Bergen whispered back. "No sentries, scouts, or sub-demons."

"This is weird."

R'cey took a step away from the trees to get a clearer view. A wave of dizziness hit her, and she stumbled over something in the shadows. Purely by reflex, R'cey put a hand out to break her fall. She caught a low hanging limb and gasped as the rough bark sparked a burning sensation in her hand. R'cey gritted her teeth to bite back an involuntary cry. She let go quickly and looked at her palm, worried about sustaining an injury at such a critical moment. She couldn't find any signs of a wound.

That couldn't be. She was sure Aamon had cast some kind of curse on the vegetation to incapacitate them. At the least, he'd sprayed acid throughout the region. Why else would it have hurt so much? Why else not post guards?

"Are you well?" Bergen gripped the same tree limb but failed to react. He frowned as he peered at her through the shadows.

"Fine." R'cey felt like an idiot, thinking stress had caused her to imagine the incident.

R'cey flinched at a rustling sound overhead an instant later, belying her assertion. At first, she thought they'd disturbed a large bird on its roost. R'cey quickly amended her assumption when something huge scrambled out of the branches headed right for her. She hadn't any time to fire the crossbow. R'cey

barely had a second to raise her arm to protect her face.

Something very strong wrapped around her arm, and claw tips pierced the leather. She prepared to fight but quickly realized there wasn't any reason. Emerald had found them.

"You scared the life out of me." R'cey stared at Emerald but then relaxed.

Emerald cocked her head, gazing at R'cey with one eye.

"I guess this means we're on the right track."

R'cey felt like a weight lifted from her chest. She'd taken on a lot on faith by following Bergen to this area, trusting that Aamon brought Thalia to this desolate mountain. The rumor of this place had been their only hope since they hadn't any way to track the demon on foot.

Bergen approached R'cey and stared at her hand. "R'cey, what ails you?"

"I told you I'm okay, Bergen. I guess I'm just a little surprised to find Emerald here. Not that I didn't trust you all along."

"No. What is happening to your hand?"

R'cey raised her right hand, her free hand. A silvery glow emanated from her flesh, casting light in their immediate vicinity. This wasn't the one she'd burned against the tree bark. It also didn't cause the same misery she'd endured recently, though it did sting slightly.

"I haven't the faintest idea." A moment later, the illumination faded.

"Perhaps it was a trick of the moonlight."

"Maybe." R'cey turned to more pressing matters, acting as though she didn't find her new condition extremely startling. "Emerald, I really hope you understand. Can you lead us to Thalia?"

Emerald squawked and shook out her wings. By rapidly beating the leathery appendages, she hovered in mid-air like a hummingbird—a very large and intimidating hummingbird. She issued a thin stream of flame from her mouth and turned toward the mountain.

R'cey had no clue what Emerald attempted to communicate until she saw the beady eye focused over the dragonlet's shoulder. "I'll take that as a yes. She's trying to get us to

follow.”

“Then let us proceed,” Bergen said. “Henry, guard the rear.”

Following Emerald through the darkness wasn't easy. The dragonlet was little more than a shadow in the moonlight. If not for the embers glowing in her belly, R'cey couldn't have seen her at all. She led the small party along a rocky game path. The trail grew narrower as they moved, and the canyon floor dropped quickly away. Before she knew it, R'cey had to slide along the trail with her back against the mountain. One false step and she'd go over the edge.

R'cey felt vibrations in the soles of her feet. She stopped, confused as she tried to assess the danger. Unaware, Emerald continued. She disappeared around a bend as a hail of pebbles bounced down the rock face. The size of the stones increased quickly, and R'cey realized this was a trap.

“Ambush!”

Tiny winged beings zipped down toward them. R'cey couldn't make out any details except that there were a lot of them. For all she knew, they were a swarm of huge bugs. Apparently, she was wrong.

“Piskies,” Kahlan said. “Try not to react. They are more mischievous than dangerous. If you try to fight them, you'll fall to your death.”

“Pixies, you've got to be kidding.”

One of the creatures zipped toward R'cey's nose and then whizzed away. She could have sworn she heard thin, tinkling laughter.

“Piskies,” Bergen corrected. “At least pixies are alive and may be killed. Piskies are undead.”

“You can't kill 'em?”

“Not as such since they are already deceased. They can, however, be destroyed by tearing them asunder.”

Same thing, although it sounded a lot messier.

R'cey leaned forward so that she could see above the ledge. At the same time, she raised the crossbow into firing position. Unexpectedly, both hands started to burn again. She flinched and dropped the weapon. It almost fell over the edge, but the string caught on a gnarled root. She quickly forgot about the

crossbow when she noticed the silver-white glow surrounding her palms. The heat intensified, and she held her hands up away from her face.

A bolt of pure white light shot out of the palms of her hands. The blast was brief, little more than a surge and not well aimed. It missed the piskies and hit a previously unseen creature. A harpy. Piskies scattered while R'cey found herself in a very different fight.

Steel clanged as the soldiers drew their weapons, but the struggle ended abruptly. Despite the poor and unplanned aim, R'cey's blast caught the harpy's center mass. The foul creature screeched and then plummeted toward the canyon floor. For some reason, it flew alone.

"Probably the sentry we searched for," Bergen said. "It was so busy trying to feed on piskies that it wasn't doing its job. Good thing harpies are so dim-witted. It must have accidentally herded the piskies in our direction."

R'cey noticed that Bergen looked at her as though he'd never seen her before. He was probably back on that whole "R'cey's a demon" kick. She thought it far more likely that Kahlan or Henry had the ability to channel energy through a surrogate and had just used her. They could have asked first. She felt out on her feet and still had no idea where to find Thalia. Whatever the case, she didn't intend to give anyone time to worry about it right now.

"Good theory, but I'm more worried that we've lost the element of surprise. Accident or not, someone will have heard that. Stay frosty, people."

R'cey retrieved the crossbow and set out once more. She quickly located Emerald not far away. "Thanks for the assist."

Emerald merely cocked her head in reply.

Chapter Eleven

R'cey found Emerald perched on a boulder, preening under a wing. When she moved closer, R'cey thought she saw the reason Emerald had stopped. A rockslide had blocked the way into the mountain. On one hand, it was a good thing. The vibria might have kept moving, unaware of the pisky encounter. On the other hand, not so wonderful since the barrier delayed Thalia's rescue.

Bergen placed his hands upon the rock fall, presumably to inspect the blockage, but then he leaned forward to peer into a tiny gap. "I see torchlight within. Perhaps we can clear a path."

"Sure," R'cey said. "If we had a crowbar and a small nuclear device, we might be able to get through. Short of that, we'll have to find another way into the stronghold."

The ground unexpectedly shook beneath her feet. R'cey and the others stumbled as they tried to catch hold of anything to prevent falling. At first, R'cey thought it was an earthquake, but she didn't remember any hunter intel to indicate this planet was seismically active. Then she heard the pounding of many feet.

"Oh, what now?"

"Trolls," Kahlan said. "They shall be upon us in moments."

"She's right. We shall guard you, R'cey." Bergen punctuated his words by drawing his sword. He motioned for Kahlan and Henry to join him on the narrow ledge.

R'cey looked ahead to see if she could catch a glimpse of these creatures and then glared at Bergen. "Exactly what is it that I'm supposed to do?"

"Clear the way. Use your magic."

"Are you cracked? I don't have magic."

Bergen turned to impress his point through eye contact. R'cey noticed the paleness of his features and the grim set of his lips. She'd never seen him scared before. That alone frightened her more than the threat of a troll pack.

"The energy blasts from your hands. That is magician class magic. Find the way, or we are all dead."

Okay, no pressure.

R'cey stared down at her hands. She felt as though they were foreign entities. Surely, Bergen was wrong. R'cey refused to believe such a thing possible. If it was, she remained convinced someone else had used her to demonstrate their power. R'cey wasn't even from this planet and had never possessed magic before. She planned to say exactly that to Bergen but surprised herself when the words came out much differently.

"I don't know how."

"You must try. We cannot stay here."

The multitude of pounding steps had drawn much closer. A pack of monstrous creatures suddenly rounded the bend. R'cey couldn't believe her eyes. The pale, hairless creatures swept toward the Enforcers like an evil tide. They issued battle cries, though she couldn't make out any intelligible words. R'cey spun back to the obstruction, the group's survival weighing heavily on her shoulders.

"Emerald, you have to help me." R'cey didn't know what the vibria could do, but anything was better than nothing. For that matter, Emerald might not even understand her.

Emerald answered that question by leaping from her perch. She took up a position directly in front of the rock fall. Emerald didn't waste any time. She fired a red-hot burst at the stone. R'cey noticed she'd hit the spot where Bergen peered through. That must be the weakest point. At least she hoped so.

Without any idea what to do, R'cey aimed both hands toward the rocks. She held the palms outward and hoped her body would instinctively act. Nothing happened, though the fighting behind her increased in frenzy. Someone, presumably human, issued a bellowing challenge. The ring of clashing steel reverberated. The Enforcers could not hope to win this fight.

R'cey drew on every ounce of willpower and concentration. Her hands grew warmer but still refused to obey her conscious desire. Perspiration popped out on her forehead and cheeks. Finally, the familiar glow appeared—but still no energy discharge. She heard another cry, one of pain. It sounded like Henry. As much as any injury to her companions bothered her, it wasn't catalyst enough to trigger her magic. Of more pressing

concern was Thalia's fate should they fail here. Captured by a demon, death would prove a blessing.

Concern for Thalia eclipsed her being, forcing a sob of frustration. All at once, power coalesced in the core of her being. R'cey felt the gathering storm well up, and she awkwardly attempted to direct the energy. She pushed outward, like pressing her hands against an invisible wall. Without any experience with this type of thing, R'cey had no control. The bolt of white-hot power erupted unchecked.

Emerald squawked and leapt over the side as the rocks exploded apart. R'cey blinked the dust from her eyes. When she could see again, her heart leaped in excitement.

"It's down," R'cey said as she noticed the rubble beneath her.

She stumbled and almost went down as she took a running step toward the opening of the tunnel. R'cey glanced over her shoulder and froze at the sight. Breaking open the barrier had taken too long. The Enforcers fought valiantly, but it wouldn't be enough.

Enforcer swords clanged off troll shields. The trolls carried only small knives as weapons, but their numbers made all the difference. Many fought barehanded, but that didn't keep them from attacking without hesitation. Trolls that dropped over the ledge remained eerily silent as they plunged to their demise.

Regardless of the lack of weapons or organization, sheer numbers would eventually spell doom. R'cey could think of only one course of action.

"Get down," R'cey ordered as she raised her hands.

Bergen obeyed, lunging backward against the mountainside. Kahlan and Henry were too busy fighting to hear. R'cey cursed and fired another burst. She aimed to the side to avoid the Enforcers and swept half of the troll pack over the side. Still, it was too little too late. Almost before she knew it, the remaining trolls disarmed the Enforcers. Strong, lumpish hands grappled for R'cey's arms and held her hands aimed toward the ground. Trolls grouped them together and marched them toward the tunnel. Ironic, since this was their destination anyway.

A troll had managed to wrangle Emerald under control. The

huge creature easily carried her under one arm. A leather thong wound about her beak ensured she couldn't blast them with her dragon's fire. It seemed nothing had worked in their favor. So much for magic coming in useful when she needed it.

R'cey stared at her hands and then scoffed. "That went well."

"I am surprised they didn't rend us limb from limb immediately," Henry said.

Bergen nodded, agreeing with Henry about their fate. "Not very troll-like behavior. Aamon must want us alive for some nefarious purpose."

"Great, I can't wait for the reunion. My headache from earlier was starting to fade."

"Quiet." The troll's voice sounded like boulders crashing together.

R'cey did as told, picturing the alternative if she didn't. In ancient Earth lore, trolls weren't known for their intelligence. Angering them might result in immediate death, regardless of Aamon's commands.

Their captors forced them into a small, oblong chamber. Stalactites hung from the ceiling, casting menacing shadows in the torchlight. R'cey didn't notice the individual cells until a meaty hand shoved her into one. The creature pushed so hard that R'cey tripped and hit the ground. A metal gate slammed closed before she could recover. She lay panting on the cold, rocky floor.

R'cey absently counted the sound of three more gates clanging shut but didn't have the strength to move. Her eyes were heavy. Sleep beckoned, though she did her best to resist. She'd used magic foreign to her body as she fought her way here, but it proved more than her system could handle. R'cey lost this battle and surrendered to the beckoning darkness. As slumber overcame her, R'cey glimpsed a single precious face.

Thalia.

Thalia rarely enjoyed waking in unfamiliar surroundings. As a child, she avoided sleepovers with friends for that very

reason. Her royal birth meant that her parents only trusted few companions with her care, but it wasn't often a concern. Thalia preferred her own room and her own things. No surprise then that awakening in a dank, cavernous chamber instantly elicited a foreboding sensation. Wall sconces held torches that cast dancing red and yellow strobes of light. Where the firelight failed to reach, ominous shadows lurked.

She appeared to be alone, but it was difficult to be sure from her current position. Thalia lay upon a stone slab near the central portion of the chamber. She attempted to sit but halted abruptly. The demon had chained her wrists to the table. Thalia pressed her head against the cold stone and closed her eyes to think. There simply had to be a way out. Whatever it was, she had to find it before Aamon returned.

Thalia tensed as she yanked hard on the chains. The only thing she received for her troubles was a pair of bruised wrists. She hadn't any tools to pick the locks and couldn't have reached them anyway.

A tendril of fear shivered down her spine but vanished quickly. R'cey was out there, and she'd be coming. Thalia had no doubt R'cey wouldn't leave her in Aamon's hands. Again, she tried to relax and think of a way out. Thoughts of R'cey helped to calm her. She recalled R'cey's soft, warm lips and the sweetness of her kiss.

Despite the current circumstances, she couldn't help dwelling on that delicious moment. Thalia could easily imagine exploring a relationship with R'cey. She was so very different from anyone Thalia had ever known. Thalia found her fascinating. She couldn't imagine life with R'cey ever growing mundane.

A furtive sound wrenched Thalia out of her memories. In the instant she required to open her eyes, Aamon had moved across the room. He stood at the altar, directly over Thalia's head. By tilting her head back, Thalia had an impressive view of the demon's fangs. The points extended below the bottom edge of the canine mandible. At least she didn't have to worry about looking up his nose. It seemed that spending time with R'cey had influenced her thought patterns. Why not just adopt her bravado, too? She certainly had nothing to lose, and she

might delay whatever he had planned long enough for R'cey to arrive.

Thalia feigned annoyance. "For the sake of Grace. I thought you nothing save an unpleasant dream."

Aamon's bone chilling laugh made Thalia rethink her approach. There was nothing pleasant in the sound, but it proved his only response. Just as during the battle at the riverside, Aamon didn't speak aloud. His dominion over his evil legion was unquestionable, so he had to communicate in some fashion. Perhaps he controlled them through a mental link. Thalia recalled her own brief mental communication with the demon and actually felt compassion for his evil horde.

Aamon tilted his head back and raised a dagger. A massive ruby occupied the center of the bone white handle. Torchlight reflected off the blade, giving Thalia a glimpse of the razor-sharp edge. She recognized the knife as a boline, a ritual blade. Aamon grasped the hilt in a two-handed hold, leaving little question of his intent. Thalia tensed and closed her eyes. She expected him to plunge the boline into her chest. When nothing happened, she chanced to look up again.

Aamon slowly lowered his muzzle. His canine skull swiveled toward the cave entrance. Seconds later, a lumpish hulk lumbered into the chamber. Thalia couldn't decide if it was one of the golems they'd encountered before or not. In any case, its arrival had saved her life. The thing stared at Aamon for a moment and then departed.

Thalia waited for Aamon to pick up where he'd left off and tried to prepare herself for that last cruel blow. Instead, she heard him snort. Aamon pivoted on his heel and stalked out. He gripped the boline's handle so hard that Thalia could see his knuckles whiten even in the poor lighting.

Thalia's heart leapt in excitement when she realized R'cey and her guards had arrived. She pulled harder against the chains but to no avail. It was time to try something new. Thalia lay back on the stone and concentrated on harnessing energy from the environment. Everything in this room originated in nature, the stone slab as well as the iron manacles. Humankind could alter the state of the material through various means, but the basic substance remained.

Thalia felt the world's power flowing. It sang upward from the ground, drawn through her will. Energy from outside the body always manifested as heat. The conviction of the bearer determined the result. Thalia fixated on her purpose: to escape. She could attempt to either heat the iron to the melting point or simply pull hard enough to snap a link in the chain. Since melting iron would conflagrate her skin and bone, her objective was clear.

Adrenaline flooded her body as the power gathered. Thalia tensed her arms, biceps straining as she pulled. The chain creaked. The manacles bit into her flesh. Something in her shoulder gave way, and she gasped in pain. Thalia stopped and inspected the chains. All links remained intact.

A sharp blow in R'cey's ribs awakened her. Instinct urged her to curl into a ball to protect her organs, but training prevailed. R'cey wrapped her arms around a large, hairy leg before her eyes had opened properly. She held on tightly and rolled backward. The troll grunted and slammed into the ground. The thing wore a battered helmet that rang when his head hit the cell floor. A ring of heavy keys spun away toward the wall. R'cey was on her feet in an instant.

She'd already fallen into a boxer's stance before she recalled that she didn't have the skin suit. The suit imbued artificial strength behind any blows she might land. She definitely didn't have that advantage now. This troll would probably experience her punches as a light tickle.

"Perfect," R'cey muttered. "Time for a strategic retreat." She knelt quickly and swept the keys from the cell floor.

R'cey leapt over the troll and bolted for the open door. She heard the troll grunting and shifting around but didn't wait for it to find its feet. She slammed the cell closure and engaged the lock. Dizziness swam through her head, making her vision blurry. Torches lined the tunnel walls but danced in an oddly disconcerting way. Her illness had grown worse while she slept. Battling a huge troll hadn't helped. She couldn't see any details of the area around her. R'cey braced one hand against

the stone to make any progress at all.

Her blurred vision made navigating the passageways difficult. Suddenly, she bent double as pain seared through her temples. An image of a cell identical to her own flashed through her mind. The scene vanished, quickly replaced with a rough outline of the tunnels. This image also disappeared, and R'cey thought she saw Emerald's beady little eyes. The calculating beast had initiated a link.

"Okay," R'cey mumbled. "I get the idea."

R'cey followed the mental schematic as best she could. After only a few sharp turns, she reached an iron gate. Emerald stood directly behind the barrier and stared at R'cey as though she knew exactly when she'd arrive. She wasn't alone. The trolls had thrown Kahlan into the same cell. Two down, three to go.

"R'cey, thank Grace. How did you find us?" Kahlan had the sense to keep her voice low. She jumped up from where she sat against the wall and scooted over to the exit.

R'cey fumbled with the lock and heavy keys as she answered. "Honestly, I wasn't planning on a jailbreak. I was after Thalia."

"Nonetheless, I am grateful. Henry and Commander Bergen are not far from here."

"Great, you and Emerald free them. Then get out of this mountain. These locks seem fairly rickety, so her fire should do the trick. I can't give you the keys because I may need them to free Thalia."

The door swung open with a loud squeak. R'cey flinched but didn't hear a shouted alarm.

"Why may we not join in the search? Thalia is our princess. We are sworn to protect her."

"No way. Look, we don't have time to argue. Any minute, that troll I knocked out is going to wake up and alert every monster in this place. One person stands a better chance in this situation than an army does. Now do what I say."

Kahlan didn't look happy, nor did she press the issue. "Very well, we will meet at the campsite. If you have not returned in one hour, we will find you."

"Agreed."

“Do you know where to begin your search?”

“I haven’t the foggiest notion. Get going and don’t look back.”

R’cey tucked the keys into her belt and took off down one corridor while Kahlan chose another. From the brief pictures Emerald had projected, R’cey recalled a large, central chamber. She figured that’s where Aamon had taken Thalia. She didn’t have a lot of personal experience with demons and such, but R’cey had read extensively as a child. The demon had targeted Thalia for a reason, and she guessed it had something to do with a dark ritual. That’s usually how these things worked. Also, she highly doubted he’d go so far out of his way just to lock her in another cell. She rounded a corner and came face to face with the Grand Duke of Hell.

Aamon froze in mid-step. R’cey recoiled and fell on her butt. She quickly scooted backward and lurched to her feet. At any moment, she expected an electrical blast like the one Bergen had suffered. She breathed a sigh of relief when she noticed he didn’t have the trident. But her relief proved short-lived. Aamon raised a hand, and a shockwave pulsed toward her. The wave picked R’cey up and slammed her against the side of the tunnel.

R’cey slumped toward the ground and reached up to touch the back of her head. She’d taken a good knock when she hit the wall. A high-pitched whining sound made her ears ring.

Aamon stalked toward her as he pulled a wicked looking knife from his robes. “You shall take the consort’s place. I shall adorn the throne room with your heart.”

R’cey hadn’t heard him speak before. The whine grew louder until she realized the sound came from outside her mind. As the noise gained in intensity, she saw a yellowish light approaching from around the bend. Suddenly, a swarm of piskies winged into view. Each of the little sprites emitted a light of their own. Combined, they illuminated the area like a fireball. Briefly, R’cey wondered if they evaded another predator, like the harpy from earlier. That didn’t seem to be the answer.

Piskies thronged over and around Aamon. They slapped their little bodies at the demon and zapped him with their own

tiny lightning bolts. Aamon flinched and swiped at them with the knife. He missed each time but eventually stopped trying. Instead, he snatched one of the piskies out of the air and crushed the tiny creature in his fist. R'cey grimaced when Aamon simply dropped the pisky and let it bounce off the stone floor.

As the piskies swarmed harder than before, the whining intensified. R'cey finally figured out their wings made the noise. There were so many of them now that they were like a cloud. Aamon used his pulse magic to fling them away, but it had little effect due to the multitude. The ornate knife clanged against the ground as Aamon started using both hands to blast them back. R'cey could hardly see Aamon in the onslaught. If she couldn't see him, chances were good that he couldn't see her. This was just the distraction she needed.

R'cey jumped up and snatched the knife off the ground. It wasn't much of a weapon, but it was better than nothing. She'd rather have had a blast pistol. At the last second, and without considering why, she scooped up the little crushed pisky as well. R'cey ran down the corridor and headed the way Aamon had come. Moments later, she burst into a much larger, circular cavern. She wasn't surprised to see Thalia chained to a stone slab in the middle.

Startled lavender eyes turned in her direction as R'cey pelted across the chamber. R'cey placed the pisky on the table and used the same hand to touch Thalia's cheek. Relief at seeing Thalia unharmed flooded her soul. R'cey couldn't resist leaning over to kiss Thalia. The supple feel of soft lips felt like a homecoming, but she hadn't any time to linger.

"I'll have you free in a moment." R'cey set the knife beside the pisky. "Where did I put those damn keys?"

She patted her britches and realized there weren't any pockets. Then she remembered tucking the keys into her belt. They'd slipped and started to slide down her waistband, but she fished them out. Seconds later, she unlocked the manacles.

"You don't look well," Thalia said. "You have dark circles under your eyes."

"Thanks. No time for small talk."

R'cey freed Thalia and then retrieved the pisky. She didn't

know if there was any hope for the little thing, but she couldn't leave it lying around for Aamon to step on. R'cey tucked the pisky under her shirt and inside her bra.

She shoved the keys toward Thalia and hefted the knife once again. "I think we've worn out our welcome. How about we get out of here before our host returns?"

"By all means, lead the way. Later you can tell me how you wrested Aamon's boline from his grasp."

R'cey started across the room to the opposite side from which she'd entered. She remembered an exit here from Emerald's schematic. Good thing she had a sharp memory. "What's a boline?"

"The dagger, which you now carry."

The question was rhetorical since R'cey was focused on their escape.

The ground shook, and the sound of many footsteps reached R'cey's ears. Aamon probably had his entire legion headed their way. The exit led them away from the evil tide. R'cey grasped Thalia's hand and urged her to run as quickly as possible. Here, the tunnels proved sparsely lit. The air stank of rot and decay. R'cey gagged once but wrested her responses under control. They dodged down tunnels that led downward and backtracked from ones that led higher into the mountain. R'cey began to feel she'd lost her way in the maze of corridors until she saw a lessening in the darkness up ahead.

She halted at the edge of a long, incredibly narrow rock bridge. The catwalk extended over a massive chasm. R'cey couldn't detect the bottom of the pit. Whether that was due to the darkness or the depth, she had no idea. Regardless of the danger, it was the sole way out.

"It's only wide enough for one of us at a time. Let me go first."

Thalia cast a worried look over her shoulder. Aamon's army had yet to show, but both knew that would change soon. "For what reason?"

"Because this is too easy. I smell a trap."

"I smell nothing." Thalia sniffed the air to demonstrate her point.

"Don't be so literal. Take the knife. If I fall, you won't be completely defenseless."

R'cey pressed the boline into Thalia's hands without awaiting a response. She started across at a jog. R'cey did her best to stay in the center but held her arms out to help balance just in case. She heard Thalia's lighter footsteps trotting along behind. The sound gave her comfort until she heard the familiar stomp of the troll army. The ground began to shake from the impact. R'cey felt the vibrations in the soles of her feet. Aamon might have golems and imps on their tails too, but she couldn't risk looking back. She had fatalistic images of imps swarming them just as the piskies had Aamon. The little beasts could easily force them to fall.

Halfway across now, there was no going back. R'cey started to think they might make it when she noticed movement from below. Aamon rose into the air, riding Tempest. The down draft from the raven-colored wings caused R'cey to stumble to a stop. The flying horse hovered before them like black death. A gout of flame erupted from Tempest's nose. R'cey stood directly in its path.

An instant before the blaze could take her, R'cey launched into a forward roll. Her shoulder struck the granite bridge hard. She kept moving despite the pain. R'cey flipped onto one knee and then brought both hands to bear. She channeled all of her pent-up frustration and anger, adding the love and worry she'd grown to feel for Thalia. The resulting blast of energy lit the cavern like daylight.

R'cey's magic struck the rider directly over his evil heart. Aamon's trident spun from his hands. The staff bounced off the stone bridge before dropping harmlessly into the chasm. The demon lord slipped from the saddle and grappled for a handhold. He made a desperate attempt to save himself but couldn't with half of his torso and one arm missing. His smoking, charred carcass followed the trident.

"How'd you do that?"

"It's a long story. Run!"

Without the master to issue instructions, Tempest and Aamon's legion froze. R'cey intended to take full advantage of the opportunity. Like a child afraid of the dark, she believed and prayed they'd be safe in the light. The army wouldn't hesitate for long. She focused on reaching the tunnel exit.

She bolted for the light and raced into the fresh air just as the sun rose over the horizon. Still, they could not linger. R'cey felt the impact tremors as the troll army drew closer. She pulled Thalia with her toward the stunted trees that grew close to the tunnel entrance. As they moved into the forest proper, the cover would become denser, but here they stood exposed.

A hand the size of a boulder shot out of the tunnel mouth and clutched at R'cey's shirt. She yanked forward, and the fabric ripped at the shoulder. R'cey expected the troll to exit the cave and tear her apart. She couldn't believe what she saw next.

Warm light filled the ledge as the sun rose. A beam of sunlight struck the troll's hand, and a cry of pain echoed throughout the canyon as the creature howled. Right before her eyes, the troll's hand turned to stone.

"R'cey, make haste. Imps and harpies will not be so affected by the sunlight."

R'cey couldn't think of anything to say. She turned and ran, leading Thalia through the forest and toward the sea. Her shirt had torn near the spot where she'd tucked the pisky, so she cupped the tiny thing. R'cey tried to protect the pisky as they dodged branches and hurdled obstacles. Shrubs and thorns snagged her clothing and scratched her skin, but she thought she managed to keep the little thing safe.

Chapter Twelve

As they raced away from the mountain, Thalia slipped in shale and grasped at anything to provide support—stunted shrub here, an outcropping of rock there. She followed R'cey at breakneck speed, not slowing even as they hit the forest below. Trolls might turn to stone in sunlight, but not so for imps, harpies, or golems. They would not be far behind.

Though R'cey appeared gravely ill, her refusal to slow indicated her awareness of the situation. Curiosity urged Thalia to ask about R'cey's newfound use of magic. Even more peculiar was the way she cupped her left breast. Thalia thought R'cey must have suffered an injury at the same time she'd ripped the tunic, but she hadn't spotted any sign of blood. Thalia made a note of these oddities but saved her questions for a more prudent time. Already, she heard sounds of pursuit. Great wings beat at the air, and heavy steps pounded through the undergrowth.

R'cey looked behind her and somehow managed to pick up her pace. "They're gaining on us. We've got to reach the campsite."

Thalia had to disagree. "Not if our people heard the troll's scream of anguish. They will know we've left the mountain."

"What do you suggest?"

Thalia leapt over a fallen log and stumbled on the other side. She found her footing and adjusted course slightly, but the alteration forced her to take the lead.

"We must head for the beach. Harpies and imps will not fly over the water, and golems cannot swim."

R'cey didn't respond. Their pursuers were closing in.

Thalia cast a hurried glance over her shoulder and started in horror. "Behind us."

Massive oily wings blotted out the dappled sunshine. Thalia dove toward the ground. Leaves and debris lifted into the air as she hit the turf. She felt the whoosh of disturbed air as the harpy narrowly missed in grabbing her. One scrape of the harpy's filthy claws would induce a nasty infection.

Thalia rolled onto her back as the scabrous bird woman swooped into a one hundred and eighty degree turn. Before the harpy completed the maneuver, a white-hot surge of power struck. The bolt hit the creature in the chest. Feathers flew, and the nefarious creature blew apart.

“I can still hardly believe your magic.” Thalia breathed the words in stunned surprise.

“That makes two of us.”

R’cey had gone down on one knee. She stood back up but seemed weaker than before, and her left hand immediately returned to her breast. From her flushed appearance, Thalia guessed R’cey burned with fever. As much as she wished they could rest, it simply wasn’t possible. Thalia grasped R’cey’s arm and slung it over her shoulder. She’d have to provide support if they had any chance at all.

“Come, the others will not be far behind.”

With multiple pursuers nipping at their heels, they rushed toward the sea. Thalia carried more of R’cey’s weight with every step. She didn’t know how much longer they’d be able to run. Then she saw it—a break in the trees. Through a gap, Thalia saw her people. They stood beside the rowboat near the edge of the water.

“Go!” Thalia shouted to the Enforcers. “Launch.”

Bergen said something to Kahlan and quickly appropriated her bow and arrow. Meanwhile, Henry and Kahlan followed Thalia’s command. Commander Bergen took up a defensive position. He’d started firing arrows by the time Thalia and R’cey crossed half the distance to the beach.

Once they drew closer, Bergen stowed the weapons and assisted with R’cey. Thalia gratefully allowed him to take most of her weight. Waves lapped at their legs, but soon they reached the side of the craft. They assisted R’cey into the boat. It frightened Thalia that R’cey was so weak. She couldn’t even sit up. Instead, she lay on the bottom. Thalia focused on her as she clambered over the side. She happily left everything else up to the Enforcers, though she glanced back to check their escape.

Just as she’d expected, the harpies stopped at the edge of the water. The imps traveled out a little farther but turned back

quickly. It seemed they were clear of the danger.

Thalia relaxed and leaned over to check on R'cey and then helped her onto her back. "I knew you'd come."

"And I knew you'd never give up. You're far too stubborn for that. I should probably tell you, I lost the crossbow."

"Tis nothing. What do you have in your tunic?"

"I beg your pardon?"

Thalia snorted in laughter. The comment wasn't really that funny, but she needed to release the stress somehow. R'cey smiled in return and reached up to touch her chest again. This time she reached inside and fumbled around a bit. Her actions were surprising to say the least. Thalia hadn't expected such behavior in mixed company.

"Sweetheart, I realize you aren't well, but what are you doing?"

R'cey chuckled and pulled her hand free. She held something curled in the palm of her hand. Thalia could barely make out a set of rumped, transparent wings. Before she could inspect the form more closely, Kahlan shouted a warning.

"Piskies, an entire swarm. Why have they not turned back?"

"I think I have the answer to that." R'cey opened her hand to reveal a tiny female pisky. The little thing's eyes lay closed, and she had yet to move. "Aamon crushed this one in his fist. I was afraid he'd hurt her again, so I grabbed her off the ground before I found you on that altar."

"I hope she was worth it," Thalia responded seriously. "Piskies are unpredictable at best."

Thalia gave the order for everyone to set aside their weapons. She faced the piskies directly, her hands up and palms open. The throng bypassed Thalia entirely. They encircled R'cey and hovered in place.

"They are waiting to see what you'll do."

R'cey addressed the mass. "I didn't kidnap her. I only wanted to protect her. I am happy to return her to you now."

Piskies didn't speak as a rule. Telepathic communication was more their way of doing things. Thalia picked up a sense of gratitude as a small contingent of piskies broke away from the horde and moved in. These few used their magic to levitate the female from R'cey's palm. Thalia could see the magic in

the air. Multicolored swirls of energy surrounded the tiny sprite. Once secured on invisible strands, the piskies moved away with their charge safely in their custody.

Thalia gazed at R'cey and smiled. "That was an extremely kind thing for you to do. Sometimes, I find your compassion staggering."

R'cey flushed further and looked immensely pleased with the compliment. "Thanks. How much longer until we reach the ship?"

"Not long now. A few minutes at most."

"Wonderful. I think I'll rest. That magic stuff takes a lot out of me. Did you call me sweetheart?"

Thalia rested a hand on R'cey's forehead. The heat confirmed her suspicions. "You are very ill."

"I'm fine."

Thalia brushed her fingertips against the dark smudges beneath R'cey's eyes. "These bruises tell a much different story."

R'cey's cheekbones looked sunken in. Thalia's chest tightened at the surge of tenderness she felt for this strangely compassionate woman. The feeling wasn't caused simply by concern for her illness. She had come to care a great deal for her, and everything R'cey did caused those emotions to grow. Something as simple as altruistic concern for a hapless pisky spoke volumes about her character. Thalia had never heard of anyone assisting an undead creature. Each time R'cey did something like this, Thalia couldn't help but love her more.

When they reached the ship a few minutes later, R'cey had already lost consciousness. Thalia insisted Bergen go first up the rope ladder. He carried R'cey slung over his shoulder. Thalia followed closely behind, afraid to let R'cey out of her sight. She monitored how Bergen transferred R'cey to the captain's cabin without orders. He laid her gently upon the narrow bunk and stood ready until Thalia dismissed him. Clearly, the two had reached a newfound respect for one another in her absence. At the very least, the animosity had ended. Thalia had one less concern now and happily focused on tending to R'cey.

With R'cey's dreadfully high fever, Thalia made the

decision to head for the nearest safe harbor. By sailing due east, the ship reached the Hotfoot Lava Lands in six hours. Thalia would have preferred to sail around the entire continent. Tales of this region insisted that it boasted the most dangerous deserts on the planet.

“Kahlan, steer toward the central shores. We want to anchor as close to the Blessed Oasis as possible. I’ve heard stories of a settlement there. Perhaps they will have medicines.”

“Can your magic not heal her?” Kahlan looked puzzled.

“Unfortunately, this illness is beyond my limited abilities.”

Kahlan’s gaze remained fixed on the horizon. “Why would anyone wish to reside in such a barren wasteland?”

“There is a village inside the Oasis,” Bergen said. “I was there once, many years ago during the Ogre Wars.”

Thalia’s heart leapt in hope. She always preferred firsthand knowledge to court gossip. “Do you believe they can assist us?”

“I believe they have what we need. It is another matter as to whether they will. These are a strange folk.”

“The sun has probably damaged their minds,” Kahlan said.

Thalia couldn’t discard Kahlan’s remark. In these wild regions, any actions taken could have disastrous results. The people of the Oasis might kill them on sight. One thing Thalia knew for certain was that without medicines, R’cey would surely perish. She required more than the trifling herbs Thalia carried in her pack or the magic wielded in her hands.

They left the ship anchored off the coast and took the rowing craft once more. Thalia needed to plan ahead and realized they’d require the vessel to continue to the Southern Isles. She only hoped nothing happened to the ship in their absence. So few in numbers, Thalia couldn’t afford to leave a guard. If this quest had taught her anything, it was to anticipate the unexpected.

Utilizing the dingy had become almost commonplace at this point. With her hands full caring for R’cey, Thalia left the logistics to her people. Bergen stepped up again, slinging R’cey across his shoulders as soon as they stepped foot on solid ground. Despite the heat of this cursed land and the sweat pouring from his brow, not a word of complaint passed his lips.

Thalia couldn't have been more proud. She made a mental note to recommend him for a promotion once they returned to Honui.

By a fortunate twist of fate, the settlement resided close to the water. Not surprising, Thalia thought. The Blessed Oasis boasted the only lush growth on the island. Even better, the residents proved quite friendly, if not overly curious about the visitors. Apparently, they didn't receive many guests.

Within the hour, Thalia rested on a chair at R'cey's bedside. The regent of this small borough personally delivered a bowl of cool water and cloths to bathe R'cey's fevered brow. Not long after, two women brought soup, bread, and drink. They also carried medicinal herbs. Thalia hadn't seen any men in the settlement and felt somewhat relieved. Women were typically not as territorial, and that fact helped Thalia feel safe in these strange surroundings.

Left in peace, she spent the night tending to R'cey, who grew delirious several times. Thalia struggled to keep her calm. The fever seemed to grow by the hour. R'cey had started to cough. She had difficulty drawing breath, often gasping for air. When this happened, Thalia eased R'cey onto her side until the spasms passed. Thalia constructed a poultice from the herbs. She placed them directly against R'cey's chest, under her shirt. The poultice did little good that Thalia could detect. She began to offer prayers to Grace for R'cey's recovery. She worried R'cey would lose her battle with this dreadful illness.

Finally, near dawn, the fever broke. Sweat poured from R'cey's body, which Thalia patiently bathed away. She gently changed R'cey's clothing with a soft bundle brought to her by the women of the village. After that, R'cey settled into a quiet, healing sleep. Thalia remained in her chair but rested her head on the mattress beside R'cey. She took the opportunity to close her eyes.

R'cey awakened slowly. She felt as if a land shuttle had struck her at full velocity. Her entire body hurt, and she was thirsty. Her tongue seemed pasted in place. R'cey didn't

recognize her surroundings, but waking on a soft mattress instead of inside a rock cell was encouraging. She tried to sit up, but a weight held her in place. Her gaze softened when she saw Thalia sleeping on her arm.

Only once before had she seen Thalia so unguarded. That night at Olan's inn, R'cey had maintained her distance. Despite the kiss shared that night, she had allowed Thalia space. R'cey wanted Thalia to think of her as chivalrous, unwilling to force their shared attraction. That was only partially true. She would never pressure anyone to sleep with her, but at that time, R'cey thought of Thalia as nothing more than a conquest. So much had changed in the course of a week.

R'cey couldn't have resisted if she wanted to. She reached across with her free hand and brushed Thalia's hair. Short and thick, the blond locks slipped through her fingers. So many times, R'cey had wanted to touch the strands, to feel as close to Thalia as a lover.

Sandy lashes fluttered, and Thalia opened her eyes. This close, R'cey watched the lavender color deepen as awareness returned. As Thalia gazed at her, R'cey's heart thumped. Her lips stretched into a smile.

"Welcome back. Are you thirsty?" Thalia reached for a cup of water from the table next to the bed.

R'cey nodded and sipped from the cup Thalia offered. A few small sips satisfied her thirst. "Why do I think I have you to thank for me still being here?"

"Because you are quite perceptive."

R'cey stretched her arm out. Pins and needles burned as the blood flow returned. "How long?"

"Just overnight. Your fever broke early this morning. Do you feel hunger?"

R'cey shook her head. "I don't remember much, but I think I fought you. I hope I didn't hurt you."

"Actually, you insisted on several occasions that I should kiss you. I believe at one point, you even proposed marriage."

R'cey grew warm with embarrassment. Thalia's amused expression didn't help. "No way."

"Yes way, indeed."

"You know you're cute when you try to talk like me."

“I shall make a note of it.”

“Well, did you?”

Thalia looked confused. “Did I what?”

R’cey brushed her thumb against Thalia’s lower lip. Thalia rewarded her with a breathless gasp. The tip of Thalia’s tongue darted out to wet her lips. It barely touched R’cey’s thumb. R’cey felt the caress to her core. What started out as gentle teasing turned unexpectedly erotic.

“Of...of course not. I wouldn’t take advantage of you in such a vulnerable state.”

R’cey noticed the huskiness of Thalia’s voice and felt encouraged. “I’m not vulnerable now. I’m quite lucid and only inches away.”

Her hand encircled Thalia’s neck as she leaned closer. R’cey felt warm breath on her face. Every sense seemed heightened. She anticipated Thalia’s kiss, her eyes drifting closed. When their lips met, the sensation was more intense than R’cey could have imagined.

Before, in the dilapidated lodgings, their contact was nothing more than physical. This time, R’cey felt the connection to her soul. She lost all awareness of time as their tongues and lips joined. The taste and feel of Thalia surrounded her, urging R’cey to ask for more, to beg if necessary.

She tugged at Thalia’s shoulders, encouraging her atop the narrow cot. Thalia complied. R’cey’s body sang when Thalia pressed down against her. Thalia ended the kiss but only moved lower. R’cey hissed when sharp teeth nipped at her throat.

“You have too many clothes on.”

“So have you,” Thalia said. “Unfortunately, we could be interrupted at any moment.”

“I’m not sure I care. I’m burning up here.”

R’cey captured Thalia’s lips again. She attempted to unbutton Thalia’s tunic, but a strong hand stopped her. Thalia’s lingual caress gentled before she finally rose up to look at R’cey.

“The longer I am around you, the more I desire you.”

R’cey knew a brush-off when she heard one. “It’s not going to happen, is it?”

“Oh yes, it will. Just not today. You were quite ill. I’d

rather not have you relapse.”

“I’m willing to risk it.”

Thalia laughed and pressed a kiss to R’cey’s forehead. She snuggled against her, and R’cey suddenly felt content just to hold her. She’d never been much for sentimentality. R’cey preferred sex to cuddling. Once the physical act ended, R’cey typically dressed and left without a backward glance. Something had changed.

“We need to speak of a few things,” Thalia said. “There is your unexpected talent for magic for one thing.”

“Yeah, I can’t explain that. It must have something to do with this planet. The atmosphere maybe, or some other unknown properties unique to Triana. I’m sure there’s a logical explanation.”

R’cey felt Thalia’s frustrated sigh. It was hard not to with her arms wrapped so nicely around Thalia’s ribs.

“Once again, I am forced to point out the flaw in your logic, my darling.”

“Such as?” The endearment threw R’cey for a loop, and she didn’t know what else to say.

“Here, magic is as valid as science. Not everything has an analytical explanation.”

R’cey had the impression Thalia wasn’t speaking solely of magic. “Name something else that defies scientific reasoning.”

Thalia rose up to stroke R’cey’s cheek. “Your demand leads me to the second item we should discuss. Along with your newfound abilities, your eye color has changed.”

“What? That’s impossible. Eye color doesn’t change, except for babies. As they mature, their eyes become the color they will be for the rest of their lives.”

“And yet, yours have shaded toward a hue more similar to my own. I can still see the brown, but it is now muted. Then there is the uncanny way you have with animals.”

R’cey held further opinions about eye color in reserve until she could look into a mirror but knew she had Thalia on her last point. “Lots of people are good with animals.”

“Typical beasts of burden perhaps but not vibria. Bergen informed me how Emerald responded to you. I saw the stirrings of a connection for myself before Aamon abducted me. Trust

me, R'cey. Vibria bond with their human counterparts, one associate, for life. They respond to no other."

R'cey swallowed hard. She had to admit, Thalia's arguments were very convincing. The idea that magic could be real went against everything R'cey had ever believed in. She felt a disturbing sensation fluttering at the fringes of her mind. It resembled panic. She needed to think about something else.

"Is that all?" R'cey's heart thudded hard after these words left her mouth.

"No, there is one other thing that defies all logic."

"What's that?"

"Love. There is no deductive reasoning to explain why I love you so very deeply."

The intensity of Thalia's gaze held R'cey transfixed. "You do?"

Thalia simply nodded.

"I suppose you have a point. I've never been very good at this mushy stuff, but I feel the same way about you. Still, what does that mean for us? I thought you were forbidden from being with someone beneath your station."

Thalia rested her head against R'cey's chest once more. "I am, but the heart does not observe rules and protocol."

"You can say that again."

With Thalia resting in her arms, R'cey drifted off to sleep. Warm, safe, and exhausted from her recent ordeal, R'cey slept without dreams. She awakened hours later. Awareness returned quickly as she sensed another person had entered the sun-baked hut. Instinct encouraged her to grasp for a weapon. She found nothing nearby.

"You are safe. My apologies for intruding," a woman announced as she approached the bed.

R'cey wasn't happy about a stranger walking in while she was unconscious. She also felt responsible for Thalia's safety and was angry she hadn't secured a weapon, just in case. R'cey almost made a snarky response to the attractive stranger but caught herself when she felt Thalia stir. For some reason, she wanted to show her best side with Thalia watching.

"It's fine. What can we do for you?"

Thalia awakened and moved off R'cey. She pushed the

bangs out of her eyes and slid off the bed. R'cey thought Thalia was attempting to be courteous. She wasn't comfortable lying in bed while an uninvited guest stood over her. She followed Thalia's example by sitting up and scooting to the edge of the mattress. Unaccustomed to being upright, R'cey had to wait a second for the wave of dizziness to pass.

"I grew concerned when Princess Thalia did not appear for the noonday meal."

"Afraid she caught whatever I had?"

"Indeed. Forgive my lack of manners. My name is Maya Braun, leader of the Blessed Oasis. Of course, Princess Thalia and I have already become acquainted."

"How very progressive of you, being the leader here instead of a man. My name's R'cey Hawke."

"R'cey!"

R'cey caught the note of rebuke in Thalia's tone. "No, I'm not being rude. It's just that most of the governmental hierarchy on this planet seems patriarchal, except for Thalia. She's royalty, so that doesn't count."

R'cey took a moment to assess Maya's striking physical appearance. She carried herself proudly, standing straight and even taller than R'cey. Maya's musculature contributed to her majestic image. She presented the picture of the perfect female warrior.

"Accolades are unnecessary," Maya said. "My people founded this settlement to escape the brutality of man's world. It explains the reason for choosing such a harsh continent as well as the current system of government."

R'cey had no idea what Maya meant about the continent. She was unconscious when Thalia brought her here. The information about the demographic seemed more pertinent. "If everyone here is female, I assume you don't care for men. What happens to Bergen and Henry?"

"It's all right, R'cey. Maya's people will not harm them. They are housed at the other side of the Oasis until we leave."

"Two of my warriors will stand guard at all times. It is strictly precautionary, I assure you."

"I can't imagine Bergen and Henry are thrilled with that arrangement."

“Nevertheless, they will abide by local protocols.” Thalia turned to Maya. “With your permission, I request we be allowed to stay one more night.”

Maya’s hesitation was so brief that most people wouldn’t have noticed. R’cey wasn’t most people. She saw the discomfort flit across Maya’s expression and understood. As part of a society uneasy with men, allowing two of them to stay for any amount of time had to be awkward.

“Yes, I’m sure R’cey will need time to regain her strength. I will have someone bring food and drink, but you will only be allowed another night of sanctuary. After that, I must ask you to move on. Many of my people are not pleased to have men present at our Oasis.”

Thalia bowed her head slightly. “Thank you for your generosity.”

Maya nodded and exited the hut.

“Good work, your majesty. For a second, I thought she’d ask us to leave.”

“Maya is an honorable woman. As much as she’d like to do so, I don’t believe she would. By the by, how are you feeling?”

“Better. The nap really helped. I should ask you the same question. How are you handling all this so well? Most victims of a kidnapping, especially by a demon, would be a basket case.”

“What is a basket case?”

“You know, they’d be hysterical, crazed, unhinged.”

“Ah, you mean since Aamon wanted to carve out my heart. Perhaps I simply haven’t had time to dwell on my captivity. I have been somewhat occupied since our escape.”

“No, I don’t think that’s it. It’s more likely that you’re just an incredibly strong woman. You’ll make a great queen someday.”

Thalia rewarded R’cey by leaning down to plant a brief kiss on her lips. “You are sweet.”

A tap on the door interrupted the moment. R’cey and Thalia broke apart as two women entered. They bore trays of food and beverage. Neither spoke as they placed the salvers on a small corner table. They were gone before R’cey could offer her thanks.

“Do you get the feeling these people really don’t want us around?”

“Bergen did proclaim them strange. It is entirely possible we are receiving a royal welcome.”

“Well, that would be fitting. Hey, you know what I just realized? I haven’t seen Emerald. Where is she?”

“You are worried for her?” Thalia sounded pleased by R’cey’s concern.

“Well, sure. I guess I’m just used to having her around. She really came through for us while you were captive.”

“She is fine, R’cey. I would have told you otherwise. The people of the Oasis are uncomfortable with a dragon in their midst, even a tiny one. Emerald hunts near the coastline and maintains vigil upon our vessel. I’ve kept track of her through our link.”

“I’m glad to hear it. What’s for dinner?”

R’cey inhaled a delicious scent as Thalia lifted the lid from the tray. A bowl of soup and a small loaf of bread made her mouth water. It seemed like days since she’d last eaten. R’cey slid into a wobbly chair and started in. She shoved the first spoonful into her mouth and swallowed before the taste hit her. R’cey slowed and moved the spoon around inside the bowl.

“Is something amiss?”

“It tastes like chicken.”

Thalia frowned. “I am unsure what a chicken is. Why is that undesirable?”

“There’s no meat in here. I think it’s vegetable stew.”

Thalia didn’t seem to understand her complaint, so R’cey let the matter drop.

“Speaking of your link, did I tell you that Emerald established one with me?”

“She did?”

“Oh yes, while I was trying to escape. She projected an image of the cave’s tunnel system into my head. At least, I assume it was her. I wouldn’t have found you without that information.”

“That is truly an amazing development. It also proves my point. You may have arrived on Triana with a normal affinity for animals, but I believe your magic has enhanced that ability.”

R'cey placed her spoon on the table. This conversation had become a little awkward. "Thalia, you know I'm still having a hard time believing in magic, right? I know it's ridiculous considering I've seen lightning shoot out of my own hands, but it's going to take me some time to come to terms with it."

Thalia reached across to take her hand. "Having one's entire belief system turned upside down can have that effect, or so I'm told. Fear not, I am here to assist you in any way you need."

Shortly after they ate, a woman appeared to retrieve the food trays. R'cey hadn't seen this woman before, but she proved just as polite as everyone else with whom they'd interacted. Reassured by that, R'cey inquired about the possibility of a bath. To her great delight, her host offered to lead her to a nearby hot springs. As soon as they left the hut, R'cey felt the full force of the sun's heat.

She recalled Maya's comment about the harsh environment and had to agree. This arid climate would discourage most visitors. If, for some crazy reason, people did migrate in this direction, the Blessed Oasis was not large enough to accommodate any sizable city.

R'cey topped the hill and spotted the hot springs. Trees offered shade, and lush grass grew right up to the water's edge. Several stone benches offered sitting areas around the pool.

"This looks really inviting. Uh...what did you say your name is?"

"Nebet. Maya is my life mate."

"Oh, I see. I'm R'cey. Do you two always take care of your visitors in person? Don't you have workers for that sort of thing?"

Nebet smiled without reservation. Her teeth flashed brilliant white against her bone-deep tan. "How else could we assess potential threats if we failed to interact on a personal level? You will find soaps and washing cloths on a bench at the far edge of the pool. No one will disturb you."

R'cey offered her thanks and watched Nebet saunter away. Despite Nebet's soft feminine curves and luxurious dark hair, R'cey suspected she was as capable of defending their settlement as Maya. After Nebet disappeared over the

embankment, R'cey was finally alone. The topography helped conceal the hot springs from prying eyes. R'cey waited a moment to be sure no one suddenly appeared bearing towels, robes, or drinks complete with tiny umbrellas.

Grateful for what these people freely offered, but a little disappointed that no alcoholic beverages appeared, R'cey stripped off her new outfit. She slowly settled into the pool. The water proved even hotter than the desert air. R'cey let her breath out, attempting to relax her overtaxed muscles. After acclimating, she submerged and scrubbed her scalp. Scouring her flesh felt wonderful. It had been such a long time since she enjoyed a proper bath.

After she thoroughly wet her hair, R'cey searched around for the promised cleaning products. Several small vials of a plasticene like material resided on the closest bench. Through a simple process of elimination, R'cey located shampoo. She'd just lathered up and prepared for a vigorous scrub when she spotted someone approaching.

"You've got to be kidding me," R'cey said under her breath as she thumbed a soap bubble out of her eye and then stared at the beautiful woman who approached.

"I thought I would join you. I hope you have no objections."

"Uh, no. How could I possibly mind? I'm sure you'd like a bath, too." R'cey's heart leapt into her throat.

R'cey's brain seemed to short out. Tongue-tied, she stared in disbelief as Thalia began to disrobe.

Chapter Thirteen

Thalia realized she'd taken a bold move. Should R'cey reject her advances, Thalia didn't know what she would do. Aamon taking her hostage hadn't instilled even a fraction as much terror as she felt now. Royal protocol demanded that she do nothing but share the bathing pool with R'cey. Her heart insisted on so much more. Regardless of what happened next, it all began with this first step.

The fact that R'cey sounded as nervous as she was helped steady Thalia's nerves and her resolve. She knew R'cey desired her in a sexual capacity, but that wasn't enough. Thalia wanted an emotional connection as well. She already loved R'cey and intended to show her how much, at least once before R'cey completed her mission and returned home. She had no doubt R'cey would leave, but Thalia would always have her memories.

She adopted a casual attitude as she strolled toward the hot springs. By now, her knees had stopped shaking. As she walked, Thalia unfastened her cloak. She dropped it beside the bench and glanced at R'cey from the corner of her eye. R'cey seemed frozen in place, her eyes fixed straight ahead. As she stood to the side and a little behind R'cey's right shoulder, Thalia quickly shucked her attire. Afterward, she deliberately chose a place to enter the water where R'cey couldn't see her body unless she turned her head.

Thalia wasn't really playing coy. She just wanted to build up the anticipation. From the way R'cey's breath came in little pants, her plan was so far successful. Thalia squatted down so that the water came to the bottom of her chin. Here she found a small ledge upon which they could sit and soak. She assumed the depth would increase significantly toward the center of the pool.

"Ah, this feels so nice." Thalia relaxed against the side, allowing her legs to float. The side of her foot brushed against R'cey's calf.

"Y...yes, it does. Um, do you want some shampoo?"

Thalia smiled at R'cey's reaction. "In a moment. Let me thoroughly wet myself first."

R'cey's gasp surprised Thalia until she realized her words could have another meaning. Pretending innocence, Thalia pushed away from the bank toward deeper water. The heat was so intense as to be scalding. After so long on the road, it felt magnificent. Thalia dropped to her knees, surrounded by the sensations of warm water and tender feelings for her companion. She rose up again after several glorious seconds and accepted the shampoo. She wanted to be clean again for what she was sure would happen next.

After rinsing her hair, Thalia asked R'cey to pass her a bathing cloth. Thalia washed her entire body, careful not to reveal too much flesh to R'cey's questing eyes. Once she finished cleansing herself, Thalia decided to push forward with her agenda.

"Turn around. I shall scrub your back for you."

R'cey's eyes widened like a frightened rabbit. "Uh, that's okay."

"Are you sure? It will feel wonderful."

Apparently, the temptation of a back washing proved too much to resist. R'cey swallowed nervously and pushed off the wall. She floated closer to Thalia, her bosom just below the water's surface. Thalia saw the distorted image of R'cey's small breasts and hard nipples. R'cey turned, and Thalia reached out to touch her. With the first instant of contact, Thalia knew she couldn't continue this game of seduction.

"R'cey, turn around."

"I thought you wanted to wash my back."

"And I thought you desired me. You certainly kissed me as though you did. Why the sudden nerves, my darling?"

R'cey turned. Her soft expression melted any lingering anxiety Thalia felt. "I do. I guess I just want to be with you too much."

"How can there be such a thing? This is something we both desire, and there is no one else here to see."

Thalia surrendered the washing cloth to R'cey and watched her toss it upon the bank. Strong arms encircled her, and R'cey stepped backward toward the ledge. Thalia followed eagerly.

As R'cey settled on the shelf, Thalia allowed her legs to float out behind her. She trusted R'cey to keep her anchored and to pull her close. Thalia's arms slid around R'cey's neck, and she closed the remaining distance between them.

Their lips met again, and this time there was no holding back. The touch was different than any Thalia had known before. It was overwhelming in its intensity, and before she knew how, she had pushed R'cey back against the sandy side of the spring. Thalia pressed herself full-length against R'cey. She felt driven by need, by want, by heat. R'cey's strong embrace told Thalia she felt the same.

Firm, small breasts pressed against Thalia's chest, and she dipped her head lower, wanting only to show her true feelings. Her hands caressed R'cey's body, stroking slowly from breast to loin before dipping into the viscous moisture she discovered there. Evidence of R'cey's arousal drove Thalia's passion higher. Water lapped at their bodies, generated by their movements and lending another dimension to the lovemaking.

She wound a leg around R'cey's thigh, latching on and grinding into her. The sensation caused her to cry out and tear her mouth from a nipple. Thalia looked down into eyes that were full of tenderness and desire. The breath stole from her lungs. A hand reached up to touch her face, and Thalia turned her lips into the palm. Wordlessly, R'cey drew Thalia back down to her. When their lips met, the touch was soft, driven by the need to communicate emotion rather than the impetus to burn furiously through the act.

Thalia's fingers were gentle as she brushed them through the obvious signs of R'cey's pleasure, spreading fluids over sensitive flesh. R'cey's moisture was distinctly different from the mineral water in which they lay. Joyous cries issued from R'cey's throat as she arched against Thalia. Thalia added her mouth to the effort, lowering her head to nip at R'cey's throat. One finger slid inside, and R'cey grasped Thalia tighter. She called Thalia's name and moved her head from side to side.

As Thalia caressed within, she moved her thumb over the tender knot of flesh at the apex. R'cey began to shudder and thrust her hips in that primal dance. Her cries, tremors, and scent began to overwhelm Thalia, and she found she was

moving synchronously against R'cey's thigh. Then R'cey began to shake before her body suddenly went rigid with the intensity of her release. Thalia's body was helpless to resist, and she joined R'cey in an infinite moment of ecstasy.

Thalia hadn't anticipated such a strong physical reaction to loving R'cey. Her heart pounded against her ribs, and it took several moments for her breathing to slow.

"I thought you were worried about someone seeing us."

"Not at the moment. Maya's people will not intrude, and you heard what she said about Bergen and Henry. They remain under guard. Kahlan enjoys her time talking with the other women."

"Then what do you say we take this little party back to the hut? There are a few things I'd like to do, but I think I'd drown if I tried them here."

"I'd say that sounds like a tremendous idea. After all, nursing you back to health once is enough."

Thalia awakened several times throughout the night. The majority of those occasions she discovered R'cey snuggled up close. R'cey seemed to sense her wakefulness, and their lovemaking ensued all over again. Toward early morning, a thunderstorm moved in. Thalia registered the crashing thunder and repeated bolts of lightning. Howling wind swirled outside, but R'cey held her close, safe and warm in their bed.

R'cey opened her eyes slowly. The scent of sex surrounded her, causing her to cuddle happily against Thalia's warm body. Gradually, she became aware of watching eyes. Startled, she sat up and surveyed the room. Dark, beady eyes stared at her from the foot of the bed.

"What is it?" Thalia's voice was husky from sleep.

R'cey released a breath and settled back against the pillows. She willed her heart rate to slow. "Nothing, it's just Emerald. She scared ten years out of me."

“What’s Emerald doing here?”

R’cey shrugged and closed her eyes. She felt Thalia shift and raise up, moving toward the vibria. Whatever they shared, the exchange remained silent. R’cey had almost nodded off again when Thalia threw back the covers and climbed over her. R’cey cracked an eye, noticing that Thalia had decided to dress.

“Something wrong?”

“Yes, we’ve lost the ship.”

“What? How?”

In response, Thalia tossed R’cey her clothes. “A lightning strike from the storm. Emerald shared images of the vessel burning before it sank into the sea.”

“That’s a bad stroke of luck, but why does it mean we have to jump up so soon? The sun isn’t even awake yet. Come back to bed.” R’cey stroked Thalia’s arm in a suggestive manner. She wasn’t above enticing Thalia into another intimate interlude.

Thalia patted her hand but continued packing her belongings. “I truly wish we had time. Unfortunately, with the loss of our ship, we must leave as quickly as possible. We have already lost two days, and we have no mounts. Now, we shall have to walk across the Lava Lands.”

“Why does that sound so incredibly dangerous?”

“Perhaps because it is.”

Less than an hour later, they were all prepared to leave. Thalia had dispatched a sentry to awaken Maya and release her men. Bergen, Henry, and Kahlan joined them fairly quickly. The men were understandably eager to leave the Blessed Oasis. Henry cited their house arrest as a key motivator. R’cey simply observed as Thalia expertly rallied her troops. She found it impressive how Thalia had grown into such a capable leader in such a short time frame.

R’cey hefted her pack onto her shoulders as Thalia prepared to make their final goodbyes. Maya, Nebet, and a small contingent of villagers waited.

“Maya, we are grateful for your assistance. May Grace forever hold you in her favor.”

R’cey had heard this blessing offered frequently while spending time with the company. In her many travels, she’d

learned it wasn't uncommon for people to believe in a higher power. Typically, she wasn't interested enough to learn about such things. In fact, she'd never inquired about this Grace deity. One day she'd have to remember to do so. Thalia could be somewhat superstitious, so R'cey would need to tread carefully. It didn't bother her that she and Thalia had different belief systems. She just didn't want to offend by asking ill-considered questions.

"You are most welcome, Princess Thalia. I would like to offer you one final largess, one of my warriors to accompany you on this most important journey."

"I appreciate the generous offer, but I must decline. We hope to procure a more direct route to the Western Kingdom once we complete our objective. We may not pass this way again."

"Then at least accept these additional provisions, to replace those you lost in the gale." Maya snapped her fingers, and a small troop of women stepped forth.

R'cey blinked at the array of filled water skins, dried meats, and powdered staples. She couldn't fault Maya for her generosity. There was only one problem.

"We can't possibly carry all this," R'cey said and surveyed the bounty of provisions.

Maya responded to R'cey's comment with an enigmatic look. Then she nodded. One of the women reached out to touch something beyond R'cey's field of vision. She heard a metallic snick. Two shiny rods shot out from either end of a transport device. The contraption resembled a medical gurney. Rather than rolling on wheels over impossible terrain, it floated on air.

"You have a hover cart?"

Thalia made a brief chopping motion, and R'cey quieted. "How did you come by this device?"

"From the magician I assume you seek. He came cycles ago to trade with us."

"Then you share good relations. Can you describe this sorcerer?"

Maya shook her head. "He always wore a hood and heavy cloak, in spite of the heat. At first, we accepted him as a benefactor."

“What changed?”

R’cey disregarded Thalia’s expression of exasperation. Though Maya could provide few details, R’cey knew she spoke of Zolla. To hear him mentioned so casually gave her hope she’d soon have him in custody. R’cey refused to consider what would happen after that, but she desperately required any information she could gather now.

“He visited only a few times since we rarely allow men in the village. Since then, I believe he casts dark spells that affect the weather. The storms grow more and more violent. We hear sounds like thunder, only louder. These sounds come from the direction of the Southern Isles. Whatever these dark spells or witchcraft are, they change our air. It becomes harder to breathe.”

Thalia turned to R’cey. Concern warred with curiosity, battling for domination over her features. “You know this sorcerer, this Zolla. What is he doing?”

“I’m not really sure, but it can’t be good. Actually, that’s not entirely true. I think he’s trying to alter the atmosphere.”

“For what reason? How could anyone possibly accomplish such a feat?”

“As for the how, my intelligence listed a lot of equipment that Zolla stole from the alliance.” R’cey’s memory of that inventory led her to a quick conclusion. “The air here is bad for us, me and Zolla or anyone not native to Triana. By using terraforming equipment, he can change that.”

“Again, why? By all accounts, Zolla arrived before you. As he yet lives, he has had time to acclimate. There is no need for him to do such a thing.”

“Not for him, you’re right. He’s planning to bring more people from my sector. Zolla is amassing an army.”

“You cannot be certain,” Maya said. “This is merely speculation.”

“It’s more of an educated guess. I’ve read his file. These types of shenanigans are right up his alley. Zolla’s launching an invasion. With the technology at his disposal, it won’t take long to conquer every army on this world. After that, he’ll establish himself as absolute ruler. It’s what he’s always wanted. Total power.”

Stunned silence met her final proclamation. Finally, Thalia

recovered. “This has the potential to change the world as we know it. We must stop him.”

“Trust me, I’d like to postpone Armageddon too, by any means necessary. Still, Thalia, I haven’t forgotten why you’ve come all this way. If Zolla has anything that can help Lotar, medicine or magic, we’ll find it.”

“I fear our joint venture may come to an abrupt end,” Bergen said.

R’cey noted Maya’s frown when Bergen spoke and understood her unease. Considering why the Oasis was originally established, men weren’t exactly popular. That most of the occupants seemed to be women-loving women, their response to these visitors made even more sense. All of that aside, Bergen’s campaign experience was too important to brush off merely to soothe ruffled feelings.

“What are you thinking?” R’cey asked.

“Walking to the far side of this land will prove difficult, if not impossible. Despite the generosity of our hosts,” Bergen said and bowed slightly in Maya’s direction, “we will probably run out of water before we reach our destination.”

Kahlan took a step forward and cleared her throat to gather everyone’s attention. “There is another issue. What happens when we do reach the other side? We cannot swim across the sea to the island, and I do not believe this floating contraption will provide transportation for us all.”

“Not even for one,” R’cey agreed. “Hover tech depends upon a surface dense enough to provide lift. Water won’t do. Maya, do you have any suggestions?”

“Only one, but you will not approve.”

Chapter Fourteen

The weight of responsibility rested heavily upon their shoulders as they left the Blessed Oasis. R'cey's sojourn to the planet was intended to be a straightforward capture and retrieval. Easy money for a bounty hunter. Yeah, right. Zolla's capture had quickly morphed into a complicated mess. R'cey bore the responsibility for her entire team's demise and had now willingly taken on the safety of another group. In addition to protecting these lives, she'd promised to help find a cure for Thalia's father.

R'cey had no idea how that happened. She clearly recalled making the decision to leave these unsophisticated, superstitious, backward savages and continue with her mission. At the time, she had mentally altered that mission to include taking out Zolla. Now she felt like Lancelot on a quest with King Arthur. Well, okay, *Queen* Arthur. She grinned at the thought and cast a sideways glance at Thalia.

No matter how this turned out, she couldn't regret knowing the Western Kingdom's princess. The recent memories of holding Thalia, of tasting her sweet skin and listening to her cries of passion, swirled in her head. R'cey wanted to stop in her tracks, take Thalia in her arms, and reacquaint herself with Thalia's kisses.

"How can you even consider such things in this heat?" Thalia asked without looking at R'cey. She hadn't even glanced in her direction for more than an hour.

R'cey blinked in surprise. "I think a better question is how can you not?"

They both kept their voices low to keep the altered state of their relationship to themselves. R'cey wasn't embarrassed. She merely didn't consider this anyone else's business. She assumed Thalia felt the same way. Her question quickly turned rhetorical when Thalia glanced at her and took a sip from the water skin without verbally responding. R'cey let it go but couldn't deny the slow burn of sexual tension.

"Bergen didn't exaggerate how hard this is going to be, did

he?”

“Not at all. From what he has told me, there is no other fresh water upon this continent. Look ahead, there.” Thalia pointed off in the distance. “That is the Burning Summit.”

R’cey spotted triple peaks far away. They weren’t hard to see considering the flat, desert sand everywhere else. Smoke drifted from the tops of the peaks, leaving little doubt as to their composition.

“You people really aren’t very imaginative, are you? I’d have called the volcanoes Triple Threat or something catchy like that.”

“In any case, I suggest we stay as far away as possible and skirt toward the south before crossing the expanse.”

“Probably a good idea. Volcanoes spew a lot of toxic gases into the air, and these are clearly active. If we get too close and one of them erupts, it could definitely ruin our day.”

“Not to mention the rest of our lives.”

R’cey smiled at the amusement in Thalia’s eyes. It felt nice to tease so playfully. A definite improvement from R’cey’s normal serious attitude toward work. She’d have reached out and taken Thalia’s hand if she wasn’t busy steering the hover cart. That and she didn’t think Thalia would be willing.

R’cey glanced over again and met Emerald’s fixed gaze. “What are you looking at?”

Emerald blinked, and Thalia chuckled. Thalia carried the dragonlet on her forearm while she clutched a water skin in her free hand. That didn’t leave much room for handholding. At least they had relative privacy. Bergen led the group while Kahlan brought up the rear. Henry walked on the other side of the hover cart and appeared lost in thought.

R’cey’s amorous inclinations quickly evaporated under the scorching sun. Sweat poured down her face and soaked into her collar. She and the others tired quickly, but they had to push on. R’cey removed her tunic, leaving her upper body covered with the thin undershirt typically worn beneath her skin suit. She donned the tunic as a head covering and felt immediate relief at getting the sun out of her eyes. Thalia and the Enforcers followed suit. They couldn’t do much about their unavoidable sunburns, but this would help a little.

“Henry, perhaps you should conserve.” Kahlan clearly sounded irritated.

R’cey glanced over to see what Kahlan meant. Henry had the spout of a water skin pasted against his lips. Water dribbled down his chin. The canteen made a popping sound when he peeled it away.

Henry shrugged and continued to slurp from the canteen. “We have sufficient supplies, and we must guard against dehydration.”

R’cey found herself getting more and more irritated at Henry’s wasteful behavior. “There’s a difference between staying hydrated and wasting water. That’s all we have, so we need to ration it.”

“R’cey is correct,” Thalia said. “We must utilize caution in this harsh climate. I shall send Emerald ahead to scout for fresh water, just in case. Unless or until she returns successfully, we will strictly measure our usage.”

Henry nodded but held onto the water skin. He draped the strap over his shoulder and steered the hover cart forward. R’cey didn’t mind that he kept the canteen. There were several others, and she preferred not to drink after anyone, unless Thalia was the individual in question. She wiped her face with a tunic sleeve and set out once more.

Emerald, the only one unaffected by the heat, took flight. She winged away toward the southeast, veering in the opposite direction from the active triple volcanoes. Soon, she was nothing more than a speck that quickly vanished. R’cey realized that the oppressive heat encouraged her mind to wander. Her skin suit would have kept her comfortable and focused. Without it, she was as vulnerable as anyone.

As the sun climbed its circuitous path, the day became even more miserable. R’cey thought Henry still guzzled more than his share, but he hid it well. Since no one commented and she couldn’t be sure, she kept her mouth closed. Instead, she concentrated on navigating the shifting sands. R’cey knew they simply had to stop for a while. She voiced her concerns, and Thalia agreed.

R’cey set the hover cart to maximum height so that it rose into the air. She used a few blankets, and they managed to

construct a crude tent. The air remained heavy and arid, but at least they were out of the sun. With quarters tight, they squeezed into the shade. R'cey noticed how Thalia dropped heavily into the sand. She saw the redness in her cheeks.

Concerned, R'cey grabbed a canteen from the stack near the edge. It was empty. She frowned and reached for another. Not empty, but definitely close. R'cey glared at Henry. He caught her eye and quickly ducked his head. R'cey finally discovered a full canteen and settled next to Thalia.

"Here, drink as much as you can."

Thalia mopped her brow and leaned against R'cey's shoulder. She seemed exhausted. "We need to save it."

"Please, drink. I haven't seen you touch a canteen in hours. Besides, it looks like not everyone is as cautious with our supplies."

Thalia's eyes widened. "Henry?"

"I assume so. I counted four empty or nearly empty water skins, and he doesn't look as miserable as the rest of us."

It was true. Sweat had soaked his shirt, but Henry's facial complexion remained normal. His arms had burned slightly, but that was all. At the moment, he rested his head on his knees with his eyes closed. R'cey thought he slept.

"I'll remedy that." Thalia took several long swallows before passing the canteen to R'cey. "I'll have Bergen assist with the contraption. Henry may walk point while Kahlan maintains vigil from behind."

From the forward position, Henry couldn't possibly pilfer water. He'd have to rely on them once he finished his current ration.

"Fitting."

Thalia surprised R'cey by stretching out and resting her head in her lap. R'cey noticed the covert glances as Enforcers attempted to avoid looking at them directly. She hadn't expected such a blatant display but was too thrilled to refuse. In fact, resisting didn't enter into the equation. She wanted to make a statement of her own by kissing Thalia. Somehow, she didn't think that would go over well, so she sat quietly and simply held her. When her back started to complain and she heard Thalia's stomach rumble, R'cey finally moved. She

didn't relish dry rations, but it was too hot to cook, and they needed to keep up their strength.

R'cey pushed the canteens aside. Maya had provided a few leather satchels as well, but R'cey hadn't looked into them before. A delicious smell hit her as she loosened the thong. "Hey, there's bread and cheese in here. The cheese looks a little melty, but I'll bet it tastes great."

Henry jumped to his feet with an eager expression. If Thalia weren't sitting directly beside her, he'd have been first to R'cey's side. Considering his history with the water, R'cey wasn't about to hand over the food.

"Thalia, *princess*, you eat first."

R'cey held Henry's gaze, silently challenging him to object. He opened his mouth but quickly closed it again. Once Thalia had what she wanted, R'cey portioned out the rest. She made Henry wait until Kahlan and Bergen had their share. R'cey took a small ration for herself after giving Henry a few morsels. Then she transferred the balance of food to her personal pack. They had another full day of walking, barring complications. She intended to ensure they stretched the food reserves as far as possible.

"It's time to get moving." R'cey gathered a few of her belongings and watched the others do the same.

Henry's sour expression caught R'cey's attention. At first, she assumed he didn't want to walk in the heat anymore. Then she saw him glance from her to Bergen and then to Thalia. R'cey couldn't imagine what he thought but felt it probably wasn't good. She didn't want him to suspect her of usurping Commander Bergen's authority because of her relationship with Thalia.

"If that's all right with you, Commander?"

"Of course, R'cey. We must cross this expanse quickly and cannot afford to tarry."

As they packed up, R'cey kept a close eye on Henry. He seemed disgruntled over something and careless with their supplies. R'cey wouldn't have attributed either quality to him, but something had changed.

"Emerald is not having any luck," Thalia said and looked overhead.

“Hmm?” R’cey blinked. “Oh, you mean with finding water. Where is she?”

“She has turned back and should arrive shortly. With any luck, I will not require sending her forth again. I dread the thought of having her investigate the volcanoes.”

“What? Why would you? I thought we agreed to avoid those things. They could blow at any time, and I don’t really want to swim through a river of lava.”

Thalia shrugged. “Unfortunately, we may be required to adjust our course. Emerald reports that the area along the southern coast has little air for us to breathe. She was forced to turn or lose consciousness.”

R’cey whistled. “Wow, a low oxygen area. I didn’t think such a thing was possible.”

“At least if we alter our route now, we will gain a few hours in reaching our destination.”

“Assuming we do not encounter R’cey’s river of lava,” Bergen said. Concern darkened his expression.

“What about the assistance Maya spoke of?” Thalia asked.

“Well, this witch is supposed to live by the sea. We’ll save time cutting across. It’ll probably be easier to travel once we hit a more temperate region anyway. I think, overall, it’ll work out better for us. Why don’t we keep going as planned unless something changes?”

“Then it is decided. Bergen, apprise the others that we are ready. Also, I wish to speak with you about the travel arrangements.”

R’cey grinned when Thalia steered Bergen away. Henry was about to have a rude adjustment to stealing their supplies. A moment later, Bergen grew furious. He spun on his heel and started for Henry, but Thalia pulled him back. They spoke in heated tones before he stalked away to do her bidding. His posture reminded R’cey of the phrase “stomping mad,” and she couldn’t resist smiling just a little. Henry deserved what he had coming.

The new positioning placed Bergen across the hover cart from R’cey. As they traveled, Thalia drifted behind slightly. Bergen’s stiffened jaw caused R’cey to wonder if he was still angry with Henry.

Emerald returned shortly afterward and lighted on the hover cart. She quickly tucked her head and seemed to fall asleep.

“I could not help but notice the altered nature of your relationship with the princess,” Bergen said without looking at R’cey.

R’cey’s eyebrows rose after Bergen spoke, and she swallowed hard. “I take it you disapprove?”

“You are aware of Trianan laws concerning royalty?”

“Trianan? You mean those archaic rules apply to the whole planet? Isn’t that a little extreme?”

Bergen glanced at her and then fixed his gaze forward once more. “You have not answered my query. Are you aware that Princess Thalia is forbidden from consorting with off-worlders or those beneath her status?”

“Yes, I’m aware. Okay?”

R’cey kept her voice low though it trembled with the rage she experienced. Not only had he pointed out her lack of breeding, as had Thalia, but he also noted her alien origins. The Amalgam also had protocols for interacting with Trianans. R’cey wasn’t so worried about that. She was more concerned that Bergen might start resenting her again. She hated the thought of losing this newfound friendship. That didn’t mean she had any intention of backing away from Thalia.

“Are you also aware of the awkward position in which you’ve placed me?”

“I’m sorry about that, Bergen. I never set out to cause you any trouble. Rules and regulations aside, how do you feel about us? Are you going to try and convince Thalia to break things off?”

Bergen was silent for a very long while. R’cey could almost hear the minutes ticking by.

“The others will not understand. I suggest you attempt to be a little more circumspect. Still, the heart rarely is swayed by statute. It desires as it desires.”

“You have a great way of stating the obvious.”

“Many thanks. I pride myself on my deductive reasoning skills.”

R’cey was impressed he could joke with her so easily. The

fact that he did so let R'cey know he didn't hold her feelings for Thalia against her. "I'm proud to call you friend, Bergen. Trust me, there aren't a lot of people I can say that about."

"Then I am honored."

As they drew nearer, R'cey contemplated the steaming volcanic peaks. She couldn't see a sign of recent eruptions, but they were still some distance away. Despite the lack of visual clues, R'cey detected the stench of toxic volcanic gases. She coughed in response. As soon as she did, Bergen also coughed.

"Use a cloth to cover your faces. We can't get any closer, or we'll suffocate." R'cey shouted so that everyone would hear. She tore loose the hem from her tunic and placed it over her nose and mouth.

Thalia moved up beside her and cleared her throat. "Emerald is the only one unaffected by such an environment. I'll send her ahead to scout a safer route. We hold position here until we receive further information."

After approximately twenty minutes of standing in the sun, R'cey was ready to suggest they erect a tent. Thalia stopped her when she said Emerald had begun sending her images. She stared into the distance as though transfixed before she attempted to explain.

"They are strange sights, tunnels made of dark, shimmering glass." Thalia shook her head. "The tunnels lead downward. Emerald reports they are free of sulfur but are very near to the volcanoes, under them actually."

"Lava tubes," R'cey said. "They're created by magma traveling through the mountains. I'm not sure I'd consider them a viable option. If the magma punches through any of the walls connecting to those tubes, we'll fry. All in all, I think I'd rather suffocate. Even if the tubes were safe, we'd still die if those volcanoes erupt while we're inside. We'd be trapped like rats in a maze."

Kahlan cringed. "Who would do such a terrible thing?"

"It's an expression, but you catch my drift."

"Then we cannot choose this alternative." Thalia said, interrupting the brief exchange. "We stay between the two hazards, the volcano, and the low oxygen area."

"Right in the middle. I don't like it, but I think it's our best

option.”

R’cey really felt she was missing something. There had to be a better choice, a safer route. She owed it to these people, but everything on this planet seemed determined to kill them. R’cey racked her brain but came up with nothing. In any case, Thalia’s word was law. The Enforcers had already set out.

R’cey noticed Thalia watching her curiously. She hesitated and then finally shrugged. “Fine, but if things get dicey, I’m pulling the plug.”

“Pulling the plug?”

“Don’t give me that, your highness. You catch my meaning well enough.”

Thalia flinched at her harshness. R’cey felt bad about her tone, but she couldn’t find it in her to apologize. She sensed they were deliberately walking into a minefield. Unfortunately, there wasn’t anything she could do about it. Nor could she force herself to look at Thalia’s face, to see her disappointment. Instead, R’cey shifted her gaze to the Enforcers and watched them walk farther away. Her vision blurred, and she blinked away tears of frustration. She couldn’t explain her reaction, crying over nothing. It wasn’t like her at all.

She started in surprise when Thalia took her hand.

“Look at me. R’cey, please.”

Reluctantly, R’cey did as requested. Rather than the disappointment she expected, she found love. As relief washed over her, R’cey sagged slightly.

“You know, in my line of work, I’ve learned to keep my emotions in check. I face problems head on, without hesitation. Then you came along and changed all that.” R’cey tightened her hold on Thalia’s hand. “I’m trying to say, I’m sorry.”

“You need never apologize for your protective nature.” Thalia stepped in closer until R’cey felt warm breath on her face. “I love that you wish to keep me safe.”

R’cey licked her lips, caught up in the moment. She couldn’t look away from Thalia’s amazing eyes. “Thank you, and just so you know, we’re being watched. I only tell you this in case you were going to kiss me. They’re probably wondering what’s taking so long.”

“Let them wait. Are you better now?”

R'cey nodded. "I'm fine, and if you keep looking at me like that, *I'm* going to kiss *you*."

Thalia glanced over her shoulder, and R'cey followed her gaze. Thalia turned back quickly, but R'cey froze at the furious look on Henry's face. Her perception of everything else dropped away. She felt riveted by the absolute rage she witnessed. It vanished instantly, and Henry seemed completely normal.

"Did I imagine that?" R'cey wasn't entirely sure what had just happened.

"I'm sorry?" Thalia watched her curiously.

With everyone facing her and Henry now in the lead, only R'cey stood in a position to note his expression. R'cey told herself that his reaction to seeing them was perfectly normal. He was probably surprised, shocked even. R'cey figured his youth and inexperience, combined with the taboo on royalty as it pertained to fraternization colored his response. She'd have to give him time to come to terms with things.

"Forget it. It's not important."

"Are you well? You seem uncomfortable."

"Oh sure, I'm great." R'cey squinted as she scanned the cloudless sky. "Nothing lives here but the sun. Which is refreshing since everything on this planet wants to bite me, stab me, or stick me."

The rest of the day passed at an agonizingly slow pace. Agonizing because of the unrelenting sun. Burns and blisters broke out over vulnerable flesh. R'cey could only standby during their few breaks and watch as Thalia healed the trauma. After each healing session, Thalia seemed more and more tired. R'cey worried that she'd have to put a stop to it for Thalia's own good. Eventually, blessedly, the sun headed for the horizon.

As seemed typical for the desert, the wind rose up as the sun headed down. R'cey sighed as the cooling breeze dried the sweat on her brow. She stopped for a moment to catch her breath, the others moving only a few paces ahead. Her deeply ingrained attention to detail allowed her to see every aspect of what happened next.

Henry stumbled. His eyes widened in obvious fear as he

spotted something as yet unseen by the others. He struggled to keep his footing. Bergen sprinted forward, ever the guardian of his troops. He reached Henry in a few running strides. Henry reacted by placing a hand on Bergen's shoulder. That was the moment hell erupted.

R'cey could have sworn Henry shoved Bergen forward. The movement was slight, only enough to throw the commander off his stride. Already off balance as he reached to offer assistance, Bergen tripped and fell forward. At the same moment, a scaly quadruped erupted from the sand. R'cey realized the twin spires she'd noticed protruding from the desert floor were actually horns.

"Bergen, look out!" R'cey yelled.

Time seemed to slow. R'cey witnessed fading sunlight glimmer off the scaly hide and saw small yet rock-hard muscles flex. She'd never have believed a lizard could leap straight into the air. Regardless of the monster's athleticism, R'cey didn't stay transfixed for long. A terrifying feature spurred her to action.

Fangs as long as the creature's body flew toward Bergen's face. R'cey lunged forward and raised her hands, palms out. She demanded her magic to respond, funneling the energy from deep inside. R'cey's hands heated faster than ever before. Her arms shook as the white-hot magic shot forth. R'cey intended to fry the beast before it ever reached its target.

She missed by half a foot.

An arrow flew past her, so close that R'cey felt the displaced air. The projectile hit the monstrosity and bounced off the armored shell. Bergen shrieked as fangs sank deeply into his neck and shoulder. R'cey lost sight of what happened next because Henry blocked her view. The only aspect she couldn't avoid noticing was the spray of blood. Scarlet droplets splattered across the sand. Some of them peppered onto Henry, covering his cotton shirt and spotting his face.

Chapter Fifteen

“What the hell?” R’cey said under her breath and then ran toward Bergen with Thalia and Kahlan at her side.

Henry dropped onto one knee in the sand and reached toward Bergen, but he halted without making contact. R’cey had no use for him if he wasn’t going to help. She shoved Henry aside and froze in horror. Bergen fell over, squirming as he struggled to tear the creature away.

“Get the cerastus off before it can imbed itself.” Thalia dropped onto her knees and reached for the thing without hesitation, but Kahlan prevented her from making contact.

Kahlan grabbed Thalia from behind, around the shoulders. “It is too late, Princess. Do not touch it.”

Images of losing Pax made R’cey throw caution to the wind. Busy restraining Thalia, Kahlan couldn’t do anything to stop R’cey from acting. The strangling noises Bergen made spurred her to hurry.

“Hold on, Bergen. I’ve got it.” R’cey grabbed the hilt of Bergen’s boot knife and yanked it free. Simultaneously, she searched for a weak spot on the cerastus.

Sand-colored scaly hide blended with the color of Bergen’s tunic as well as his tan. It took a second to make out the particulars. Blood covered the front of Bergen’s shirt. His neck and arms were slick from a combination of blood and sweat.

Fangs had sunk in so deeply that R’cey couldn’t see any part of them. The cerastus had utilized its tail, wrapping it tightly around Bergen’s throat. R’cey stabbed the point of the blade into the sand and reached for the creature with both hands. She grabbed the tail in one and the back of the creature’s head in the other. She gripped the lizard right behind the tiny horns to hold it still and attempted to unravel the tail from its victim. Bergen’s cheeks reddened, and he gasped for air.

“You’re killing him,” Kahlan said.

“If I don’t get this thing off, he’ll die anyway. Thalia, I need your help.”

“No, I’ll do it.” Kahlan released Thalia and scooted in front

of her.

In a matter of seconds, Kahlan wriggled up beside R'cey and snatched the knife out of the sand. The cerastus squirmed in R'cey's grasp. She couldn't tell if she'd loosened it from Bergen's neck, but she refused to let go.

Kahlan took hold of the cerastus right below R'cey's hand. She placed the serrated blade against the thick body. With the first slice, Bergen screamed.

"It's biting down harder." R'cey released the tail and slid her hand between Bergen and the cerastus. She placed her fingers on each side of the creature's jaw. "I'm trying to pry the mouth open. Keep going. You have to hurry."

Kahlan complied and sawed through lizard flesh and bone. If R'cey wasn't so determined to save Bergen, she'd have thrown up. Blue-black blood spilled out over their hands and combined with Bergen's. The cerastus remained eerily silent, but it bit even further into Bergen's flesh. She didn't have much success with loosening the deadly grip.

Suddenly, the blade cleaved through the lizard. R'cey flung the body away. It landed harmlessly in the sand, but they weren't out of the woods yet. The fangs remained inside Bergen's body.

"Catch your breath," R'cey told him. "When you're ready, we'll get this thing off."

"You cannot. Removing the beast will surely kill me."

Thalia rested a hand on R'cey's shoulder. "He's right. At the moment, the fangs prevent the blood from leaving his body. He will die in seconds if we remove them."

"You can heal him." R'cey felt incensed at the defeatist attitude. "I vote we pull this damned bug off, and then you can fix him up."

"Unfortunately, democracy will not sway me. This is no small wound, R'cey, and I cannot replenish his fluids. Even if I could, we would need actual physicians for such an endeavor."

"So, what do you suggest, that we let him die? Just like Pax?" R'cey refocused on Bergen when he took her hand. She noticed the inescapable truth in his eyes.

"I am dead already." Bergen could barely keep his eyes

open, and his breath became more labored.

“No, please. You can make it. You’ll be fine.” R’cey’s voice broke, and she blinked back the tears.

“You must know differently. I cannot survive this, but do not grieve. I am a soldier, and I die well, protecting my company.”

R’cey squeezed his hand, unable to refute the words. She appreciated the warrior’s code. As a hunter, she lived it. One of the reasons the Amalgam respected bounty hunters was because they accepted assignments that most people refused outright. The high mortality rate wasn’t unusual. She’d seen death many times and knew the impending signs. As much as she wanted him to live, to will it, R’cey understood that Bergen simply couldn’t pull through this.

“I promise that your death won’t be in vain.”

“That is good, because your task now is to keep Princess Thalia safe. Kahlan, this quest must succeed for the good of our kingdom. You are in command now. Please let Kilik know I died...” Bergen coughed, and blood ran from the side of his mouth.

Kahlan nodded and thumped a hand over her chest. R’cey recognized the Trianan version of a salute.

“He will know you died with honor,” Thalia said. “Your name will live on in song and story.”

There wasn’t much to say after that. The three women sat close to Bergen, heedless of the blood and gore. Henry remained several feet away, silent since the attack. Of the group, Emerald behaved as though nothing unusual had happened. Normal, considering she was an animal, R’cey thought. Emerald rested on the hot sand, preening under her wing before closing her eyes to settle in for a nap.

Bergen didn’t survive long. His eyes closed, and his respirations slowed. He seemed to fall asleep, but this was the stillness of death.

Eventually, R’cey released his hand. “What do we do? Just leave him here? That doesn’t seem right.”

Thalia stood, wincing as a knee popped. “No, we can do more. Immolation.”

“Like we did with my crew? How?”

“Perhaps you can utilize your magic.”

R’cey shook her head before Thalia finished. “No way. I don’t have that kind of control. I’d end up blowing him apart.” She looked away, cringing at the idea.

“Emerald can do it,” Kahlan said.

“Then let us proceed. R’cey, you must leave him.”

Reluctantly, R’cey moved away. Thalia had already started toward Emerald. Kahlan stood beside Henry, her arms folded and anguish coloring her features. R’cey glanced at Henry and saw nothing. Though Henry remained quiet in this somber moment, R’cey read no emotion whatsoever. She flashed to the instant Henry had stumbled in the sand. When she remembered him placing a hand on Bergen and pushing off him, fury took control.

“You did this.” R’cey rushed toward Henry, shoving him backward as hard as she could. He stumbled but didn’t fall. “You saw that thing in the sand and sacrificed Bergen to save your own worthless hide.”

When his eyes glinted in amusement, R’cey went for him again. She intended to pummel him into a bloody pulp, but Kahlan prevented her by stepping between them.

Kahlan caught R’cey by the upper arms. “Stop, this is not helpful.”

“Who cares about helpful?” R’cey glared at Henry over Kahlan’s shoulder. “I’m going to stomp your ass into the ground. Come here, you little shit.”

Thalia frowned but seemed less inclined to stop R’cey. “Henry, is this true? Did you intentionally place Bergen in harm’s way?”

“Of course not. This was nothing more than an accident.”

R’cey noticed his complete lack of inflection. Henry sounded as though he was reciting a line. He couldn’t even be bothered to put some emotion into the denial. Worse for him, she saw the sudden doubt on Kahlan’s and Thalia’s faces.

“Oh, very convincing, Henry. That was sarcasm, by the way. I know you did it. Since we’ve been on this continent, it’s been all about you. You’ve been guzzling our water with no regard for anyone else, not even your princess. Now you’ve murdered someone who was more of a man than you can ever

hope to be.”

“R’cey,” Thalia said softly, “this was not murder.”

“Close enough. He knew what would happen when he pushed Bergen.”

Henry sighed impatiently. “Yes, I caught sight of the cerastus, but I did not force the commander before me. He stumbled...and you cannot prove otherwise.”

The final pronouncement left R’cey speechless. He was right about the lack of proof, but R’cey didn’t need it. The cocky, upraised brow and quirk to his thick lips said it all.

“Thalia, we have to leave him here.”

“You cannot be serious.”

“We can’t trust him. He’ll be the death of us all.”

“R’cey, Henry cannot survive alone in this desert. Should I do as you suggest, I will be responsible for his demise.”

“Then let him go back to the Oasis. Maya and her people can take him in.”

Henry responded to the suggestion by stepping toward R’cey. He stopped safely out of her reach. “Princess, do not listen to this off-worlder. You know the people of the Oasis do not care for men.”

R’cey glared at Henry. “In your case I understand why.”

“R’cey, he comes with us. Feel free to keep careful watch on him. I cannot in good conscience leave him here, but he will face trial once we return to the kingdom.”

Bringing Henry along didn’t sit well with R’cey. All this time she’d chalked his mistakes up to inexperience. Even his fear and failure to act during Aamon’s attack. Now she realized he’d acted out of cowardice all along. Cowardice and a blatant disregard for others. Still, she wouldn’t allow Thalia to have his blood on her hands.

“I’d prefer to bury you in the sand up to your neck. You’re lucky that your princess is so merciful. But know this. If I see you endanger this group in anyway, I’ll kill you myself. Proof be damned.”

R’cey didn’t wait for a response. She stalked away, pushing the hover cart ahead of her. She was desperate to put as much space between herself and Henry as possible and to keep the supplies out of his reach. Kahlan joined her as Thalia dealt with

Bergen's remains. R'cey watched her communicate with Emerald but turned away as the vibria moved toward Bergen. She knew it would take some time for the body to reduce to ashes, but Emerald's intense dragon fire could easily start the process on its way. In the meantime, R'cey's gaze rested on Henry. He'd chosen to stay with Thalia.

"Do you truly believe he baited the cerastus?" Kahlan asked.

"Do I think he got that thing to kill Bergen instead of him? Yes. I have no doubt at all. I saw the whole thing. I may not have proof, but I know what he did."

"Then he owes me a debt of blood."

R'cey didn't understand. She looked to Kahlan to elaborate, impressed by the pure rage on her face.

"Commander Bergen was my mother's brother."

"Your uncle?"

"Henry is safe until we complete our task. Once we return to Honui, I will have vengeance."

R'cey was reminded of a similar conversation not so long ago. She'd just met Thalia and spoken to her of retribution for her crew. Thalia had argued against vengeance and attempted to convince R'cey that justice was always a better choice. Maybe justice was good enough for the more evolved. R'cey had always believed vengeance and justice were the same. In looking at Henry and thinking about what he'd done, she believed that more than ever.

"Let me know when you confront him," R'cey said without looking at Kahlan.

"You wish to observe?"

R'cey shrugged. "Guess I'm not very evolved."

In the distance, Emerald ignited a blaze. R'cey marked Bergen's passage, imagining she saw his ghost carried on the smoke. He would reach the warrior's reward and find true rest for eternity. She refused to consider he might take part of the cerastus with him. The deadly creature's head remained attached to Bergen's body, but R'cey believed it would simply cease to exist. Surely something so dastardly had no ghost.

Thalia walked over to stand beside her. R'cey allowed the silence between them, giving Thalia the time she needed to

grieve. She and Bergen had been very close. R'cey couldn't imagine the pain she felt. To her surprise, Thalia took her hand. R'cey squeezed gently but remained focused.

When most of the corpse had burned away, R'cey dropped her gaze. "Let's get on with this. Bergen gave his life for this mission, and I don't intend to dishonor him."

Thalia only nodded. She took up the far side of the hover cart while R'cey manned the other. Thalia glanced at Kahlan to give the order to move out.

"Henry, take point," Kahlan ordered.

Henry shook his head but complied with Kahlan's order. Emerald resumed her place on the cart, resting but remaining close to Thalia, as was her habit. There were only a few hours before sundown, and the company spent those in quiet contemplation. They passed the volcanoes from a safe distance, but R'cey kept track of the smoke spiraling from the tops. These were definitely active.

The evening breeze blew the sulfurous gases in the opposite direction, and they continued with relative ease. R'cey was glad they'd followed Thalia's instructions for taking the middle road. Despite their loss, things could have been far worse. One or more of them could have suffocated in the low oxygen area. All of them could have burned to death if the volcanoes blew.

"How much farther?" Kahlan asked, projecting her voice to be heard.

"Not far," Thalia said and looked ahead. "I see the glint of water in the distance."

R'cey peered ahead and caught a hint of something. It could be sunlight reflecting off the ocean. "Good eyes. It'll be full dark in an hour. Do you want to stop for the night?"

"No. Solis rises tonight. We shall have the light of two moons, and I wish to put distance between us and this cursed land."

"I'm really sorry, Thalia. I know how much you cared for him."

Thalia nodded, and R'cey noticed how her jaw tensed. "We cannot trust Henry. Tonight we stand guard without him."

"I second that idea."

By the time Solis had reached its zenith, the reduced

company of four reached the coast. At the crest of a small hill, scrub grass began. It thickened as they headed east, and the wind cooled against their faces. Carried by the current that flowed over the water, the air was cool against R'cey's skin. She found it wonderful to smell something besides volcanic gas.

The pace picked up at the promise of succor from the endless sand. A short time later, they reached the coast. Emerald perked up as they approached. She shook herself and then launched into flight. Emerald pushed off so enthusiastically that the hover cart dipped toward the ground.

Thalia smiled as she watched Emerald soar overhead. "Emerald is also pleased to see something other than sand. I've asked her to seek a fresh water source."

"Hopefully she'll have a little more luck this time. Now that we've reached the shore, I suggest we camp for the night. It's been a long day."

Thalia agreed and gave the order. In no time, they had laid out sleeping rolls and stashed their supplies. Dry scrub and a few sparse trees supplied tinder for a meager fire. It wouldn't burn long, but they required something substantial to eat. Dry rations provided little in the way of energy, and they'd walked for a very long time. Kahlan supervised as Henry constructed a crude stew. R'cey kept an eye on him from several paces away. She smiled as Thalia slipped an arm around her waist. These casual touches made the dark times more bearable.

"Hey, how are you holding up?"

"Better now that the end of this journey looms before us. We have only to cross the sea to ask the sorcerer for a cure."

R'cey bumped lightly against Thalia's hip. "You forget that we still need to find a witch that lives around here and talk her into providing transportation to reach the sorcerer."

"Such minor details," Thalia said and laughed. "Why must you always spoil my fun with details?"

"Because I'm the logical one, remember?"

R'cey couldn't stop gazing into Thalia's eyes. Firelight flickered in the depths, merging with the lavender to create a new color. R'cey thought it the pigment of peace. This close, with the scent of Thalia in her nostrils and the feeling of her

warm body, the worlds dropped away. Political machinations and craven posturing no longer held meaning.

“Then again, logic is overrated. When I look at you, I feel...magic.”

Thalia raised a hand, and R’cey leaned into her caress. She experienced the touch to her core and allowed it to heal the day’s sorrow. She had called Bergen friend, but this woman was so much more. Thalia was love and life. R’cey didn’t want to consider what that meant when it came time to leave. Thalia saw the conclusion of their quest, but R’cey saw only the end to their relationship.

“The food is ready,” Kahlan called out.

R’cey sighed and followed Thalia back to the fire. Once they’d all finished eating, R’cey volunteered to take the first watch. Kahlan quickly offered to relieve her, as they had previously arranged. Henry said nothing. He merely grunted and headed for his sleeping roll.

“Thanks for helping clean up,” R’cey said over her shoulder.

R’cey intended to rile him up with her sarcasm, but he failed to react. She shook her head and kicked sand over the remains of the fire. She left Kahlan and Thalia finishing up as she searched for a high spot from which to stand watch. Moments later, Thalia joined her.

“About time you got here. I was getting cold.”

Thalia settled into the sand close enough to lean against her. She rested her head against R’cey’s shoulder. R’cey took advantage of her proximity to hug her close.

“You cannot possibly be cold.”

“No, I’m not. It is a little cooler here than the desert, but it feels good. Aren’t you worried Kahlan and Henry are going to say something about this?”

Thalia shook her head. “They are sworn to my service, even Henry. While I know that our time will eventually end, I want to savor every moment we have together. If that means showing my love in front of them, then that is what I will do.”

“Love, huh? Just remember that you said it first.”

“Is that truly important?”

“Not at all. I apologize. I was trying to be funny. I guess it

fell a little flat. Hey, shouldn't Emerald be back by now?"

"She is. Emerald returned a few moments ago. She rests upon my sleeping roll." Thalia pointed toward the campsite, and R'cey could just make out her shadow in the moonlight. "Also, I am aware that you changed the subject."

"Guilty as charged and by the way, I do love you. Still, if it's all right with you, I'd rather not talk about things between us ending. I'd rather focus on the here and now."

Thalia rewarded R'cey with a kiss. In the darkness, R'cey gave herself over to the lingual caresses. She focused on the feel and taste of Thalia rather than what her people might think about their relationship. Eventually, the need to breathe broke the contact. Thalia snuggled up against her, and R'cey happily held her close.

With her chin resting on top of Thalia's head, R'cey picked up the thread of their conversation. "Did Emerald find anything?"

"Yes, she discovered a very fat fish swimming too far into the shoreline."

R'cey poked her fingers into Thalia's ribs. She was rewarded with a very unladylike squeal. "Tease. You know what I mean."

"I do, and yes, Emerald found fresh drinking water. We have enough for the night, so I think we should find the source in the morning."

"Good idea. I'd rather not break a leg looking for it in the shadows."

Thalia sighed tiredly, but R'cey felt the tension in her body. Considering how far they'd walked and that Thalia was more accustomed to a drawing room than a hike across a continent, R'cey thought she'd already be asleep.

"Something on your mind?"

Thalia rested a hand on R'cey's knee. "My body hurts, and I miss Bergen's council."

R'cey sensed Thalia had more to say, so she kept quiet and waited.

"Maya says this witch has great power. She is all that stands between us and a short, yet perilous journey across the sea. I do not know how much more I can take of this."

"Hey, don't start giving up on me now. You're the strongest

person I've ever met. We'll deal with the witch tomorrow. We didn't come all this way to turn back now. Besides, like you said, it's only a short trip over the water."

"Short yet treacherous. We must survive the perpetual whirlpool."

R'cey froze in shock. This was the first she'd heard of a perpetual whirlpool. With their luck, any ship they had would get caught in the undertow and sucked to the bottom. Through sheer force of will, she kept that notion to herself. Thalia already seemed defeated. What she needed now was a little positive reinforcement.

"We'll make it, and all of this will be worth the price we've paid. Zolla will have something to help your father." R'cey spoke of medicines, though she suspected Thalia had other ideas. "Let's talk about something else. Tell me what you're going to do once you get home."

"Aside from curing my father? I wish to see my uncle. When I left Honui, I never thought I'd say such a thing. We'd grown so far apart, but after everything we've experienced, I realize the importance of family. What of you? What will you do?"

"Soak in a hot bath for about three days and then spend a week's worth of credits on real food. The biggest, juiciest steak I can find. Medium rare. Tell me about your uncle. Since I assume I'll meet him when we reach your city, I'd like to know what he's like."

R'cey closed her eyes and listened to the sound of Thalia's voice. Speaking about such mundane things made her fall even further in love. She didn't want this night to end.

"Uncle Kilik is the Captain of the Enforcer Guard. He is eldest but renounced the throne in favor of knighthood. When I was a child, I followed him around like a puppy. I worshiped him. As I grew, he became distant until I believed he cared nothing for me at all."

"You sound like you've changed your mind."

"Kilik attempted to dissuade me from this quest. I saw his concern for me, something I hadn't seen in years."

R'cey shrugged lightly. "Sure, you're family. Why wouldn't he care what happened to you?"

“Kilik lost his own family in an uprising, the same one that took my mother. He hasn't been the same man since. He never took another wife, never had another family. Looking back, I realize he suppressed his emotions so that he could not be injured again.”

“He sounds like a man who feels things deeply and has a strong sense of honor. I'd say he cares for you more than you know.”

When Thalia stifled a yawn, R'cey decided to call it a night. Although Thalia resisted, she capitulated when R'cey insisted. She walked Thalia to her sleeping mat, waited for Emerald to hop aside, and then kissed Thalia goodnight. R'cey finished her watch, eager for Kahlan to relieve her so she could climb onto her own blanket and grab a few hours of sleep.

Chapter Sixteen

“What is that?” R’cey stared out over the water in disbelief.

“I believe it is the witch’s island.” Thalia stood on the shore beside R’cey, but didn’t seem concerned about the unusual sight hovering over the sea.

“You have to be kidding me. How are we supposed to reach it?” R’cey couldn’t believe what she saw. Islands did not float. Laws of gravity aside, the sheer mass made such a thing impossible. “You’d think this would be something worth mentioning.”

“Maya did say reaching the island would prove challenging,” Kahlan said.

“True,” R’cey said, “but this is ridiculous. Any ideas, Princess?”

“Only one. Clearly, this witch values her solitude. Her spell places her refuge where only flying creatures may reach it.”

“Then what? We send Emerald up there with a message?”

“I see no other way.”

R’cey couldn’t either. To reach the island themselves, they’d have to swim out over the surf, use a grapple gun to fire a line up, and then climb the rope. They didn’t have a grapple gun, and R’cey didn’t think they could navigate the crashing waves.

“I don’t suppose anyone has a communications device we can send along? Paper and pencil to write a note?”

Henry shook his head. Kahlan shrugged. Thalia frowned.

“We have no need of such crude devices. Emerald can communicate with the witch in the same fashion she does with me.”

“Is that even possible? I thought you needed a link for something like that.”

“Of course. Emerald is the one to establish that connection. Has she not already done so with you on the odd occasion?”

R’cey realized she shouldn’t be surprised. Despite all she’d seen on this planet, she still thought of Emerald as a dumb animal. She really had to start keeping an open mind. “Then

she can talk to anyone she wants. How come I didn't know that?"

"Their abilities are what make vibria so valuable," Kahlan said. "Unfortunately, they speak rarely with humans. To be the beneficiary of such an exchange is a great honor."

"Okay, so they're snobs, too."

Thalia didn't seem to be listening. She'd squatted down to Emerald's level. The two were locked in silent communication. Several long moments later, Thalia blinked and backed away. Emerald extended bat-like wings and lifted off. Her powerful downward thrust tossed beach sand into the air. R'cey brushed the granules out of her eyes to observe Emerald's progress. It took only seconds for her to vanish over the island's edge.

"What message did you send?"

"Only that Princess Thalia Dumont requests an audience. I thought it best to keep things simple, to avoid confusion. Now we wait. Kahlan, perhaps now is the time for you and Henry to evaluate our supplies?"

The two wandered away, but Thalia's order reminded R'cey of another item. "Didn't you say something last night about a fresh water source? How far away is it?"

"Just around the beachhead and a short walk inland. Once Kahlan returns, we'll take the empty canteens to the waterfall and refill them. Henry may drink his fill before we leave the Hotfoot Lava Lands."

R'cey's pulse jumped in anticipation. "A waterfall sounds like a great opportunity for a shower. It'll be nice to get the sand out of my hair."

"My thoughts exactly. That is why Henry will remain here. He shall await Emerald's return and guard our remaining foodstuffs. Once we finish, he may bathe as well."

R'cey brushed a quick kiss across Thalia's lips and looked deep into her eyes. "I like how you think. The last thing I want is to see him naked."

The waterfall was the most beautiful thing R'cey had seen in a long time. Relative to the heat of the continent, the water felt cool and refreshing. Sunlight glinted off the water and reflected from the wet stone. R'cey especially appreciated how cool droplets trailed down and created little pools among the

jagged stone. Some splashing and light play ensued before they filled the canteens. R'cey rinsed out her jerkin and dressed in the light undershirt and her britches. She didn't think it would take long before her tunic dried. By the time they returned to the beach, Emerald was already there. R'cey wasn't surprised since Thalia had announced her return ten minutes earlier.

"Feyoria says she shall meet us when the sun reaches its tipping point," Thalia said. "We shouldn't have to wait much longer. She has agreed that I may bring one guard. Kahlan, you and Henry stay here. I'll take R'cey with me."

Kahlan protested, outraged. "Princess, you simply cannot leave my sight. With Commander Bergen gone, your safety falls to me."

R'cey appreciated her loyalty, especially since Henry merely nodded and waded in ankle deep water. He didn't seem to care either way. R'cey was pleased Thalia had chosen her for a companion and kept her eyes pinned on the floating island. She still couldn't imagine how they'd access the witch's sanctuary.

"I appreciate your concern, Kahlan, but I suspect the witch will not appreciate an entourage. R'cey will provide adequate protection."

R'cey glanced overhead to check the position of the sun. "She's late. Maybe she changed her mind."

"Perhaps she became distracted by something," Thalia suggested.

"Yeah," Henry finally piped up. "She's busy roasting small children in her oven."

Thalia glared at him, and Henry got quiet. "There, look."

R'cey refocused on the atoll and saw an even more incredible sight than a floating island. At first, she wasn't sure, but then she realized what was happening. The island slowly lowered toward the ocean's surface.

"Would you look at that?" R'cey said, stunned at this magnificent sight.

"Yes..." Thalia breathed.

"Can you believe it?"

"No."

"I have never seen the like," Kahlan said.

Henry merely snorted and kicked at the water. R'cey rolled her eyes at his sullen attitude and then decided he wasn't worth it. The island hit the surface, and a larger than normal wave rolled toward the shore. The group danced back out of the way and waited for the ripples to die down.

"Now what do we do?" Thalia asked. "I still see no way to access the isle."

"Maybe she wants us to swim." R'cey stepped back as another wave washed onto the shore.

"No, something moves across the water." Kahlan pointed.

A hard surface of some type shot out from the island's edge and rapidly approached the beach. R'cey heard a ratcheting sound that told her this was a mechanical contraption. The technology was far too advanced for a supposedly unsophisticated witch who lived like a hermit on a floating island.

"Looks like Maya and her people weren't the only ones trading with Zolla," R'cey observed.

"More sorcery." Henry spat on the ground to emphasize his disgust.

"This isn't magic," R'cey corrected. "Just good old human ingenuity."

Henry glared at her and rested his hands on his hips in a belligerent manner. "I fail to see the distinction."

It didn't take much to see that he was calling her out. R'cey had reached her boiling point and wanted to lunge at him. "Oh, here we go. I thought we'd gotten past all this. You can't possibly still think I'm a threat to your quest or to Thalia."

"Actually, I am certain you are precisely that. You consort with Princess Thalia, though you know it is against our laws, and you have threatened to kill me. How do I know you will not do so given the first opportunity?"

"Henry, that is enough," Thalia snapped. "You speak out of turn. Any relationship I share is none of your concern."

Henry quieted, but his eyes still flashed. He continued to stare directly into R'cey's eyes. She found his bearing quite confrontational.

"Henry, you are an idiot every day of the week. It would be nice if you'd just take a single day off." Finished with his

unpleasantness, R'cey stalked away toward the waterline.

As she passed, she deliberately bumped his shoulder. He fell back a pace, and R'cey willed him to make a move. If he gave her any excuse, R'cey would happily pulverize him. As usual, he failed to respond. R'cey heard Thalia speak to him, but she quickly passed out of earshot.

Henry was rapidly becoming a problem, but R'cey had other concerns at the moment. She tried to push him out of her mind, though it was difficult. R'cey pinned her eyes to the newly positioned island. In the short time it took to deal with Henry, the bridge had crossed the halfway point to the Hotfoot Lava Lands continent.

In addition to seeing the high-tech bridge, R'cey caught her first glimpse of Feyoria's hovel. To call this structure a home would be generous. It hit all the archaic clichés R'cey could think of. The edifice seemed built right into a huge tree, the kind of tree four people couldn't reach around if they held hands. R'cey really couldn't discern a lot of detail due to all the shadows cast by the tree canopy.

Thalia moved up beside her. "I have sent Henry to guard the camp. He will remain there until instructed otherwise."

"At least Feyoria built her shanty on a forested island. Smart move, avoiding the Lava Lands. What do you think the odds are of finding two extreme climates so close together?"

Thalia set her hand on R'cey's arm. "Are you well?"

R'cey chuckled without humor. "You already know me so well. Henry's going to be a problem. You know that."

"We shall deal with him later. As for Feyoria's construct, do not be fooled. Witches often utilize glamour spells to hide their opulence."

"Are you saying she really lives in a palace?"

"Perhaps, or perhaps things are exactly as they appear. The path approaches. Let us begin."

Thalia didn't wait, leaving R'cey little choice but to follow. Emerald joined them, flying straight toward the atoll without hesitation. R'cey was a great believer in animal intuition. She took comfort from Emerald's easy manner.

"My skin suit would come in handy right about now."

"Do you expect Feyoria to attack us on sight?"

“You never can be too careful. I wish I at least had a blaster. This sword is awkward.”

Kahlan’s sword smacked against R’cey’s calf, emphasizing her point. She kept a hand on the hilt to minimize the swing, but it didn’t really help a lot. R’cey simply wasn’t accustomed to carrying such a weapon. Nor was she exactly proficient. Despite that, she didn’t intend to walk into a witch’s lair armed only with unpredictable magic. Thalia had agreed to carry Bergen’s bow and arrow. He wouldn’t need it anymore, R’cey thought grimly.

“We’ll be fine,” Thalia assured her. “Do not forget that your hands have become weapons in their own right.”

“Oh, yeah. I forgot about that. You always know just what to say to cheer me up. Remind me why we didn’t bring the others. No matter what you say, I’m not comfortable placing you directly in danger.”

“First, Henry cannot be trusted. He would surely create an incident and cost us any chance of procuring transport.”

“True, but why not Kahlan?”

“One does not give the appearance of an invading army when seeking favors.”

The journey over the surf line proved uneventful. R’cey listened to her boot heels strike the solid metal bridge with a satisfying thunk. They were high enough up that none of the water droplets from the waves touched them. Once they reached solid ground, it was only a matter of a short walk to approach the island’s single structure. Emerald took post on a thick tree branch just over the hovel’s doorway. R’cey had followed a step behind Thalia on the way over, but now she surged ahead.

“You’re not going first.” R’cey drew the sword with one long pull. “If this is a trap, I’ll see it coming before you do.”

R’cey disregarded the hint of amusement in Thalia’s expression. She stayed focused on their approach to the structure. She cast a quick glance to Emerald and then scanned the area. On the surface, she found nothing suspicious. Having worked as a skip tracer for so many years, R’cey realized that didn’t mean anything. Five feet from the door, she hesitated.

“Stay sharp, Emerald.”

R’cey started forward again only to stop at the entrance.

She considered knocking for a split second. Then she raised the sword, ready to knock with the hilt. Before she could make contact, the door swung inward without a squeak. She took that as an invitation. An eerie, weird and altogether terrorizing invitation. At least, that's what she figured Feyoria wanted her to feel. For some reason, R'cey found that irritating and a waste of time. Feyoria had already agreed to meet with them. This show was completely unnecessary.

A little miffed, R'cey raised the sword into the ready position. She took a step forward, and then another, into the house. Her eyes needed a moment to adjust. At first, she saw only darkness and the fuzzy outline of battered furniture. R'cey blinked, and the strangest thing happened. The room instantly brightened until she squinted at the glare. The wooden floor shifted and shot outward, lengthening as though the house had suddenly expanded. What she'd perceived as ramshackle furniture morphed into gilded antiques—tables, chairs, and a full-length mirror. Seconds later, R'cey stood in the entryway of a magnificent mansion.

She still hadn't seen the witch.

"Impressive indeed," Thalia whispered.

"But where is Feyoria?"

"I am here."

R'cey spun to her left, sword raised. Feyoria stood beside the mirror, but R'cey felt sure she wasn't there before. It was as if she'd appeared out of thin air. A quick assessment of the woman offered no comfort.

Feyoria stood tall and elegant in a red sequined gown. The dress fell to the floor, trailing behind her. Feyoria had drawn her long red hair into a knot at the nape of her neck. She wore a thin silver crown, exquisite in detail despite the fragile appearance. To call the woman gorgeous seemed an underestimate. Feyoria's haughty expression gave R'cey the impression she knew something they didn't.

The witch moved unexpectedly, quick as a cat. She lifted her staff from the floor and lunged forward onto one foot. At the same instant, she raised her free hand. Yellow light erupted. R'cey grasped the sword with both hands and braced her body for an attack. She parried the energy blast with the flat of the

blade. When the bolt hit, R'cey felt the vibrations to her bones. It lasted only a second before the sword vanished. R'cey found she suddenly held a slimy, slithering serpent.

"Crap!" R'cey tossed the snake away before it could strike.

R'cey expected the serpent to hit the floor with a sick thump. Before that could happen, the snake altered form again. Kahlan's sword bounced with a loud clang and then settled onto the floor.

"You have no need of weapons." The voice belonged to an old woman. Feyoria turned to Thalia and offered a stiff, arthritic bow. Her youthful countenance failed to match her voice and bearing. "Welcome, Princess Thalia Dumont. To what do I owe the pleasure of a visit from Lotar's heir?"

"You know of my father? This land is far from the Western Kingdom."

"I know a great many things. For example, I am aware that you came seeking assistance that only I may provide."

Feyoria started across the room, and R'cey caught sight of her reflection in the mirror. Instead of a vibrant, sexy woman, R'cey discovered the hag she'd expected all along. Hunched over, white haired and wearing a tattered old cloak, Feyoria seemed the perfect image of an evil witch. She glanced at R'cey and laughed. The sound grated on R'cey's ears like bricks rubbing together.

"My home may be a palace, but even I am mortal. I live, I age, and eventually, I shall die. The magic allows me to ignore that truth. For a time."

"Our apologies," Thalia said. "We mean no disrespect."

Feyoria shuffled over to a thickly cushioned chair and settled in front of the lit hearth. Firelight flicked over her, somehow making her appear even more striking. "Perhaps we should get to what it is you seek. Your vibria wishes to feed soon."

R'cey didn't bother asking how she sensed what Emerald wanted. All she knew was that Feyoria didn't ask them to sit, and that was just fine. Concluding their business and getting out of this creepy place was best for all concerned. Apparently, Thalia also felt uncomfortable. She shared a tense look with R'cey and took a deep breath.

“As you wish. I’ve heard you may be able to provide us with a seafaring vessel, something large enough for four. We seek the Southern Isle…”

Feyoria raised her hand. “I care not for your self-appointed task. Tell me only what you offer in exchange.”

“Why do I get the feeling you already have something in mind?” R’cey asked.

Feyoria cackled again, and R’cey saw Thalia flinch. “Because you are quite astute for a visitor from another world. As I said, I know many things.”

“Let us speak frankly,” Thalia cut in, saving R’cey from asking how Feyoria acquired her knowledge. “What do you wish in exchange for the vessel?”

“Your first born child.”

R’cey took an involuntary step forward. She had already reached for the sword before remembering that Feyoria disarmed her. “You can’t be serious.”

“Unacceptable.”

Feyoria shrugged. “I require someone to whom I may pass on my magic, an apprentice.”

“I cannot and will not acquiesce.”

“That means no. Surely there’s something else you want, something just as valuable that’s less of a cliché. Jewels? Gold?”

“What need have I for trinkets? My magic allows me to conjure anything I desire. Oh, very well. There is one other thing.”

“You have only to ask,” Thalia said.

“One dragon egg per annual cycle for five cycles, beginning upon the anniversary of your return to the kingdom.”

“Why?” R’cey snapped. “You settled on that choice awfully fast, which tells me that it’s what you wanted all along.”

“My reasons are my own. What say you, Princess?”

Thalia looked to her again, and R’cey could almost read her thoughts. Feyoria had deliberately backed them into a corner. She’d initially requested something she knew they’d reject out of hand. Refusing a second time would place them in a position for Feyoria to turn them away. R’cey knew how much the

success of this mission meant to Thalia. She'd already guessed the answer.

"Agreed."

Feyoria clapped her hands together and jumped up from her chair. She hustled over to the mantle and grabbed a leather pouch. It had been there the whole time, but R'cey had noted it only in passing. Feyoria had been one step ahead throughout their exchange.

"Place this satchel upon the sea. It will become that which you seek."

"Seriously? A ship in a bag? Thalia, this is some kind of trick."

Feyoria drew up to her full height, her posture growing rigid with anger. R'cey might have been impressed if she hadn't seen her true form in the mirror. "I've no need to resort to trickery, and it matters not. You require transport, and I require the eggs. Have we an accord?"

"We do. Apologies, R'cey, but she is correct. We need this, and I have already agreed." Thalia turned her attention back to Feyoria. "Know this, witch, our contract is void should this incantation fail."

"Of course, I'd expect nothing less. Now do run along. Your preconceived notions are fouling my aura." Her gaze rested on R'cey, driving home her point.

Neither of them hesitated. Thalia snatched the purse from the witch's hand and spun toward the door. R'cey was hot on her heels, though she paused long enough to scoop the sword from the floor.

Chapter Seventeen

Thalia scanned the horizon. She held onto the rigging for the mainsail to keep her balance. She'd never admit it aloud, but sea travel always made her queasy. With the sun gently shining and the slap of waves against the hull, she found it difficult to believe anything else could go wrong. The pouch had indeed conjured a sailing craft, so quickly that Thalia had to jump aside or be smacked in the face. Now, half a day later, Kahlan manned the wheel while R'cey rechecked their remaining supplies. Henry kept lookout from the crow's nest. At least he couldn't foul this simple task unless he fell asleep.

Any concerns for what Henry might do weren't misplaced. Unlike R'cey, Thalia had never thought of him as a child. She made no excuses for the dishonorable behavior that had resulted in the death of a close friend. Thalia considered Henry in relation to their return to Honui and wondered how she could speak of all this to his mother. The truth would break Hannah's heart.

R'cey approached Thalia and then set her hand on the ship's railing. "You seem very serious. Worried?"

Thalia smiled and reached for R'cey's hand. "Not presently. I'm sure that will come soon enough. Is everything in order?"

R'cey shrugged in that one-shouldered way that Thalia adored. "We have plenty of water and dried rations, barring any complications. Emerald is keeping an eye on the youngest member of our party, and the ship is in great shape. It looks brand new."

"Yes, it is quite clean. I've not seen a single rat dropping."

"Eww, thank you for that visual."

Thalia squeezed R'cey's hand then released her. As cute as she found R'cey and wanted to kiss her, Thalia thought it best to keep up appearances in public. Strange, she shouldn't need to hide her feelings out here in the middle of nowhere. Kahlan wasn't an issue, but having Henry around made Thalia feel exposed.

"The fortunate news is we should reach the Southern Isle

in a few more hours.”

“That’s good. After walking across the Lava Lands, I’m sunburned enough.”

Thalia figured R’cey must be joking. “You are not burned anywhere, unlike the rest of us. I believe your natural pigment prevents such a thing.”

“Would you like to check?” R’cey took a step toward her, moving into Thalia’s personal space. “I’m sure you can find signs of heat somewhere.”

Thalia shivered at the intimate growl. Her body tightened, and she swallowed hard. There was something erotic about making such statements where anyone could hear. Thalia started to respond in kind, but a warning from Henry halted her words.

“Storm dead ahead!”

Thalia and R’cey rushed forward to acquire a better view. From the bow, Thalia could barely make out darkening skies off in the distance. She turned to Kahlan for an explanation.

“Must be the outer boundary for the whirlpool, Princess. We should prepare for a severe blow.”

“Hey, wait a minute. No one said anything about a hurricane.”

“It is how the vortex maintains energy,” Thalia explained as she searched around for loose equipment. “Henry, get down here and secure our supplies. Tie down anything that may shift.”

All hands set to work, concerned but unhurried. The storm remained quite a ways off. Henry had sounded the warning with plenty of notice. By the time the rain started, Thalia thought they were as prepared as possible, considering the circumstances.

“Princess,” Henry said, “there is no reason for you to endure this tempest. You should go below decks.”

“Not as yet. Kahlan may have need of us. You will follow her orders without hesitation. Do you understand?”

Her command lost some of its firmness as the nose of the ship suddenly pitched into the air. When a particularly large wave struck the bow, Thalia reached for an anchor. She held onto the rigging as the surge tossed her body backward.

Thalia's feet slid on the saturated deck, and she almost fell. The rain started gently but quickly intensified.

"Thalia," R'cey said and started to come toward her.

"I am fine. Stay alert."

Wave upon wave crashed against them as the sea began to roil. Whitecaps and foam all but obscured the blue-green waters. The rain pounded so intensely that Thalia could hardly see past the gunwales. Then came the announcement she'd dreaded.

"Whirlpool off the port bow." Kahlan's biceps bulged as she fought the wheel, but she kept her gaze ahead. "I'm skirting south of the leading edge."

Before she could alter course, Thalia felt the wind increase. The ship heeled dangerously close to port, shoving them headlong toward the hazard. Emerald squeaked and lost her perch. She slapped hard into the deck at Thalia's feet, the storm too strong for her to fly.

Thalia reached for Emerald, tucking her under one arm. She'd never meant for Emerald's loyalty to place her in harm's way. "I should have sent you ahead. You could have found a more secure route."

Through their link, Emerald transmitted emotions of trust and devotion. Thalia sensed her love and something else. Emerald wouldn't have obeyed such a command to proceed without her companion. Her steadfast determination to remain at Thalia's side assuaged any guilt. Thalia tightened her grasp, resolute in keeping her friend safe from the sea.

Another wave struck from starboard, dashing over the side before surging over Thalia and Emerald. Thalia spat out a mouthful of salty spray and attempted to blink the water from her vision. The strike from starboard continued rolling the ship almost horizontal. Thalia's feet left the deck. She dangled by one desperate handhold but refused to release Emerald. She scrabbled for anything to gain purchase with her feet. Her wet grasp wouldn't hold for long.

Somehow, Kahlan managed to right the ship. When she did, Thalia's knees hit the planks. She knew she'd have bruises but gave thanks not to have gone over the side. Terrified she'd lost someone, Thalia searched for her people. Henry had lashed

himself to the main mast. Idiot. If the ship went over, he didn't stand a chance. Then again, no one did.

R'cey lay on the deck on her stomach, holding to a cargo hatch lever. When Thalia glanced over her shoulder, her heart froze. She'd never seen R'cey so frightened.

"We can't take much more of this," R'cey said, her voice barely audible above the howl of the wind. "The sails are pulling us in. We need to cut them loose."

Wind caught R'cey's words, tossing them away. Thalia barely understood. Behind her and up on the wheel deck, Kahlan managed to hear.

"No! Without them, we haven't any control. We're almost there. Just hang on."

Henry screamed. Goosebumps broke out over Thalia's body from the sound. At first, she couldn't imagine what inspired his terror. He seemed to have lost the ability to speak. Henry stabbed the air with his finger, pointing desperately ahead.

"What in hellfire is that?" R'cey asked.

"Kraken!"

Grace save us, Thalia prayed.

With Kahlan on the wheel and Henry tied in place, only three remained to fight the beast. Thalia couldn't discount Emerald's fire as a viable weapon, but the vibria couldn't maneuver in this hurricane. Thalia needed all of her strength just to hold fast. The tossing waves would send her over the edge if she released the rigging.

Apparently, R'cey didn't have the same problem. She still lay on the decking, one hand grasping the cargo hold's iron ring. Thalia had the perfect vantage point for what came next. Tentacles the size of a castle wall reached up and over the prow. Thalia saw the creature's suckers as it searched for prey. The suckers were the length of Thalia's body.

R'cey rose onto one knee and fired a bolt of energy from her free hand. The blast caught a glancing blow to one of the kraken's arms. Gore flew into the air, but the creature failed to withdraw. The damaged arm and another slapped over the vessel, bringing down sails and rigging alike. The deck tilted downward. A heavy beam dropped, and Thalia had no choice

but to let go. She slid across the deck at a frightening speed, headed for the bow and the kraken. The falling beam struck where she'd been moments ago and crashed through the upper deck planks.

Thalia released Emerald as the vibria began to struggle. When Emerald attempted to fly, Thalia reached for R'cey. She managed to catch hold of her belt. Despite the storm, Thalia heard R'cey grunt from the impact. R'cey continued firing and blasted one tentacle in half.

Slimy flesh exploded into the air. Thalia recoiled as a blob smacked her cheek, but she stayed focused. Thalia drew the sword from R'cey's scabbard, grateful Kahlan had allowed her to retain the weapon.

Thalia struggled to stand. The tempest seemed to have lessened, and the seas weren't quite as rough. She suspected the kraken had unintentionally forced them away from the whirlpool as it sought to devour them. Thalia still found it difficult to keep her balance, but she didn't hesitate to attack. She slashed at a tentacle, but the ship jostled the other way. Thalia landed on her side and struck her head on the planks. She recovered quickly and reached for the sword. The blade had bitten deeply into a kraken arm.

A roar filled the air. The kraken's head rose out of the sea, highlighted by the storm-darkened sky. A nightmarish parody of an octopus, the creature possessed a single eye and a beak filled with countless rows of wickedly sharp teeth. The eye fixed on R'cey as she continued firing energy bolts.

An arrow suddenly struck the monster above the eye. Henry had managed to free himself and joined the fight. Thalia had been worried about Emerald after releasing her, but she saw her now. Emerald darted about the kraken, shooting goutts of fire at the tentacles that attempted to drag them under.

A beam of sunlight unexpectedly streamed through the clouds. Thalia felt hope surge at sight of the gale breaking. The ray of light hit the kraken's eye, and Thalia saw the beast flinch away. She knew what to do.

Thalia yanked the sword free and dashed forward. Behind her, she heard Kahlan shout a warning. The kraken seemed intent solely upon R'cey, the one inflicting the most harm.

Thalia used that distraction. As the beak closed in on R'cey, clearly determined to ingest her, the kraken exposed its one true weakness. Thalia lunged forward. She aimed the sword point at the kraken's eye.

If she could blind the creature, it couldn't find them. If she could penetrate even deeper, she could ravage the brain. It seemed almost too easy. The creature raced toward R'cey as Thalia closed the gap. Her aim proved true. The sword slid in easily, nauseatingly, to the hilt. Blood and gore covered Thalia. She blinked and couldn't react in time. The kraken jerked away, hauling Thalia along. A lagging tentacle struck from behind. Thalia felt herself going over. She released the sword, grappling for anything to keep her from falling into the sea.

"Henry, grab her!" R'cey yelled.

Thalia managed to catch hold of a cleat above the foredeck's gunwale. She saw R'cey pinned down by part of the mast. The heavy beam trapped her legs, but Henry stood unencumbered. He watched Thalia from a few feet away, his expression unreadable. He still held the bow, an arrow nocked in place.

One hand slipped, too wet to hold on. Claws grabbed the back of Thalia's leather jerkin as Emerald tried to help. The dragonlet was far too small to lift her, but it was enough for Thalia to throw one arm over the side. She attempted to pull herself up, but her muscles were too exhausted.

Suddenly, booted feet hit the deck, running toward her. Kahlan had left the wheel.

"I have you, Princess."

Kahlan hauled Thalia up amidst the mass of quivering kraken tentacles. The monster had yet to withdraw completely, and Thalia had almost gone with it. A slimy arm passed in front of Henry's face, much too close for comfort. He dropped the bow and arrow and ran the opposite way. Thalia heard the cabin door slam closed as he scampered to safety.

"Almost there," Kahlan grunted.

Thalia threw her leg over and then instinctively ducked. A final quivering tentacle came toward her as the beast fell away from the ship. It barely missed taking her head off. Kahlan wasn't so fortunate. The thick arm struck her at the top of the

shoulders. Her breath whooshed out as she flew over Thalia's head. Thalia tried to grab her but missed. Kahlan disappeared instantly beneath the waves.

"Kahlan!"

Thalia searched frantically for a few desperate moments. Nothing. Soon, she had to abandon the search. They were still in the storm, though it had lessened substantially. She quickly climbed to the steering house and took over the wheel.

"We have to look for her," R'cey pleaded. "Please, Thalia."

Tears mingled with the rain. "It's too late. She can't have survived the undertow."

The truth tore at her heart, almost as much as R'cey's entreaty. R'cey had never once given up on any of their people, even when she knew it was impossible. In many ways, her commitment to them left Thalia feeling small. Somehow, she felt she should be the one never to submit. She wanted to continue looking for Kahlan but had to deal with reality. Three other souls still counted on her to see them through. She wouldn't sacrifice R'cey, Emerald, or even Henry to retrieve one they'd already lost.

Thalia steered toward clear skies. The ship had lost all sails save one. Though small, it was enough in combination with their rudder. Relief struck with the force of a physical blow as they cleared the storm clouds. Minutes later, the rain stopped. Soon thereafter, the ship reached calm seas.

Thalia left the wheel and climbed onto the main deck to help R'cey. She remained pinned under the mast remnants.

"Emerald, I require assistance."

Emerald responded immediately. She hopped down from the gunwale and grasped a barge pole in her beak. When she dropped it at Thalia's feet, Thalia noticed a tear in one of the reptilian wings. Blood streaked her breast, but the injury wasn't life threatening.

"Allow me to free R'cey, and then I shall heal you."

Emerald cocked her head and blinked.

Thalia used the pole as a fulcrum. She slid it under the remaining hulk of the mast and put her weight behind it. The beam lifted, and R'cey scooted out.

"I probably could have got myself out if I hadn't been on

my stomach.”

“Are you hurt?” Thalia felt strangely numb.

“No, I think I’m okay.”

“You are fortunate the kraken splintered the beam. It could have crushed you.”

“Thalia, are you all right?”

“I...I...”

Thalia suddenly burst into tears. She threw herself into R’cey’s arms, sobbing so hard that her entire body shook. She’d managed to lose three of her most trusted allies yet still had nothing to show for it. Grief held her in its grasp, demanding she stop to acknowledge her failure.

R’cey simply held her, silent and providing Thalia with support. Eventually, the emotional storm blew itself out. Thalia remained in R’cey’s embrace anyway, feeling her heat and drawing what comfort she could.

“Are you all right now?”

Thalia nodded, unsure if she could speak. A gentle finger under her chin encouraged her to look up. R’cey brushed her tears away.

“As ridiculous as it sounds, I understand how you feel. As much as I try to keep people at arm’s length, your guards got under my skin, too. Pax, Bergen, Kahlan...I barely knew them, yet they seemed as close as family.”

Thalia sniffled and cleared her throat. “Thank you for saying that. It means a great deal to me.”

“I mean every word. Now, pull yourself together, Princess. We’re through the worst of it, and we need to finish this. How much farther?”

The question allowed Thalia to focus on something other than loss. “It shouldn’t be far now. Can you take the wheel while Emerald and I stand lookout?”

“Sure. I’ve never steered a sailing craft before, but how hard can it be? Do me a favor though? Stand lookout with the bow Henry dropped?”

Thalia chuckled, feeling a little better. R’cey could make any situation seem brighter with a few light-hearted words.

“I believe I can do that.”

“Good, because I don’t trust him with any type of weapon

at this point. Where is the little weasel anyway?"

"He ran like a whipped cur and sought refuge in the captain's cabin."

"It's just as well. If I had to look at him right now, I'd snap his neck."

R'cey headed up the ladder to the wheel. Thalia took a moment to repair Emerald's injury before taking her post. She drew comfort from the ease with which Emerald flew onto the gunwale. Henry never reappeared, and Thalia eventually began to relax. She tracked their progress, appreciative of the steady easterly breeze that pushed them along. Another hour passed before she spotted their destination on the horizon.

"I see it, the Southern Isle."

"Keep a sharp eye out. It's been too long since something horrendous tried to kill us."

The harsh sarcasm was something Thalia understood. It was R'cey's way of dealing with her own pain. Thalia kept quiet and started planning their approach. Few options remained. As the island loomed closer, Thalia scurried to their remaining sail.

"What are you doing?" R'cey asked.

"Slowing our approach."

"Should we drop anchor?"

"No." Thalia loosened the knot and lowered the sail. "We've lost the longboat. We'll have to beach the ship as closely to shore as we can and swim the rest of the way."

"I hope Feyoria doesn't want her ship back. Then again, half of it's gone anyway."

They made it almost the whole way before the vessel scraped a sandbar. The impact lodged them in place and threw Thalia against the rail. While she regained her breath, R'cey sprinted to her side.

"Looks like the tide's out. It'll be a short swim."

"Thank Grace for small mercies."

The thunk of a bolt being thrown open caught their attention. The cabin door swung outward, and Henry poked his head out. He squinted in the bright sunlight and then stepped onto the deck. "Have we reached the island?"

The casual question proved the last straw. R'cey growled

and rushed at him before Thalia could stop her. She grabbed Henry by the throat and slammed him against the bulkhead. R'cey towered over Henry by a foot. She was also much stronger. She lifted him by the neck, choking him while his feet dangled off the ground.

Henry's eyes bulged. The veins in his forehead stood out as he flailed his legs. He couldn't gain purchase, and Thalia didn't think it would be long before he lost consciousness. She waited to see what would happen next.

"You bastard. I told you I'd kill you if you cost us anyone else."

As much as Thalia enjoyed the display, she couldn't allow R'cey to carry through with her threat. Henry wasn't worth the blood on R'cey's soul.

"R'cey, let him go. Now."

Thalia spoke harshly, sure R'cey wouldn't listen otherwise. As it happened, Thalia had to repeat the command anyway. Then she tugged on R'cey's arm before she finally released him. R'cey took a step back with a murderous look on her face. When she'd moved far enough out of the way, Thalia drew her fist back and punched Henry as hard as she could. She struck him with all of her pent-up fury. Blood exploded from Henry's nose. His head slammed back against the bulkhead, and he howled with anguish from the double impact.

"Nice shot," R'cey said and smiled.

Thalia shook her hand out, trying to make the pain dissipate. "My patience with you is at an end. R'cey and I will proceed without you. Stay here. When we return home, you will be stripped of your commission. Is my order in any way unclear?"

Henry had both hands cupped over his face. Blood dripped between his fingers, and Thalia noticed that both eyes had already started to blacken. She wasn't sure he could respond but didn't care. Thalia turned away, expecting R'cey to follow. Emerald already awaited them by the rope ladder. Her beady eyes shifted to Henry, and she hissed. For some reason, Thalia found her friend's reaction to Henry amusing.

"Emerald, I am so sorry, but you will not be joining us." The vibria remained uncomfortably silent, even through their

link. Through their long association, Thalia realized she'd upset her friend. "This journey grows more and more perilous. I cannot further endanger you. You should be able to fly safely home without encountering any dangers."

"Uh, do you really think she's going to listen?"

"She must." Thalia's voice broke as she remembered Emerald's recent injury. "This quest is at an end. Emerald, please. I need for you to ensure our safe return to Honui. Those who sought to remove the king from power will not hesitate to murder us to achieve their agenda."

The final appeal did the trick. Emerald acknowledged the importance of keeping Thalia safe from internal dissidents. She squawked once, cast a glare at Henry, and then took wing. Thalia watched her until Emerald flew out of sight. She prayed she would see the dragonlet again.

"I am ready."

"Should we rest first? We've been up a long time, and I'm sure Zolla has a nice warm welcome set up for us."

"No. The sun is high, and any traps will be more difficult to anticipate come darkfall. Let us finish this. For Kahlan."

Chapter Eighteen

R'cey's first impression of the Southern Isle wasn't a pleasant one. The sunlight stopped at the edge of the beach line. Dark, low clouds obscured the landscape, casting deep shadows she found difficult to penetrate. Unlike on the high sea, these clouds weren't a precursor to bad weather. The smell told her as much, as well as how the fine hairs stood up all over her body.

R'cey peered at the surroundings one more time and then looked at Thalia. "He's terra-forming this island, just as I suspected. First here and then, in all likelihood, the whole planet."

"What is this...forming? You briefly explained before, but I do not understand how it works."

Thalia's expression told R'cey how confusing she found the idea. Her brow was furrowed, her posture tense. Even as they strode across the terrain, R'cey noticed the stiffness in Thalia's shoulders.

"Terra-forming. It means he's changing things to be more hospitable for his species. Our species. Probably because of the way the atmosphere affects us." As they neared the ridgeline, R'cey had her first good look at the tiny continent.

"For what reason? Surely this Zolla requires trees and growing things the same as Trianans."

"I'm not sure reforming a planet works that way. I'm no expert, but I'd guess the process means starting from scratch. Maybe trees and grass come later."

Thalia panted slightly as they worked their way up from the shoreline. "That still fails to answer my query. Why do such a thing at all?"

"My guess? He's planning to invite some friends."

"The invasion of which you spoke?"

R'cey nodded. "It's no secret he has a lot of followers. Zolla probably plans to set up an advanced base of operations here before launching his attack. Too bad he won't get the chance."

"We are stopping him with archaic weapons? From your

point of view, of course.”

“Naturally, but he doesn’t know about my new abilities.”

“He also remains unaware of our presence.”

“That’s what I’m thinking. We have the element of surprise.”

R’cey hopped over a wide crevasse. As her feet hit, she turned back to assist Thalia. She extended a hand, but movement from the side caught her attention. Something large and black shifted. It appeared the terrain had begun to move. R’cey had no clue if that was normal for a terra-forming operation.

Thalia’s gaze shot from R’cey toward the motion. Unlike R’cey, she acted. Thalia dropped to one knee. She snatched an arrow from the quiver and fired in one fluid maneuver. For all her valor, the arrow clanged off metal and ricocheted into the air. By then, R’cey had assessed the situation. She pulled herself together and grabbed Thalia by the sleeve. Thalia didn’t require much encouragement to follow as R’cey scampered toward safety.

“The lantash,” Thalia said. “This is the creature controlled by the sorcerer.”

“We call it a digger, and it isn’t a creature. It’s a space vessel used for mining asteroids.” R’cey lurched aside, throwing Thalia backward with her own body weight.

Rubble exploded as one huge grappling claw reduced their cover to powder. R’cey heard a massive wheel grinding over rock as the vehicle pursued.

“Get up. Run.”

“Use your magic.”

R’cey yanked Thalia to her feet and shoved to get her moving. “I can’t destroy the ship. It’s our only way out of here.”

Fire erupted from twin drill cannons. R’cey dragged Thalia around another barrier just in time. She saved them from a roasting but still felt the leather on her boots heat up. R’cey slapped out the fire on her calf and reconsidered her position.

“Maybe we can just knock out the claw and drilling tools. Stay here.” R’cey peered around the stone bank then dashed back just as quickly.

An explosive charge just missed taking off R'cey's head. Normally used to assist in boring through solid rock, this digger must have been turned into a personal weapon by Zolla.

The grenade impacted the turf and detonated. Shrapnel filled the air. R'cey had time only to raise her arms as a shield. Her defenses proved woefully inadequate. Rock, dirt, and other flying debris pummeled her. Fortunately, the projectile struck far enough away that she didn't suffer any serious injury.

"Are you okay?" R'cey asked.

"Yes, but not for long. You must do something."

R'cey had already figured that out. Without further delay, she darted toward the digger. R'cey had seconds to scan the machine. It fired again, and she jumped into a forward roll. She rose onto one knee and used her energy bolts. In her quick glance, she'd sized up the digger's distance and exact positioning. R'cey aimed for the scoop claw. She caught the arm at the first joint and severed it, somewhat messily. Metal fragments shot away, leaving the familiar stench of burnt circuitry.

The digger immediately countered with the flamethrower. R'cey had to go for cover again. She dove over the top of a granite boulder and landed hard on the opposite side. Jagged shale bit into her palms.

"R'cey, are you hurt?"

"Only my pride. We have to get out of here and find Zolla."

"What of the lantash?"

"Not a chance." R'cey pushed to her feet. "That thing is responding too fast to be manned. It's got to be some kind of defensive program controlling it. We find Zolla, we shut it down."

R'cey took off, headed inland. The only thing on her mind was distance between them and the digger.

Thalia walked a couple paces behind R'cey but quickly caught up to her. "Where are we going?"

"No idea. Trying to think like a megalomaniac is a little outside my purview. I'm open to suggestion, but let's get away from that ship first."

The digger followed for a short distance. It took a few more shots at them but stopped suddenly. R'cey guessed Zolla had

programmed the machine to guard against sea access. As aggressive as the digger was, he probably didn't expect anyone to escape it.

"How do you suggest we proceed?"

R'cey stumbled over an uneven patch of ground. She almost went down but managed to catch herself. As vain as the next person, she was glad the shadows prevented Thalia from seeing. R'cey considered Thalia's question and drew on her experience for the solution.

"Head to high ground, preferably away from the digger. We need a good vantage point to search for signs of life. On this world, Zolla may be considered a sorcerer, but even he can't operate in the dark."

"And if he has gone underground?"

"Most snakes do, but he'll leave a trail. Nothing disappears entirely."

They traveled a fair distance, but R'cey found it hard to judge exactly how far. The conditions weren't exactly favorable. Not for the first time, she longed for the night vision properties contained within the skin suit's helmet. Instead, she had to do things the old fashioned, ploddingly slow way. She searched for a rise of some sort against the dark horizon way. I believe this grade will provide a fine view." Thalia spoke from several feet away.

While she didn't require Thalia to be glued to her hip, R'cey preferred her closer while in such dangerous surroundings. "Hey, wait for me. There's no telling what other surprises Zolla has in store."

Thalia turned back and offered a hand. R'cey grasped it and pulled Thalia into her arms. Without hesitation, she kissed Thalia. It felt so nice to indulge herself without Thalia's people around. She enjoyed Thalia's taste and heat but kept the interlude brief.

"I'd love to keep going, but let's wait for a change of venue." R'cey looked deep into Thalia's eyes and smiled.

"I concur. Come."

R'cey kept hold of Thalia as they climbed the hill. Usually, she didn't care for intimate touch outside the bedroom. In this case, she couldn't get enough. A lump rose to her throat as she

thought again about leaving Triana. They reached the crest, and R'cey gazed out over a narrow, low valley. The lump in her throat grew but for entirely different reasons. She swallowed hard, and the lump became a stone in her gut.

Up here, the stench of salty sea air carried easily on the breeze. They'd moved at least a kilometer inland, and she'd grown accustomed to barren and blasted rock. The view from the hilltop altered drastically. Zolla's terra-forming had devastated the island. Smoking tree trunks lay scattered across the surface, surrounded by burning shrubbery. According to Thalia's intel, no one had lived here. Considering the complete destruction, R'cey was grateful for that small mercy.

"The restructuring process hasn't begun here yet. It's still in the preliminary stages."

"This is a nightmare."

R'cey studied the horrific sight, checking for any sign of her quarry. At first, she saw only the fires and embers where they'd run their course. What had once been a beautiful rain forest lay in ruin. The wanton destruction sickened her.

Remnants of a particularly large tree appeared odd. R'cey couldn't figure out why. Then she noticed the smoke. The breeze carried the vapor away from them, but at a certain point things changed. Unexpectedly, the smoke stopped and dispersed in different directions. It almost appeared to strike a solid object, but she didn't see anything.

"You know," R'cey mused, "I've got to remember that even if I don't have access to technology, Zolla does."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning stay low and follow me. You don't do anything unless I clear it first. Understand?"

Thalia bristled. "I am not a child, and this is my quest."

"Yes, and he's my target. Look, I'm not trying to control you, but this man is dangerous. I have a better chance of anticipating his actions. I promise, if he has a cure for your father, we'll get it. Just humor me and do things my way."

Thalia held her gaze for so long that R'cey began to think she'd refuse to cooperate. Her eyes flashed, but she finally nodded. "How I wish I had not sent Emerald away. Her scouting abilities are needed."

“Not true. Zolla has a dome in place. Emerald couldn’t see through that. See how the smoke eddies around a barrier?” R’cey pointed. “Zolla has a shield erected to protect his base from prying eyes. The dome’s holographic projection bends light, making the barrier practically invisible.”

Thalia didn’t waste time questioning the mechanics of a protective bubble. “How do we breach this shield?”

“There must be an exterior as well as an interior control panel. Zolla’s not likely to have a barrier he can’t access at will. We just have to find it. To do that, we need to avoid having Zolla spot us.”

“All right, I will do as you say. After all, I don’t understand any of this.”

“Right.”

R’cey hunched over and headed downward. Her feet slipped in shale, and the sword threatened to trip her. She grasped the scabbard but kept one hand free. Ironic how she relied more on magic she’d never believed in more than a piece of sharpened steel.

She scurried from trunk to boulder, keeping to any kind of handy concealment. R’cey carefully avoided anything that could set them ablaze. In no time, they closed in on the barrier. R’cey dove into a small hole that barely accommodated her body. She felt Thalia hit the ground beside her. Without concealment, she’d be visible to anyone who cared to look. Frantic with worry, R’cey used a hand gesture, instructing Thalia to move. Thalia responded with a blank expression.

“Find cover,” R’cey whispered.

Thalia shot R’cey an irritated look. Then she grunted and jumped to her feet. For some reason, R’cey found her reaction amusing. All of that changed quickly. As Thalia sprinted for a burnt-out log, the surface of the dome shimmered. R’cey knew that only happened in two instances. Either Zolla had turned off the barrier to welcome them inside, or he planned to fire a weapon. He couldn’t shoot with the barrier in place. R’cey had a pretty good idea which option he’d choose.

One side of the holographic display, the side facing her, disappeared. R’cey caught sight of a plasticene habitat contained within the dome. The Amalgam used the preformed

structures for planetary exploration. It figured Zolla would add something like this to his inventory while making his escape from justice. A portal in the habitat's face slid aside. The nose of a forty-millimeter laser cannon rotated into view. R'cey lurched to her feet and watched as the cannon's muzzle began to glow.

"Duck!" she shouted, saving Thalia the effort by tackling her from behind.

She heard the *sssnap* of the cannon, felt the burn in her side as the laser struck. R'cey went down hard but shoved her way up onto her knees a second later. Though injured, she figured this would be their only chance to find a way inside. Zolla wasn't likely to accommodate them by lowering the shield again. Once he ceased firing upon them, that was exactly what he'd do.

"Stay here."

She didn't bother checking to see if Thalia obeyed. There wasn't time. R'cey tracked the cannon's movement with her eyes as she darted forward. Kahlan's sword banged into her shin. One hand went to her belt buckle as she ran. R'cey released the sword and allowed it to drop away.

The cannon muzzle swiveled toward R'cey, but it missed as she adopted a serpentine pattern. She zigzagged toward her target, aiming for the structure. The next time Zolla fired, R'cey dove to the ground. She grunted but hadn't time to wallow in pain. Up again, she closed the gap. Unexpectedly, Zolla ceased fire, and the barrel tipped toward the ground. R'cey sprinted harder, increasing her speed as much as possible.

Zolla had abandoned the gun. Any second and the barrier would rise. The telltale shimmer told R'cey when Zolla had hit the switch. Breath burst from her as she forced her body forward. R'cey was so close to the shield now that she couldn't stop if she tried. She estimated the shield's threshold and had only seconds to make it through.

R'cey hurtled past the imagined plane. Her feet left the ground, and her arms extended. For a second, it felt like flying. Reality set in when the shield struck her left boot. R'cey felt the impact as a heavy vibration that set her teeth on edge. A

split second later, electricity surged through the contact. R'cey's body tensed so hard she thought her bones would snap. It didn't last long but left her winded. R'cey groaned, holding her side as she attempted to sit. Discarding the metal sword had probably saved her life. That could change. R'cey couldn't allow Zolla to regroup.

Off world habitats didn't carry sophisticated locking mechanisms. Assuming Zolla hadn't modified this one. If he had, this was really going to hurt. R'cey stood on wobbly legs. She tried to run, but her gait was off. She stumbled a little and couldn't understand why. It took a second for her to realize one boot heel was shorn off from the laser cannon.

R'cey lowered her head and rammed her shoulder into the access port. She encountered no resistance. At all. Inertia carried her through the unsecured entryway. Her feet hit slick floor tiles just past the threshold, and she landed on her butt. She slid across the floor and spotted the wall coming up fast. R'cey tried to extend her legs but wasn't quick enough. Her knees hit the wall.

Through the minor discomfort, R'cey noticed a shadow disappearing around a corner. She set off in pursuit. In the last three minutes, she'd suffered one serious injury and sustained multiple contusions. She felt like she'd run a military obstacle course. A pro at compartmentalization, R'cey focused on her quarry. She hobbled down the corridor and rounded the corner. She expected to chase Zolla throughout the compound. She didn't expect him to turn and fight.

Zolla waited at the end of the next narrow hallway. He stood with legs splayed, holding a grenade launcher. Artificial light glinted off a silver lip piercing. A thick brush cut clashed with heavy, black eyebrows. Dressed all in black synthetic-leather, Zolla fit the stereotype of a super villain.

R'cey instinctively raised her hands. She fired twin bolts of white-hot energy. One shot struck the wall behind Zolla. The other hit the end of the grenade launcher. Plasticene exploded from the structure wall and peppered Zolla with the shrapnel. His weapon spun harmlessly away, striking the toe of R'cey's boot. Zolla screamed. He ducked down and covered his head with both hands.

“Please, don’t hurt me.” He sounded like he would cry.

R’cey blinked. She straightened slowly from her defensive position, expecting another attack. When Zolla continued cowering and gibbering, she didn’t know what to do. She hadn’t expected this craven behavior from murdering scum.

“Well, spank me rosy.” R’cey squatted down to retrieve the weapon because if she’d leaned over, she would have fallen.

Holding Zolla at bay with the grenade launcher seemed the hardest thing she’d ever done. She attempted to conceal the dizziness spinning through her head. She tried to hold the weapon steady, despite the weight that caused her arms to tremble. Zolla continued quailing in terror. Since he used his arms to cover his head, R’cey didn’t think he noticed her utter exhaustion.

“On your feet.”

Zolla flinched and dared look up. “You aren’t going to kill me?”

“Not sure yet.”

R’cey motioned with the muzzle, and Zolla stood. He kept his hands raised. R’cey had encountered people who mimicked fear as a ploy to make her let down her guard. It had only worked once and nearly cost R’cey her life. She certainly wouldn’t make that mistake with Zolla.

“Colonel Hans Zolla, I am Commander R’cey Hawke, Amalgam Hunter Retrieval Unit Alpha. You have no rights whatsoever, and it would give me great pleasure to kill you where you stand. The Amalgam will pay my bounty whether you’re dead or alive.”

“A hunter, Commander. I understand.”

“Good, now move it. The first thing you’re going to do is shut down the terra-former.”

“But we’ll die.” Zolla’s voice cracked. A bead of sweat tracked from his temple. If his fear was an act, it was a good one.

“You can count on it if you don’t do as I say.”

He swallowed hard and nodded. R’cey followed from a safe distance as he entered the habitat’s warehouse. She spotted the monstrosity right off. Considering the huge metal machine took up the bulk of the cavernous bay, she couldn’t have missed it.

Six cylindrical arms rose at varying angles from the rounded housing. Electricity arced between the points. A single blue beam shot skyward, erupting through a one-way force shield in the ceiling.

“Please, just allow me to explain. You’ve heard the stories. The atmosphere is deadly.”

R’cey had heard enough. Some people only responded to force. She reversed the grenade launcher and struck Zolla with the butt. He dropped to the floor and clutched his bloody cheek.

“Shut down the machine.” Her tone brooked no refusal.

Zolla groaned as he rose. He stumbled to the transformer in response to her silent threat. R’cey watched him reach for the lever and aimed the grenade launcher.

“Nice and slow, Zolla.”

Chapter Nineteen

R'cey propped the weapon in the corner and pushed the door open. Now that she wasn't fighting a psychopath or a souped-up digger, she felt every minor injury. She held onto her side as she peered out onto the blasted landscape. At first, she couldn't see Thalia. Her heart leaped into her throat at the idea that something had happened to this incredible woman.

After R'cey scanned the area once more, she spotted movement and saw Thalia's blond head pop up over a burnt-out tree. "It's okay. You can come inside now."

"Where is the sorcerer?"

R'cey smiled. Somehow, all of this seemed so anti-climactic. She didn't see the point of reiterating that Zolla did not have magical abilities. "He's a little tied up right now."

Thalia stepped out from behind the trunk. She still carried her bow at the ready. Apparently, this quest had, at the least, taught her caution. R'cey stepped aside and allowed her to enter. As soon as she crossed the threshold, R'cey pulled Thalia to her. They spent a long precious moment simply holding one another. R'cey reveled in the feel of Thalia's arms wrapped around her waist, until she squeezed. The pressure generated a gasp of pain.

"You're injured." Thalia released R'cey. Her eyes drifted from R'cey's face and then down to her midsection.

"Laser cannon caught me in the side. Don't worry, it cauterized the wound when it hit, and it was just a glancing blow."

Thalia pawed at R'cey's shirt, attempting to lift the hem. "Allow me to see."

"In a minute. Let's get back to Zolla. I don't like leaving him out of my sight, even for a minute. You can heal me while I'm interrogating the prisoner." R'cey retrieved the grenade launcher and led the way to her captive.

R'cey found Zolla right where she'd left him. She had tied his hands behind him and secured him to the powered-down terra-former. As he sat on the floor and peered up at her, he no

longer seemed as menacing. In fact, he reminded R'cey of a scared little boy. Not exactly the raging felon wanted by the Amalgam.

“There he is, your great and powerful wizard.”

Thalia didn't appear impressed. She released her grasp on the bowstring and walked to within a few feet of him. “This man is not what I expected.”

R'cey couldn't argue with that. “Why don't we get down to it? Why did you have that terra-former running? Are you planning to invade this planet with your army?”

“What army? I haven't any army. I was just trying to change this island where I could walk around without a breather.”

Neither Feyoria nor Maya had said anything about Zolla wearing a mask. Then again, R'cey hadn't exactly asked.

R'cey glared at Zolla and shook her head. “You did more than that. The weather outside the island has changed drastically. The Blessed Oasis is experiencing violent thunderstorms and electrical storms.”

“I had no idea.” Zolla paled slightly. “I...I'm not a scientist. I didn't know that would happen.”

As he spoke, Thalia moved closer to R'cey but remained quiet. She placed the bow and arrow on the ground, a careful distance from Zolla. R'cey didn't resist this time when Thalia lifted the hem of her shirt. Seconds later, she felt the tingling sensation caused by Thalia's healing magic.

“All right, let's say I believe you. Why have you programmed the digger to attack anyone arriving on the island? You could have killed us, or was that the idea?”

“I have a right to defend myself. My brother would stop at nothing to see me dead.” Zolla sounded sincerely panicked, but his response was surprising.

“What has your brother got to do with you stealing credits and weapons from the Amalgam or murdering innocent civilians?”

Zolla rolled his eyes in apparent disbelief. “*He* did all that, Gunther. My brother, Gunther Zolla, did all of those things and framed me for his crimes. I had no choice but to flee Celetron or risk death at the hands of the Amalgam. Please, you can't

take me back. I won't survive a day."

"Sure, that's why you have all these supplies stashed here and a killer digger on the beach. I bet you requisitioned everything from the storerooms or paid for it yourself."

He flinched at her sarcasm. "Yes, I took some things to help me survive. I didn't expect anyone to follow me here because of the planet's dangerous reputation. I planned to make this small, and by the way uncharted, island habitable for my..." Zolla closed his mouth and looked away. Clearly, he'd almost revealed something important.

"For your what? Army? Invasion force?"

"I told you that there is no army. If you must know, I wanted to bring my fiancé here. I feared that she might succumb to this world's atmosphere. I've lost everything. I couldn't lose her, too."

"You're twisted, you know that? You'd change an entire planet's ecosystem for one person?"

"I've told you everything. You can believe me or not. The choice is yours."

"Okay, fine. You're an idiot using a weather machine that you don't understand. You're innocent of all charges filed by the Amalgam. Answer me this, why would your own brother frame you?"

Zolla shrugged somewhat awkwardly due to his restraints. "It's far easier to frame someone close to you than it is a stranger. He knows everything about me, and no one would believe me if I denied the accusations. Gunther is a senator. I'm only a military man."

"And I'm sure you planned to live on Triana for the rest of your life, just you and the little family. Come on, Zolla. Don't tell me you haven't dreamed of establishing your own private kingdom here on this backward world."

"Gunther is the one who craves power," Zolla said loudly, "and he isn't above stepping on anyone to achieve it. Including his own flesh and blood."

"Well, you damn sure knew about my crew when you shot my ship down."

R'cey was tired of hearing Zolla's lame excuses. The faces of her team flashed through her mind, and she wanted to tear

him apart. Their deaths alone were sufficient reason to take him back to face the assembly.

“That was you?” Zolla blanched, and sweat broke out on his forehead. In a weak voice he asked, “What happened to your people?”

“What do you think? Our ship crashed, and they died. I would have too if not for Thalia. I don’t know if you’re guilty of the Amalgam’s charges, but I *know* you murdered four hunters.”

R’cey lowered her shirt as Thalia stepped away. Her side felt much improved, and she wasn’t quite as dizzy. The other minor wounds would heal over time.

“I am so sorry. My only excuse is that I was frightened. I thought Gunther had sent a death squad for me. Please, I’ll do everything in my power to atone for that tragedy.”

“You can’t make up for it, ever.” R’cey swallowed her grief. “Still, there might be something you can do for Thalia. Your answer could go a long way toward increasing your longevity.”

“Anything, you need only ask.”

His immediate willingness to assist made R’cey wonder once again about his reputation. This man did not seem like a megalomaniac. He was so earnest that she wanted to believe him. R’cey might almost feel sorry for him, if she didn’t personally know some of his victims.

“Princess Thalia needs a cure for her father. He’s in a coma. We’re not sure if there’s an underlying medical or magical reason, but we’ve been led to believe you can help.”

“I’m not sure where you acquire your information, but I do have extensive supplies. As I made my escape from Celetron, I...acquired a large inventory of first aid equipment.”

“And the magical cures?” Thalia asked quickly.

Zolla nodded. “Feyoria and I have traded quite a bit. She has generously provided me with spells as well as poultices that she says have great healing properties. You are welcome to all that I have.”

He attempted to step away from the terra-former and came up short. Apparently, he’d forgotten about R’cey securing him to the machine. R’cey handed the grenade launcher to Thalia

and briefly instructed her how to fire.

R'cey slid up behind Zolla and released him. "Lead the way."

Zolla showed them to a nearby supply chamber. Though much smaller than the warehouse, the closet was stocked to the ceiling. At a glance, R'cey thought Zolla could treat a small country of every known disease.

"We'll take everything. You won't need it anymore."

"I understand. I ask only one favor in return for my equipment. As a Commander, you have great authority within the Amalgam."

"And?"

"I want your word I'll receive a fair and exhaustive investigation of the Amalgam's charges against me. Also, I'd like for you to personally ensure my safety during that time."

R'cey's jaw tightened. She wasn't sure about providing security for a man who'd killed her friends. As much as she disliked Zolla on principal, she still had her own honor to consider. "I will, but I'll also make sure you're prosecuted for the death of my hunters."

"I'll assist in packing up the supplies. May I suggest we take the terra-former? The last thing we need is for some ignorant Trianan happening along and flipping it back on."

R'cey's hackles went up again. She didn't like Zolla's snobbish reference to the planet's inhabitants. The fact that she might once have done the same didn't mitigate her reaction. Zolla's guilt with the Amalgam might remain in dispute, but she just didn't like him.

She removed the hunting knife from her boot and approached Zolla. His eyes fixed on the blade, and he swallowed nervously. He released his breath when R'cey cut his bindings loose.

"Enter the access code and shut down the automated subroutine on the digger. Call it back to our location. We'll load everything in the cargo hold."

Zolla removed a small black box from his pocket and tapped in a few commands before he handed it over.

R'cey recognized the monitor screen of a small transmitter. "I assume this is the remote?"

“The *Cleaver* is en route back to us. It should set down outside in a few moments.” Zolla turned back toward the supplies.

R’cey didn’t know why Zolla hadn’t called the digger back on his own, but she happily palmed the device. Maybe by showing cooperation, he thought he’d earn favor with her. Zolla wasn’t kidding when he said that R’cey carried a lot of weight with the Amalgam. Most hunters did.

R’cey stepped out into the corridor and motioned for Thalia to follow. The room was far too compact for them all to move around comfortably. From right outside the chamber, R’cey could keep an eye on him but speak to Thalia if she kept her voice low.

“What do you think?”

“I believe he is no magician,” Thalia said. “I only pray to Grace that he has what we require.”

“I really hope so, too. By the way, who is this Grace that you’re always referring to? Is she the Trianan ideal of a god?”

Thalia smiled and shook her head. “Not as such. Grace is one of our deities but not a creator god. She is a warrior, one who came into being when life began on our world. She protects.”

“There’s something you’re not telling me.”

“You are very perceptive, but now isn’t the time.” Thalia cast a glance to Zolla as he stacked a crate at their feet. “We shall discuss it later.”

The building shook, and Thalia’s eyes widened. She looked around with evident concern.

“It’s okay. It’s just the digger. What do you say we finish up and get back to your kingdom?”

“Nothing would make me happier. I have missed my home.”

R’cey insisted that Thalia continue to watch their prisoner. She wanted to believe in his innocence but couldn’t take the chance on being wrong. As R’cey helped Zolla carry out the medical supplies, she wondered if she was getting soft. Thalia’s compassionate nature had definitely had an influence on her. Some might see that as a positive character change, but it didn’t bode well for her career prospects.

She chewed on the issue as she lowered the rear ramp and carried a crate into the cargo hold. When Zolla stepped aboard, she decided to worry about it later. She'd be the one piloting the ship back to the Amalgam and needed to acquaint herself with the digger.

"Looks like you got your hands on a new ship. How'd you manage that?" R'cey asked Zolla.

"Just lucky, I assure you. I happened upon the space port just as a mining troop was preparing to set out for the asteroid belt."

"Uh huh. Lucky. Right."

More likely, Zolla had done his homework and knew well in advance when he could get his hands on a ship. The configuration wouldn't matter as long as the vessel would function in space as well as inside an atmosphere.

They loaded the digger within thirty minutes and prepared to set out. R'cey secured Zolla on the cramped bridge. She tied him into a seat positioned in a far corner so she could keep an eye on him while operating the controls. Thalia took the seat to her left.

"All set?"

"Yes," Thalia said. "Do not forget that we must retrieve Henry."

R'cey frowned. "I'd hoped you'd forget about him."

She punched a button, and the *Cleaver* lifted off from the turf. It hovered about two meters off the ground, throwing ash and cinders into the air. The ship bumped slightly as the ground struts folded into the belly. Controls on a digger were slightly different than a vessel designed for space. R'cey was accustomed to sophisticated buttons and a touch screen. Here, she had an archaic type joystick with a trigger on the housing. The trigger was designed to fire explosive charges for mining. R'cey tilted the joystick forward. She went a little far, and the *Cleaver's* nose dipped toward the ground as the body shot forward.

"Whoa, sorry about that. Compensating for pitch and speed."

The digger leveled off, and they zipped over the damaged island. R'cey hoped that without the artificial climate changer, the land would soon recover. Either way, it wouldn't be fit for

human habitation for many years. She shook her head.

“What is that?” Thalia pointed through the transparent gallium windscreen.

“What?”

“I saw someone below.”

“Who would be crazy enough to explore this island, besides us I mean.”

“Perhaps Henry became concerned and came to our assistance.”

“Sure he did, and I’m the Queen of the Amalgam. Wait, I see them. Is that...?”

Thalia gasped. “It can’t be.”

“It is.”

R’cey’s heart thumped in joy. She steered the *Cleaver* close to the person on the ground and lowered the ground struts. From the way she’d positioned the digger, she couldn’t see anything once they touched down. She’d already released her straps and headed for the exit before Thalia could respond. Seconds later, R’cey heard Thalia jogging toward her. R’cey hit the hatch release and came face to face with a spearhead. She stopped short, her boot sliding from her attempt to halt so quickly. Thalia had no such incentive. She bypassed R’cey without hesitation and flew through the doorway.

“Kahlan, you’re alive!” Thalia threw herself at Kahlan and wound her arms around her neck.

Kahlan quickly dropped the spear and returned Thalia’s embrace. “My apologies, R’cey. I did not anticipate you besting this metal beast.”

“Forget it. How’d you survive the sea?” R’cey asked.

Kahlan released Thalia, and R’cey took the opportunity to slap Kahlan on the back.

“During the kraken attack, the longboat fell away. I was able to swim to it when I hit the waves. Somehow, I was thrown free of the vortex. After I cleared the storm, I constructed a small sail from my tunic.”

“You make it sound easy. Remind me never to doubt your seafaring skills.”

“I shall.”

“How did you come to be here, this far inland?” Thalia

asked.

“I discovered Henry upon the remains of Feyoria’s ship. He apprised me of your intentions, so I followed to provide assistance. I happened upon this metal monster and was engaged in a great battle when it suddenly flew away.”

“That must have been when I triggered the remote. Are you hurt?”

“Only a few bruises. Tell me, Princess Thalia, has our quest been successful?”

“I believe so, but it is a long tale. Come Kahlan, I will tell you everything on our way home.”

“Home. It has been so long, but where is Emerald?”

“I sent her back to Honui. As we speak, she wings her way to the castle falconry.”

R’cey felt compelled to speak. “I hate to break it to you, but we’ll probably beat her back. The ship is a lot faster than Emerald.”

“This is a ship? I see no sails.”

R’cey left it to Thalia to explain that to Kahlan along with the rest of the story. They boarded the *Cleaver* and headed out once again. Retrieving Henry didn’t take long. As soon as he spotted Zolla, Henry’s eyes widened, and he begged a sword from Thalia. He seemed frightened, so R’cey didn’t mind. In this case, having him armed worked in their favor. She could count on him to slay Zolla instantly if he tried anything.

A few hours passed. Thalia finished giving Kahlan the account of their activities. R’cey had little to do since she’d punched their destination into the onboard computer. The *Cleaver* flew on autopilot as R’cey kept an eye on her two problem children. Before she knew it, the digger beeped a proximity warning.

“We’re on approach to the city.”

Thalia quickly returned to the chair at her side. “I suggest we sit down in the Silver Valley. It lies just to the north and west of the capitol.”

“Think the locals will riot if they see an alien space craft?”

R’cey had meant her remark as a jest, but Thalia wasn’t laughing. “Should the Enforcer Guard determine we have aliens in our midst, they might kill you on sight.”

“That’s a cheery thought.”

Thalia allowed R’cey to worry about their unwilling visitor. Her immediate concerns centered on the unit of Enforcer guards headed their way. In the distance behind them, and over the treetops, Thalia spotted the familiar castle turrets. Until that exact moment, she hadn’t truly felt she’d returned home. Memories of her last days before the quest reminded her of something—something Thalia felt she should share.

“R’cey, have I ever told you that I knew I’d meet you? Long before I saw your ship coming down over the Keechog River.”

“Really? No, I don’t recall you mentioning it.”

They still had a few moments before the guards would arrive. “Seer Saraphax predicted I would meet a stranger who would prove instrumental in the success of our quest. She meant you.”

R’cey snorted, a gesture Thalia had learned to interpret as skepticism. “There’s no such thing as precognition.”

“You once said the same of magic.”

“Don’t remind me.” Zolla stopped walking, and R’cey pushed him forward with a hand on the shoulder. “Keep moving.”

“Regardless what you believe, she was right. None of us would have returned without you.”

R’cey remained silent, but Thalia didn’t require a response. She scanned the arriving unit and noticed an obvious absence. “Henry, head to the castle and apprise my uncle of our return.”

“Is that not why the guards rally to meet us?”

“Doubtful. I believe they are simply a random patrol. Do as I say.”

Henry shoved the sword into Kahlan’s hand and sprinted away. He disappeared quickly into the forest. Thalia didn’t like how he continued to question her orders, but he was no longer her problem. The guard contingent arrived seconds later. Thalia recognized Lieutenant Perry through the helmet’s faceplate. Typically arrogant and crass, Perry caught her off guard by dropping to one knee. He thumped a hand across his chest and

bowed his head.

“Well met, Princess Thalia. Welcome home. Long has it been since your departure.”

This was something new. Perry’s unusual behavior led Thalia to believe things were amiss in the kingdom. She wanted to shake him until he revealed the dreaded information, but she was no longer engaged in a quest. Royal behavior was tantamount while involved in affairs of court.

“My gratitude, Lieutenant.” Thalia was out of practice when it came to the courtesies. She let go of the charade. “Where is Captain Dumont?”

Perry stood and finally met her eyes. Thalia didn’t like what she saw there, equal parts grief and sympathy. “No disrespect intended, Princess. Much has happened since your departure.”

“Tell me.”

“I think it best if you hear the news directly from your uncle. He sits on the throne, awaiting your return.”

Kilik would never do such a thing unless...

“Kahlan, see that R’cey and Zolla are settled into the castle. Show R’cey to the dignitary quarters and ensure Zolla finds a nice warm cell. R’cey, I’m sorry. I’ll explain later.”

“Go, we’ll be fine.”

Thalia wanted to kiss R’cey for her understanding. Instead, she turned on her heel and ran toward the castle.

Chapter Twenty

“As you were.” Thalia’s voice echoed down the hallway as she approached the guards.

The Enforcer Guards standing post outside R’cey’s door snapped to attention at Thalia’s approach. Thalia stepped between them and hesitated. For a second, she wanted nothing more than to return to her own chambers and fall into bed. Exhaustion permeated every cell in her body. R’cey would probably be asleep anyway. Even the moons were about to set.

The desire to see R’cey won out. Thalia knocked before she could change her mind. From the speed with which R’cey opened the door, Thalia decided she must have been waiting up.

“My apologies for disturbing you at this late hour, Commander.” Thalia’s formal apology was for the benefit of her sentries.

“It’s no trouble, Princess. How may I be of service?”

Thalia relaxed. She should have known R’cey would understand court politics. There didn’t seem to be much she couldn’t handle. Thalia hadn’t seen R’cey to explain their situation since arriving back into the kingdom. Until now, she couldn’t be sure how R’cey would react.

“I wondered if I might have a private word.”

One of Thalia’s guards snapped to attention and turned toward her. “Princess, I must insist on accompanying you inside.”

Thalia stared at him blankly until she finally understood what prompted his behavior. “Sergeant Forrest, several weeks ago I left Honui as little more than a child. Since then, I’ve battled harpies, kraken, and been kidnapped by a demon. I thank you for your concern, but I am capable of conducting a simple conversation.”

Forrest refused to back down. He stiffened and held her gaze. At one time, such intimidation tactics would have worked.

“Stand down, Enforcer. I command you, or would you

prefer a permanent posting in the catacombs?”

Forrest continued to glare down at her for a moment more. Then he abruptly shifted back to sentry position. “As you wish, Princess Thalia.”

Thalia didn't waste any more time with him and stepped past R'cey, grateful when she finally closed the door. Thalia continued into the rooms, aware of R'cey following and curious about the accommodations. Thalia had never spent much time in the dignitary quarters. She found the opulence impressive. Someone had even stoked the massive fireplace in the living area.

Thalia turned and discovered R'cey waiting less than a step away. She moved into her comforting embrace. With strong arms around her and her head under R'cey's chin, she felt much better than at any other time in this long and trying day.

“What was that about with the guard?”

“I'm sure you understand. These people are accustomed to treating me like a piece of the furniture. A child, even one born of royalty, is still merely a child. They became accustomed to ordering me about, and I allowed it.”

“Looks like you've changed at least one mind. It's all downhill from there.”

Thalia smiled and pulled away. “Thank you.”

“For what?”

For so many things, Thalia wanted to say. She didn't even know where to start. “Nothing.”

“Think nothing of it,” R'cey said and smiled. “I've got plenty of that.”

Thalia grasped her hand and tugged gently. “Would you mind if we sit?”

“Of course. You must get off your feet. Come on, I know the best seat in the house.”

Thalia settled into the corner of a heavily upholstered couch. This close to the fire and with R'cey's arm around her shoulders, she wanted nothing more than to snuggle. Falling asleep in R'cey's embrace sounded wonderful. Unfortunately, that would have to wait.

“R'cey, I must apologize for leaving you alone so abruptly and for so long.”

“Are you kidding? I knew you’d have a lot to take care of. Kahlan and I shoved Zolla into a cell without any trouble and managed to get the supplies unloaded without too much trouble. Apparently, Kahlan has quite a few guards that are pretty loyal to her. She even posted some of them around the ship to keep anyone else from finding it.”

“She is quite remarkable. I really should promote her. Did the colonel appreciate his accommodations?”

“Well, they aren’t as nice as this one, I can tell you. I never thought I’d see an actual dungeon. Did you receive the medical supplies? I lost track after Kahlan brought me here, but she said she’d make sure you got them.”

“She fulfilled her promise.”

R’cey leaned away slightly. “You sound...odd. Did Zolla refuse to help with the medicines? I’m sure your people understand the magical stuff, but if he reneged on our deal...”

“R’cey, stop. Zolla did not refuse to assist. His services were no longer required.” Thalia dropped her gaze to the carpet. She blinked back tears and cleared her throat. “Uncle Kilik did not greet us because he had taken my father’s place upon the throne. King Lotar succumbed to the dark spell shortly after our group left Honui. Everything we did was for nothing.”

“Oh no, I am so sorry.”

As R’cey held her, Thalia gathered her strength from the touch. “There are moments I wish to sob uncontrollably. At other times, I feel I’ve learned of a stranger’s demise. We were not close, not for many years, but he was my father. I should experience more grief at his passing.”

“Hey, there aren’t many people who would go through what you did for someone. You did everything you possibly could. No one could ask for more.”

Thalia swiped the moisture from her cheeks. “I appreciate your words, but they cannot alleviate my guilt. I set all of this in motion through my ignorance.”

“We talked about that. You couldn’t have known about the spell, and you were looking out for your people. Wait, does any of this have to do with your uncle? Is he claiming the throne now?”

“No. Kilik has no interest in the throne. That responsibility

falls to me. Hence my enhanced sense of remorse.”

“Ah, my love, I get it.” R’cey kissed Thalia’s forehead. “Regardless of the outcome, you did not do all this so you could be queen. That would have happened eventually, no matter what. The trouble is that it doesn’t matter what I say. Only you can forgive yourself.”

“Very true, but I thank you for trying.”

“So, when’s the coronation?”

Thalia sighed. She sensed the turn in conversation. The prospect of what came next hurt more than Lotar’s death.

“My advisors tell me the kingdom has been too long without a monarch already. They have set the coronation for six days hence. I do not suppose you could stay for the ceremony?” Thalia felt sure she already knew the answer.

“I wish I could, but I’ve been gone for a long time, too. The families of my crew deserve to know what happened, and I must bring Zolla to justice.”

Thalia nodded, attempting to appear brave. Inside, she felt as though her heart had shredded asunder. “Would you at least spend this final night with me?”

R’cey turned to her and cupped Thalia’s face between her hands. “Try to stop me. Thalia, I love you. I’d give anything to never leave your side again.”

“Our responsibilities and Trianan law prevent that.”

“Responsibility sucks, but I’m happy to have this night to show you how I feel. I only have one request: a hot bath and a fresh set of clothes for tomorrow.”

Thalia chuckled. “You are somewhat ripe, my dear.”

“Yeah, and you have room to talk.” R’cey moved her hand as though waving away a bad smell.

“I have an excuse. I’ve been dealing with court business since our arrival. Why have you not bathed yet?”

R’cey cocked an eyebrow. “You mean in that giant swimming pool in the other room? As I’ve said, I haven’t a change of clothing. Plus, I was waiting for you.”

In spite of R’cey’s impending departure, Thalia’s heart soared at the thought of loving her once again. She kissed R’cey, reveling in the feel of soft lips and strong arms. Thalia stood, suddenly impatient. She pulled R’cey toward the bath.

Quick hands removed her clothing. Soon, cool tiles pressed against bare feet. The cool water enhanced the heat of R'cey's tongue in her mouth. Bare skins pressed together beneath the surface, urging Thalia to let go completely.

Thalia let go of protocol and royal expectations. Only their forbidden love mattered. Tomorrow, R'cey would leave her forever, but this night belonged solely to them. Thalia intended to show R'cey her love and leave an indelible memory upon her heart.

R'cey inhaled the scent of rich, pristine leather. The mahogany-colored tunic reminded her so much of Thalia that her chest ached. She kept her eyes trained on the darkness of space, unable and unwilling to speak to her current companion. Saying goodbye to Thalia after the night spent together had torn her heart out. R'cey had witnessed that pain reflected in Thalia's eyes at their final parting. She could recall little after that searing moment.

Court duties kept Thalia from walking R'cey to the *Cleaver*. Kahlan had that honor. She had also supervised Zolla's transfer to the digger. The only positive in this day was Emerald's safe return to Honui. As she looked back over this entire experience, R'cey could only say that she'd never be the same.

"Are you all right, Commander? You look a little pale," Zolla said and smirked.

"I'm fine. Shut up or I'll restrain you."

Zolla sniffed. "You know by now that I'm no threat. If you thought otherwise, you'd have already tied me up. Why don't you tell me what's bothering you? It's not like we have anything else to do for the next ten hours."

R'cey had come to believe Zolla's tale of woe. She found it extremely plausible his brother had framed him. Politicians weren't exactly high on her list of favorite people. On the other hand, her prisoner had cooperated with R'cey from the outset. He readily admitted his guilt in shooting the *Cyrene* down and, while not exactly looking forward to it, seemed willing to pay

the price. That did not mean R'cey longed to confide in him.

"Allow me to guess. It's that gorgeous Trianan princess. Am I right? You two certainly had quite the chemistry."

Zolla sat forward in the auxiliary control chair. His hands dangled between his knees, and he watched her intently for a reaction. His expression reminded R'cey of soldiers telling off-color stories around camp. It sickened her to think of speaking about Thalia in such a way.

"Get this straight. I don't want to talk about it. If you keep it up, I'll gag you and stuff you in the cargo hold."

"All right, all right. No need to get testy. I'm just trying to make friendly conversation."

"There is nothing friendly about our association. This is a job, nothing more."

R'cey's heart hammered. She realized she was spoiling for a fight, taking her heartbreak out on Zolla, but she couldn't seem to help it. She decided the best course of action was to minimize actual conversation. Otherwise, she might throttle him before they saw the Amalgam's outer rim.

"Since you don't want to talk, perhaps you'd allow me to make us some lunch."

"Not a chance, Zolla. I don't want you out of my sight."

"Now, Commander, you've locked down everything that could possibly be used as a weapon. All the cargo holds and air locks are secured. What could it hurt if I made us a few sandwiches?"

R'cey rolled her eyes, her patience at its breaking point. This guy was like a petulant child. He just wouldn't stop. The prospect of a few minutes alone with her thoughts made her decision.

"Fine, if it'll get you to shut up, then go make sandwiches."

"Fantastic. What would you like? I believe there is some fine pastrami in the cold station."

"Make mine roast equiferus. No onion."

Zolla wrinkled his nose. "I never understood the allure of eating wild horse."

"It's not horse, well, not so much. More like...what used to be called zebra."

"Same thing. Simply awful."

Zolla disappeared a moment later, finally gracing R'cey with some blessed peace. With the silence, R'cey could finally concentrate. She had ten hours before arriving in Amalgam space. Eleven to reach Hunter HQ. Consigning Zolla to a detention center was the first priority, after checking in of course. Once finished with the end of retrieval protocol, maybe High Marshal Lusky would allow her some much-needed time off.

R'cey grasped the leather pouch hanging around her neck. She felt ID chips shift in her grasp. R'cey had carried the tags for several weeks now. She didn't relish breaking the sad news to the people waiting at home, but it was best to get it over with. Better the family members heard it from her than by receiving an impersonal Amalgam hologram. She also needed to remember to go by Auberg's Bar. Tasia deserved to know why Melousa didn't show for their date.

A slight sound, just a footfall, advised R'cey that Zolla had returned. "Leave it on the console. I'll get around to it in a minute."

R'cey flinched when she noticed something flying past her. Instinct told her whatever it was would prove deadly if she didn't react. She dove out of the pilot's seat without hesitation. A whooshing sound created from Zolla's attack caused her to react on a primal level, but she wasn't quite fast enough. Something large and heavy caught a glancing blow on the top of her right shoulder. R'cey grunted at the pain but continued rolling onto her knees. She spun to face Zolla and brought up both hands. R'cey focused her energy and tried to fire an energy bolt that would obliterate him. Nothing happened.

"I suppose that answers that question," Zolla said and glared at her. "Apparently, you have to be on Triana for magic to work."

R'cey glanced at the metal object in his hands. "Really? You attacked me with a serving tray?"

"I was hoping to catch you off guard. The tritanium is heavy enough to cave in your skull."

"What can you say? You're stupid. So now what?"

"Now, we do things the hard way." Zolla drew a small but lethal knife from a boot scabbard. "I've had this since we met,

just saving it for a special occasion. Now we're all alone, and you don't have a skin suit loaded with weapons."

"Uh, out of curiosity, where did you have that thing stashed? I patted you down myself."

"That's not important. Let's get this over with. If you cooperate, I'll make it quick."

Sure, because R'cey was going to do that. "Your brother didn't frame you."

"Hardly. That insipid little fool couldn't find his butt with both hands."

"Then I guess there's only one thing left to do."

R'cey launched herself from the floor. She intended to fly over the top of the pilot's chair and take Zolla down. Trianan gravity was much heavier than the artificial stuff created onboard the *Cleaver*. R'cey calculated her body had adjusted to the alien atmosphere, and she'd have more agility here against the lesser pull.

Instead of hurtling over, her legs hit the backrest and flipped her downward. R'cey barely got a hand on the knife and kept it from plunging into her throat. Zolla yanked her across the seat back and flipped her onto the floor. When her training kicked in, R'cey knew what he was going to do before he did it.

When Zolla attempted to straddle her in the hopes of choking the life from her or slitting her throat, R'cey jammed her knee into his crotch. Zolla made a shrieking sound and hunched down to protect his privates. R'cey took advantage by punching him in the side of the head. He fell to her right but didn't go down completely.

R'cey quickly rolled in the opposite direction and regained her feet. As soon as she stood, she noticed the pain in her shoulder had not abated. She couldn't lift her arm up more than a few degrees. Bending her elbow was one thing, but any real use of the limb was out of the question.

"Looks like you've got a problem, Commander." Zolla faced her, grinning like a madman.

He brandished the knife, holding it slightly away from R'cey as he waited for an opening. She couldn't believe she'd fallen for his act. Hadn't she learned anything from her last

twenty years in this business?

“If you think that little swine sticker is going to take me out, you are seriously delusional.”

Conversation wasn't her main objective. R'cey was more interested in delaying and distracting him. Unfortunately, she couldn't see anything handy that she could use as a weapon. She had made sure to secure anything Zolla could get his hands on—barring a knife he'd stuffed up his backside. She couldn't help wondering if he'd shoved the sheath in there, too. Surely, he had. Otherwise, he'd have sliced himself in half.

“Since I appear to be out of options...” R'cey turned and sprinted out of the main bridge. Her arm swung useless at her side.

R'cey wasn't a coward. Given no alternative, she would fight Zolla hand-to-hand. She hoped to find another choice. Her dominant hand was compromised and, sadly, Zolla was a healthy and much heavier opponent.

Light from the galley spilled into the hallway. For a second, she was tempted to duck inside. R'cey squelched the urge and kept moving. Other than another serving tray, she couldn't think of anything in the kitchen to use as a weapon. Unfortunately, this corridor would soon dead end. She had secured all other rooms except for the head.

R'cey's eyes narrowed as an idea emerged. Fires in space were a decidedly bad thing. For that reason, all space-worthy craft were equipped with automated as well as manual flame suppressors. R'cey increased her speed and headed for the fire extinguisher mounted near Airlock A. She could hear Zolla closing the distance, not only due to his footfalls but also because he had yet to shut up.

“I can't believe you fell for it, Hawke. How gullible are you?”

R'cey skidded to a stop at the wall mount then gasped when she reached for the extinguisher. She'd already forgotten about her shoulder injury. She fumbled for the release as Zolla pounded down the hall toward her. Desperate, she glanced his way just in time to duck a swipe from his knife. The double-edged dagger passed by so closely that R'cey heard the displaced air.

In response, R'cey thrust her left leg into Zolla's path. He was going too fast to avoid the obstacle. Zolla struck R'cey's leg hard enough to spin her about. He continued going. His feet flew out from under him, and he crashed into the airlock's transparent plasticene hatchway.

R'cey let go of the idea to brain him with the fire extinguisher. Instead, she grabbed for the airlock controls. Holding him inside the airlock would work just as well as any cell. But R'cey screamed when Zolla hurled his stiletto into the control panel. The surgically sharp blade pierced the back of her hand and continued on into the circuitry. Her hand was pinned to the control panel by the knife.

With her right arm and left hand impaired, R'cey struck out with her feet. Zolla was close enough for R'cey to deliver a snap kick to his chin. His head flew backward as blood sprayed into the air. She felt the satisfying crunch of a broken nose. While he was recovering, R'cey yanked the knife from her hand. Since adrenaline kept her from focusing on any discomfort, she could deal with Zolla.

When Zolla came at her again, R'cey dropped to her knees. It wasn't enough to throw him off his feet, but she succeeded in knocking him off balance. R'cey stood quickly, flipping him over. R'cey realized she'd dropped the knife. Zolla didn't hesitate to go after his weapon. She took advantage of his distraction. R'cey dropped to one knee and tripped the emergency panel on the floor. The tiny hatch rose instantly, and R'cey thrust her hand into the compartment. She grasped the release lever and yanked upward.

Zolla panted like a racehorse. He grabbed the knife but had yet to straighten completely. Apparently, staying in shape wasn't high on his list of priorities. R'cey couldn't believe how winded he sounded. The airlock hissed from pressurizing, and the doors parted. R'cey planted a boot on Zolla's rear and shoved him into the compartment. She propelled him hard enough that he hit the deck and slid a few feet toward the ship's rear exit.

R'cey turned and stomped down on the lever. The doors swished closed, and R'cey fell against the bulkhead. She took a few deep breaths as Zolla struck the plasticene. The blade's

hilt didn't make much of an impact, only enough to draw her attention.

"You bitch! Let me out of here. Do you know who I am? I am Colonel Hans Zolla, three times decorated hero of the Founders Wars. Who are you? A lowly bounty hunter, ready to wallow in your own filth for a reward."

"Let me ask you something, Zolla. Was it really an accident, killing my crew?"

"I couldn't care less about your crew." Zolla curled his lips in disgust. "Anyone coming after me deserved their fate."

R'cey had heard enough. Zolla spewed obscenities and outlined all the ways he wished he'd murdered R'cey's crew in person. She turned back toward the cockpit, happy to leave this psychopath in the tiny airlock. She couldn't believe she'd bought his act, even for a second. If she had to stand here and listen to him a moment longer, she'd open the hold and strangle him.

Red alert klaxons suddenly blared throughout the ship. At the same time, the lighting dimmed, and bright, revolving lights activated from behind. R'cey spun about—sure Zolla had done something to sabotage the ship. The alarm written upon his face couldn't be faked.

"Warning, airlock will disengage in twenty seconds."

"Let me out! The airlock's going to open."

To underline Zolla's statement, sparks showered from the wall-mounted control panel. R'cey hesitated, slow to react due to her personal feelings about this man. Then she realized that if the airlock opened, he'd die instantly. Zolla deserved to suffer far longer for his crimes.

R'cey sprinted back to the emergency lever and thumbed the floor panel release that she'd used before. This time, nothing happened. She tried again with the same result, though the computer's automated system responded.

"Warning, emergency override unavailable."

Their eyes met. Both seemed as shocked as the other. Zolla began hammering at the plasticene with his knife hilt and his fists. He kicked at the barrier, but it held. R'cey reacted with mixed feelings. She wouldn't mourn his passing, but no one deserved to die through explosive decompression.

“Do something, please! Open the door, Commander. I’ll do anything, please, please...” Zolla dropped to his knees, gibbering in fear.

“Warning, airlock will disengage in ten seconds.”

R’cey wasn’t ready to give in. She jumped to the wall-mounted panel, hoping to bypass the circuitry. As soon as she made contact, an electrical surge threw her backward into the bulkhead. The back of her head whacked against the surface, and dizziness swam over her. She shook it off and tried to make it back to the controls.

“Warning, airlock will disengage in five...”

They were out of time.

“I’m sorry.” It was the only thing she could think of to say.

Zolla regained his composure at the last moment. He sniffled and stood, still clutching the blade. Unbelievably, he smiled and saluted her. The airlock’s outer door hissed. The red siren light at the rear of the compartment revolved. The doors parted, and Zolla’s body shot out into space.

R’cey couldn’t believe the nightmare had finally ended. She felt numb from the loss of life on this mission. R’cey struggled to think what her next move should be. Zolla was already dead, no getting around that. Now, she had to think like a Commander, to finish the job. Her crew deserved that much, and she wouldn’t let them down. R’cey headed for the bridge.

After shutting down the hyper-drive, R’cey set a course to return to their previous coordinates. The ship had already traveled light years from the location, but she easily found the megalomaniac floating in zero gravity. R’cey utilized the digger’s mining grapppler to haul his body back into the ship.

She’d once bragged to Zolla that the Amalgam would pay her bounty whether she brought him back dead or alive. Now, she would test that theory. She couldn’t be happy about the death of another person, not even one this vile, but she still had to make a living.

Chapter Twenty-One

R'cey leaned against the wall of the sky tram. Bodies pressed close around her as the hover train followed its pre-ordained route. Ten days after arriving back on Celetron, she still experienced bouts of extreme exhaustion. This morning proved no exception. She figured it was the cost of readjusting to another atmosphere.

Eyes closed, she rested her forehead against the window. Normally, she treasured the view of the capitol from this height. Today, she simply wanted to rest. Ironic for her first day back to work. The train slowed and began its descent. R'cey opened her eyes and straightened her shoulders. The skin suit felt a little tight after Triana's more relaxed apparel.

Her heart had felt heavy since returning home. Breaking the news of her crew's demise to their families made it worse. They had reacted in exactly the gut-wrenching way R'cey expected. Their faces still haunted her. Only Tasia had proved the exception. Apparently, Teles's comment aboard the *Cyrene* was accurate. Tasia had been after Melousa's credits. Nothing more.

R'cey shuffled over to the exit as the sky tram slid into the docking station. All around, the familiar sights of Amalgam Central Operations greeted her. She stepped off onto a receiving platform on the thirtieth floor. Unlike subway stations of old, the space faring settlers from Earth had opted for an alternate venue than underground. Gallium windows, harder than steel, surrounded the structure. The decision afforded travelers a bird's eye view of their world.

She turned away from sunlight glinting off countless windows from hundreds of similar buildings. The once awe-inspiring sight left her cold. She much preferred verdant green forests and indigo waters. R'cey headed straight for the lift.

“Good morning, Commander. Welcome back.”

R'cey sighed loudly when she saw Lusky. This was the last person she wanted to see so early in the day. “Perfect. Is it too late to take another car?”

“Funny.”

Neither of them laughed. R’cey and High Marshal Lusky detested each other and made no bones about it. Only her record of successful retrieval kept him from sending her to the basement. Right now, R’cey would happily work for the Amalgam pathology department. The doors closed, and her opportunity to escape slipped by.

“How are you feeling? I heard your prisoner almost escaped.” Lusky shoved half a cronut into his mouth. Both cheeks puffed like a pregnant squirrel.

Short, fat, and balding, Lusky struck her as the least impressive male specimen possible for his position. R’cey could think of two fates that would ensconce him as the director of the Hunter’s Guild—either nepotism or he possessed an image of a high-ranking official doing the deed with a monkey.

R’cey slammed her mind closed on the subject. The thought of someone furthering their agenda through familial relations reminded her of Zolla. Retrieving his body and seeing the effects of space on the human form left her with lingering nightmares. Still, as always, she marveled at Lusky’s choice of attire. Wearing the skin suits was a privilege reserved for those associated with the hunters. Too bad he took full advantage of the opportunity. Made from the most adaptive fabric in the known universe, the suits accommodated any body type. Lusky’s suit challenged that theory as it strained to contain his girth.

“Shoulder’s a little stiff, but medical patched me up in record time.”

“You headed back to work?” Lusky waved a data chip under her nose as though to entice her. “We’ve got a real juicy one lined up if you’d like first crack.”

“Not this time, sir. I have a few hours personal time before I report for duty. I still have some things to finish up first.”

Lusky stared at her for a second, a look of confusion on his stubbled face. “I thought your eyes were brown.”

“Color infusion.”

“Right.” A crumb dropped from the corner of his mouth.

His response confirmed R’cey’s suspicions. Lusky didn’t know her at all. R’cey would never utilize such a vanity device.

The lift doors parted, and she slipped out before Lusky could respond. He stayed quiet, probably too busy chewing. As long as R'cey didn't have to face him for a few hours more, she didn't care.

She soon forgot about him as she traversed the marble corridor leading to the records department. In no time, she stood outside the glass walls and scanned the interior office. A smile lit her face. Finally, a break.

R'cey stepped through the automated entry. "Hi, Sally."

"R'cey, you old space dog. What are you doing down here in the slums?"

Sally's perpetual smile shone like a beacon of white against her dark skin. Her salt and pepper hair, piled high on her head, bounced as she moved around. R'cey had never seen her in an ugly mood, unless Lusky happened to be present.

"You know how it is. The life of a hunter isn't all space battles and saucy women."

"Ha!" Sally barked out a laugh before turning a little more serious. "You've lost weight. Was this a bad one?"

R'cey shrugged. She hadn't lost a pound. Clearly, Sally noticed something had changed but couldn't put her finger on it. "Nah, easy as pie. Guess you could say I've been on a crash diet. Triana doesn't have a lot in the way of the highbrow cuisine to which I've become accustomed."

"Uh huh, because you even like that kind of thing. Listen, I have this friend..."

"Oh no, Sally. No blind dates. Not even for you." R'cey stuck a finger in her collar and tugged slightly. "Actually, I'm down here to do some research. Mind if I borrow the historical archives?"

"Is this for a case?"

"Something along those lines."

"Now, R'cey, you know the protocols. I can't allow you to use the records for personal reasons. I'd never hear the end of it from you know who."

"Forget Lusky. I promise you won't get in trouble, and it's not really a personal thing anyway. I ran into some things on Triana that just don't add up. Even though the case is already closed, this might crop up again sometime in the future, and I'd

rather be prepared.”

“Okay, sounds plausible.” Sally tapped some information into a data pad and then handed over an access card. “Use bay four nine, down at the end. It’s the most secure, and no one ever goes in that far.”

“Thanks. You’re a doll.”

“If you really wanted to thank me, you’d consider meeting my friend.”

“Bye, Sally.”

R’cey swiped the access card through the reader and waited for the automated system to kick in. Archives housed all secure records for the entire Amalgam. As such, the heightened security wasn’t much of a surprise. Sally, and others like her, monitored every entrance and exit. They also logged the purpose of each visit. Although they seemed unthreatening when judging by appearance, the clerks were authorized to use lethal force in the event of a breach. R’cey had no choice but to tell Sally some of the truth of her visit. She left out that a return to Triana was highly unlikely and that her research was in fact of the most personal nature possible. By investigating Triana’s history, R’cey felt closer to Thalia. She missed her so much that she could hardly breathe.

“Retinal scan in progress.”

R’cey froze as a bright light swept back and forth in front of both eyes. A second later, the computer prompted her for a DNA sample. R’cey pricked her finger on the extended needle and waited for the artificial intelligence to respond. If the computer sensed any deception in her identity, it would respond with lethal countermeasures. R’cey always held her breath at this point, convinced something would go wrong. Death by neurotoxin wasn’t her idea of the best way to go.

“Identity confirmed. Good morning, Commander Hawke. You may enter when ready.”

At first glance, R’cey thought the locker room was empty. She’d just returned from what Lusky said was an easy single-hunter retrieval mission. She snorted in disgust. The escaped con

turned out to be an Andoran slug. No matter what anyone said, a slimy one hundred pound slug wasn't easy to wrestle into custody. Especially when it was buried in a dumpster eating as much restaurant garbage as it could stuff between its mandibles.

R'cey caught a good whiff of her own scent and swallowed against the instinct to gag. She pressed the release catch on her shoulder and peeled the top of her suit away from her body.

"Tell me how a troll like Lusky gets to be in charge of an all-female Hunter's Guild."

R'cey jumped as Yolie Martinez wandered around the corner from the back row of lockers. She had a dark smudge across one cheek, and her suit looked like she had wallowed in the sand. Yolie stripped off the suit without hesitation and reached for a clean towel. As always, R'cey couldn't help but to notice her hard body and small, tight breasts. Her caramel-colored skin looked kissed by the sun.

"The single most unsolvable question in the galaxy. Worse than the three body problem. What did he do?"

"Grabbed my ass and pretended it was an accident. Of course I punched him in the throat and pretended I'd tripped over him. He's so short, it could be true."

R'cey grinned at the image and walked toward her locker. "At least he has good taste." She immediately regretted the suggestive comment as Yolie's eyes lit up.

"You in the mood for a quick one? We'll have to do it in the shower since we only have ten minutes before briefing."

R'cey grabbed her gear and slammed the door. She backed quickly toward the showers. "Sorry, you don't want to get near the stuff I'm covered with. Maybe another time."

"Hey, why are you so skittish? It's not like I expect a commitment."

R'cey realized she was acting like an idiot. She and Yolie had done this before on many occasions, and it never meant anything, but R'cey couldn't do it. Even though she'd never see Thalia again, just the idea made her feel like she was cheating.

"Sorry," she repeated. "I just can't."

R'cey showered as quickly as she could. She bypassed Yolie on the way out, giving her a wide berth. R'cey didn't expect the other hunter to pounce on her, nor could she explain

her own behavior. Every day since leaving Triana, her thoughts of Thalia and the urge to be with her grew stronger. Retrieving the slug might indeed have been an easy assignment if she weren't so distracted.

"This is getting out of hand," R'cey mumbled as she entered the briefing room. She headed for the wall-mounted beverage dispenser. "Peruvian tea, extra hot."

"How can you drink that sludge?"

R'cey ignored the hunter, unsure who even asked the question. She watched her tar-like drink as the unit dispensed it into a ceramic mug. R'cey snatched her cup and walked over to lean against the wall. Others milled around and talked about nothing in particular as R'cey chewed on her bitter brew. A few seconds later, Yolie sauntered in. She shot R'cey a puzzled look but thankfully maintained her distance.

Forty minutes later, the hunters began to grow impatient. Lusky had yet to show. He wasn't above making them wait, but even he wasn't usually this tardy. A few people finally left the briefing room. R'cey assumed they were already assigned to active cases and couldn't keep waiting around. When Lusky did make it, R'cey was surprised to see him red faced, sweating and looking extremely worried. Worse, two Parliament senators accompanied him. Thankfully, neither was Senator Gunther Zolla.

"All right, settle down." Lusky took his typical place at the front of the room. "We have a problem. A little over an hour ago, Queen Thalia Dumont of the planet Triana contacted the Warehouse Guild."

R'cey felt like someone had slapped her. She hadn't expected to hear Thalia's name, much less in an official briefing.

"As some of you may know, leaders of Triana sometimes conduct trade with the Amalgam's supply units on a secure communications channel. They do this while keeping the xenophobic locals in the dark about our existence."

"So why do we care about trade policies?" Yolie asked.

"We care because the Western Kingdom is in the middle of a full-scale uprising. Some of the Enforcer Guards have turned against the current regime, and the queen's forces can't hope

to fight them off. The general population is under martial law instituted by the rebels and unable or unwilling to assist.”

“They’re asking for our help? What do we get out of it?”

R’cey, still numb from Lusky’s announcement, didn’t know who asked the question. She was far more interested in the response. Amalgam policy prevented direct intervention with a developing world. That same protocol had caused her a lot of hardship on the recent mission to Triana. She couldn’t understand why the policy would change now.

“Queen Dumont has generously offered the Amalgam unlimited access to the silver deposits on the Southern Isles if we agree to intercede on her behalf. As you know, silver is in short supply throughout the Amalgam Federation and is instrumental in computer circuitry. This would go a long way toward solving a big problem for us.”

None of this made any sense. There were no silver deposits on the Southern Isle. After Zolla’s terra-forming stint, R’cey couldn’t think of anything of value there. More than that, she couldn’t see Thalia bargaining with something she didn’t have. Thalia would never do such a thing, unless the situation was far worse than R’cey could imagine.

“Commander Hawke, the queen has requested that you lead any teams we send. I’ve agreed since you know the people and the terrain.”

That was one order from Lusky that R’cey was happy to obey. “When do we leave?”

“Not so fast. The first question is how many hunters do you need? I think a large-scale assault is the best way to go. We can send in a full battalion along with four war-birds.”

“That’s not a good idea, sir.” R’cey had to approach Lusky from a diplomatic position. Showing her usual disdain for the man wouldn’t help her cause. “No offense, but a small squad is easier to communicate and coordinate with. Also, we can more easily infiltrate the castle grounds. People still don’t know about intelligent beings from other worlds, and we don’t want to create further panic.”

“They do now. Apparently, that’s part of the problem. Someone spilled the beans and used it as an excuse to stage a coup. You have two hours to work out the details. Choose any

hunters not currently assigned to other projects to join you.”

R’cey had an idea exactly who would use such knowledge to their advantage. Thalia should have allowed R’cey to kill Henry when she had the chance. Now, R’cey had two hours to lift off Celetron and ten hours of travel time, even at hyper-speed. Anything could happen before they reached Triana, including the unthinkable.

“Resources?” she asked in a choked voice.

Senator Valderan, a tall, willowy woman with hair the color of snow, answered the question. “Full access to anything in the Amalgam’s arsenal. I agree that a small contingent is a better choice, regardless of Trianan knowledge. I shall have the war-bird *Javelin* waiting on Launch Pad 21 Theta within twenty minutes.”

Chapter Twenty-Two

“Commander, we’re emerging from hyper-speed,” Hunter Sarah Gardner said.

“Set up a geo-synchronous orbit above the Western Kingdom. Use the coordinates in the targeting computer.”

Gardner gave a sharp nod. R’cey couldn’t see her face, but she saw the blond curls bounce. Since this wasn’t considered a military operation, R’cey wasn’t surprised by the lack of a verbal response. Hunters tended to act. Gardner proved no exception as she punched in the information. Instinctively, R’cey tightened her grip on the arms of her chair. She relaxed when the *Javelin* adjusted course, and she felt nothing.

Unlike hunter ships like the *Cyrene*, this war-bird class vessel easily held a crew of five hundred. They hadn’t nearly that many people onboard, but R’cey appreciated the large bridge that afforded her a central command chair. From her position, she could oversee personnel manning navigations and could monitor the science station as well as communications. To her left, Commander Yolie Martinez held the seat reserved for second in command.

“Martinez, once we’ve established orbit, assume command of beta squad. We’ll use the shuttles to enter the atmosphere.”

“I’ve got it, Commander. The cloaks should prevent anyone on the ground from seeing us.”

R’cey turned to the young woman on her right. “Communications, have we heard anything from the planet?”

Big brown eyes met R’cey’s gaze. The woman barely looked old enough to be a hunter. “Sorry, Commander. Nothing on any Amalgam channel.”

R’cey’s last contact with Triana had been with Kahlan. She had agreed to prepare her guards for the hunters but had broken off contact rather abruptly. R’cey had heard sounds of a skirmish nearing Kahlan’s position. R’cey only knew she was supposed to rendezvous with her outside the castle.

“Have the assault teams meet me in the launch bay. Yolie, join me as soon as we’ve established orbit.”

R'cey left the bridge, taking the power lift down four decks into the belly of the ship. She needed to check that everything was in place for what came next. Her nerves were already on edge due to the continued silence from the planet. She dreaded to think of Thalia's fate in the midst of a civil uprising. For that reason, she couldn't take a chance that whoever readied their equipment hadn't considered every possible contingency.

She didn't have as much time as she'd have liked. Two squads of hunters reported within five minutes. She recognized a few from having worked with them before. Some of them, she didn't know. They appeared as young as the navigator, but R'cey didn't find that surprising. As she once told Thalia, Hunter Guild had a high turnover rate. Knowing them wouldn't matter anyway, as long as they followed orders. R'cey offered them a nod in greeting and continued assessing the gear.

"All present and accounted for, Commander."

R'cey glanced up as Yolie strolled into the launch bay. "How would you know? You just got here."

"The fact that I didn't find anyone in the corridors was a dead giveaway."

"You have a point. All right, Hunters, listen up." R'cey gave everyone a chance to gather around before she began. "As you know, people of this world don't take very kindly to outsiders. Most of them didn't know we existed until now."

R'cey spent a few minutes bringing the squads up to date concerning her recent mission to Triana. She left out very little as she detailed her time with Thalia and the Enforcer Guards. By the time she finished, she thought Yolie would love to throttle Henry on her behalf.

"I'm telling you all this because of one small detail that may save our asses. Queen Thalia once told me that many of her people suspected aliens existed. Like Earth from centuries ago, just because the government tries to keep them in the dark doesn't mean it actually works."

Yolie stepped close to R'cey and folded her arms. "Just because they suspect aliens are real, that doesn't mean they won't try to kill us on sight."

"Hunter Martinez is right, but it also doesn't mean they will. If we're going to reveal ourselves to the inhabitants of this

planet, I'd like to get off to a good start. That means no killing unless absolutely necessary. Use your stun weapons. Stay in constant contact through the helmet coms, but make sure you suppress external speech control. In fact, I want all of you to switch to internal coms only right now before you forget."

"Want to make sure they can't hear us talking, Commander?"

The question came from their erstwhile navigator, Hunter Gardner. R'cey quailed to think she had such an inexperienced skip tracer among the group. The fact that Gardner questioned something so basic made R'cey wonder about the others.

"That is exactly right. Everyone, remember your training. We have the element of surprise, and I don't want to give that away. Yolie, you and beta squad will make for the outer courtyards and hold position. Use the stealth technology in your suits to blend in. Once I've contacted Kahlan, I'll know more."

"Who's our contact?" Gardner had become downright chatty.

"An Enforcer guard that has the queen's complete trust. Her name is Kahlan Bethell. That's assuming something hasn't happened to her in the last nine hours. Remember to keep your helmets in place unless you relish regular hemotide injections."

R'cey planned to do the same. She remembered how quickly her magic had deserted her when she left the planet with Zolla. The same could be true of her immunity to the atmosphere. The suit would also help her level the odds since she didn't have any archaic weapons handy.

Yolie raised her hand. "One question. What exactly is our mission? We aren't equipped to fight a war."

"No, we're not. Our goals are to ensure the safety of the queen and retake the castle from enemy forces. If we capture the leaders of this little uprising, the coup stops with them. At least that's the hope."

"Do we know who these insurgents are?"

R'cey nodded. "Henry is one of them. I've already described him to you. If anyone sees him, take him into custody with as little bloodshed as possible. I've learned there is one other dissident, but I'm unsure of the accuracy of the intel.

Believe it or not, the one who orchestrated this whole mess is supposed to be an old woman. I find that hard to believe, but keep your guard up. Grab your gear and let's move out."

Four shuttles waited inside the launch bay, but R'cey decided not to spread her forces so thin. Instead, her team occupied one craft, and Yolie piled her people into another. Two vessels were much easier to hide and would lessen the possibility of accidental discovery. R'cey allowed Yolie to lift off first. The *Yun Yu* broke through *Javelin's* force shield and streaked toward the planet. R'cey gave them a good ten count before she followed.

Inside the *Alrescha*, R'cey felt like a sardine in a very small can. These tiny ships weren't designed to hold five hunters in full chaser gear. Carter pressed in on one side while Janssen jostled her from the other. R'cey barely knew their names, and she surely didn't appreciate being this close. Pan and Novak had the sense to squeeze as close to the bulkheads as possible.

Unable to do anything about the situation, R'cey concentrated on following Yolie toward the planet. Right as they were about to enter Trianan atmosphere, R'cey saw the *Yun Yu* shimmer and disappear. Good. Yolie had engaged the cloak. R'cey followed her example and soon felt the turbulence of planetary atmosphere.

"It's getting hot in here," Carter mumbled from R'cey's right.

"We're coming in a little too sharp. I'm adjusting course. That should help."

The turbulence eased off, and the temperature dropped slightly. R'cey checked the targeting computer and engaged the thrusters as they headed for the Western Kingdom. Her heart picked up at the thought of seeing Thalia again, even in these dire circumstances. First, she had to find her.

Moments later, R'cey directed the *Alrescha* to the predetermined landing site. "Hawke to Martinez. Are you in place?"

"Ready to go, Commander. Preparing to exit the shuttle now."

"Understood. Take your position and wait for my signal. Remember that we can't tell the difference between friend and

foe at this point. I'll need to confer with my contact."

R'cey mentally crossed her fingers. The situation could go south quickly without that information. She shut down the thrusters and placed an emergency lockout code over the controls. No one but her own people would have the knowledge to override the system.

"Move out. Stay close and stay frosty."

Soon, R'cey was back on familiar vibrant green terrain. As soon as her feet hit the turf, she felt as though she'd come home. Despite the helmet's ability to filter the natural air, she smelled the lush forest. She shuddered at the strong visceral sensation. She caught sight of the castle spires through the trees and took off in a low crouch.

R'cey kept her left arm raised and her fist closed. The position automatically engaged the suit's built in blast weapon. Strangely, the helmet made her feel as though she had blinders on. Given the fully integrated heads-up display, she knew she was being ridiculous. She chalked it up to her previous time on Triana. R'cey had relied upon her own senses for so long that the suit now caused her to feel encumbered.

"Commander, check your ten o'clock. Someone approaches."

R'cey was unsure who spoke in such a harsh whisper, but she did as requested and turned around to see who approached.

The person raised a sword and stepped closer. "Do not proceed until you identify yourself. I am Captain Kilik Dumont, and I demand to know your purpose for being here."

R'cey rushed to reassure her squad. "Hold fire. It's a friendly."

The person she spoke of surprised her by raising a sword. Captain Kilik Dumont seemed intent on removing her head. R'cey could think of only one way to stop him.

"Computer, disengage helmet lock."

R'cey broke her own rules by removing the headgear but felt she had little choice. Kilik didn't know her and had to be frightened by the all-black technological suits. She jerked the helmet off as he closed to within a few paces.

"Captain Dumont, I'm R'cey Hawke. I'm Princess Thalia's friend. We embarked on the quest to find a cure for her father

together.”

He froze and then slowly lowered the sword. “Deepest apologies, Commander. It is difficult to know a friend from an enemy these days.”

“I understand. I thought Kahlan would meet us. Is she all right?”

“Lieutenant Bethell is well. She leads an assault against the southern perimeter in an effort to drive back invaders.”

“I’m going to bring my team in so they can hear what you have to say. Please, don’t be alarmed. No one will harm you.”

Kilik straightened and pushed his shoulders back. “I fear nothing.”

R’cey wasn’t sure she believed him, but she had to make allowances for male pride. “To do that, I’m going to have to put my helmet back on. If you have trouble distinguishing me from my hunters, just look for my insignia here.” She indicated a triple crest painted in white. The small emblem rested over her left shoulder.

Moments later, her people gathered around, both hunters and a few Enforcer guards. The guards carefully kept their distance, awaiting Captain Dumont’s word. Kilik’s wide-eyed expression signified curiosity but was absent any concern. R’cey had to give him points. She keyed her com system to broadcast to everyone in the immediate vicinity. She would shut down the external communications once they possessed the information they needed.

“First, where is the queen?” R’cey’s heart thudded at the thought of seeing Thalia once again. The possibility that she might have been harmed caused it to thunder even more.

“Yes, I believed that would be of primary concern. My niece has been taken captive by Henry’s forces. She is locked in the castle dungeons. Unfortunately, a small contingent gained access to the lower levels of the castle. Before we knew it, they had moved up from below and forced us from the Great Hall. I still am unsure how they accomplished this without being seen.”

“The catacombs,” R’cey said. “Thalia once told me she used underground tunnels to leave the castle when she wanted to be alone.”

Kilik smiled. “She always was far too clever. I don’t suppose she mentioned the location of these tunnels to you? We could utilize them to work our way back inside.”

“Sorry, it never really came up. Next, how do you tell the two opposing forces apart?”

Kilik indicated a red band that encircled his left biceps. “My guards are instructed to wear the circlet at all times. Henry’s traitors shall not have this garment.”

“Well, it’s a good idea, but it isn’t exactly foolproof. Anything could happen to those armbands. They might get torn off in a skirmish.”

“True. Also, an enemy might simply state they lost their band. However, it was the most obvious mark I could devise. We do have one final safeguard in place, a catch phrase. If unsure of an opponent’s allegiances, Thalia has instructed us to say, ‘if things get dicey.’ The correct response is—”

“I’m pulling the plug.”

Kilik started in surprise. “How could you know that?”

“It’s something I said to Thalia as we crossed the Hotfoot Lava Lands. All right, no one on the other side is going to know that. My other team is waiting to move in from outside the castle walls. What’s the plan?”

“I believe your squads may help us turn the tide and retake the castle. I would like for you to make your way to the dungeons and free Thalia. As for myself, I will take a team to dispatch Henry and his cohorts.”

“Sounds easy, but things rarely are. I’m assuming Emerald is locked inside the falconry?”

“Yes, but she is of little use. Emerald responds only to the queen.”

R’cey shook her head. “Trust me, we have an understanding. I’m going to free her first, and then I’ll head to the dungeons. If you can manage it, I’d like for Kahlan to give me a hand.”

“I will send for her. She will meet you at the falconry.”

R’cey called Carter forward and introduced her to Captain Dumont. “Carter will act as liaison in my place. She’ll coordinate any information between us.”

Carter raised her sun shield so that Kilik could see her face.

R'cey instructed her to stay near him. Then she slipped off to carry out her end of the mission. R'cey waited until she'd crossed into the tree line to engage the suit's cloaking field. Despite Trianan awareness of advanced societies, she didn't know how they'd react to someone disappearing from view.

Thalia groaned and rolled over on the cold stone. Her side ached from where Henry had kicked her repeatedly. She stared up at the dungeon ceiling, wondering how things had so quickly gotten out of hand. Thalia put a hand to her aching head and attempted to sit. The chamber spun dizzily, and she had to wait a moment before she could stand.

"I had begun to think you would sleep throughout the entire battle."

Thalia was startled to find another in the cell with her. She pinned her eyes upon the last individual she'd ever expected to see again. The woman had not changed. Hair the color of burnished gold caught the sunlight from outside the keep's window. Silver armor gleamed, and blue eyes sparkled with humor.

"This is all your fault. You knew full well when you accepted my contract what would happen."

Thalia's head still spun. "Of course I did."

"Answer this question. Are you truly a magician, or are you something more?"

"Ask what you truly wish to know. Am I your warrior, Grace? Did I deliberately mislead you when I accepted our bargain?"

Those were the most important questions. In the last few months, Thalia had come to believe the very person she'd contracted to handle her father had used her as a tool. Now was her chance to discover the truth.

Thalia stared at Grace as she awaited her response. "What is your answer?"

Grace threw her head back and laughed. Rich, tinkling sound echoed throughout the dungeons until Thalia's ears ached. Finally, the cacophony tapered off.

“Look around you. The change you desired has come. Now is your opportunity to turn the kingdom’s fate around, but be warned. Do not call upon me again.”

In a blink, Grace disappeared. The method of her egress wasn’t in itself a confession. Many upon this world possessed strong magic. Thalia wanted to believe this woman simply another among countless who fit that category, but she knew it wasn’t so. No one would ever believe she had personally interacted with Grace, but she did. That was good enough. Later she would pull the memories out and analyze the details from every angle. For now, she had to focus on what came next. That meant escaping and saving as many of her people as possible.

As a child growing up inside the huge castle, Thalia had explored every inch of this place. It wasn’t until Lotar began to change that the dungeons were even used. She knew from experience that she couldn’t hope to jimmy her way out of the iron cells. As for the single window above, she could never fit through the opening. Not only was the exit far too narrow for her body, but iron bars also prevented her from considering the possibility.

Thoughts of her people fighting and dying in her name prompted her to try everything she could. Left with few alternatives, Thalia’s mind turned to magic. Unlike R’cey who possessed the gift of explosive energy, Thalia’s generated only benign healing magic. Today, that simply would not do. The key to utilizing enchantment was in the intent of the wielder. She needed to focus and channel her abilities into something useful.

Typically, Thalia’s gift generated heat to speed up the healing process. She stood in front of the iron door and placed her hands upon the lock. Thalia lowered her head and closed her eyes to concentrate. As the metal grew warmer beneath her hands, she gripped more tightly. Beads of perspiration erupted from her cheeks and brow. She poured all of her efforts into forcing the iron to heat and hopefully begin to melt.

“Whatchadoin’?”

Thalia started at the familiar voice and raised her eyes in shock. “R’cey, how did you get here?”

R’cey stood outside the cell with Kahlan at her side. She

wore one of her black skin suits, which made her look so enticing. She had the faceplate open on her helmet. Thalia would have recognized her eyes anywhere. She also noticed how Emerald's color blended with the suit as she rested on R'cey's shoulder. Thalia assumed she hadn't heard their approach because she was too focused on weakening the lock.

"You'll burn your hands off before you melt through that lock. Move back and we'll leave it to an expert."

R'cey hadn't answered the question, but she didn't need to. She had known R'cey would come as soon as she received word of Thalia's situation. Thalia moved back from the lock as requested. Emerald took her place, one claw wrapped around an iron bar and one still braced upon R'cey's forearm. The vibria inhaled and then blew out an intense burst of fire. Thalia took another involuntary step backward to avoid the inferno. The lock quickly reddened from the blast. It popped free seconds later.

After R'cey kicked the cell door open, Thalia flew into her embrace. With Emerald so close on one side and R'cey's warmth encompassing her, Thalia's courage and determination grew.

After a long, sweet moment, Thalia drew back and gave Kahlan her attention. "Lieutenant, my gratitude for your assistance in freeing me."

Kahlan thumped a hand over her chest in a Trianan salute. "With the help of R'cey's hunters, we have the usurpers on the run. Captain Dumont has forced the last of them into the Great Hall. We know this through R'cey's talking device."

"She means our communications system," R'cey clarified. "If you don't want to miss the action, I suggest we get a move on."

"Kahlan, I require a weapon."

Kahlan immediately sheathed her sword before removing a bow and quiver of arrows from her where she had slipped them over her shoulder. "I suspected as much. Once we freed Emerald from the falconry, we made a brief stop at the armory."

Thalia much preferred the bow and arrow to a sword. She could do more damage from a distance than up close. Thalia nocked an arrow to the string and led the way from the

dungeons. High, stone steps carried them upward.

As they traveled, R'cey began demanding information. "So, what started this little uprising anyway? I know Henry's an ass, but how does he manage to pull off something like this?"

"As in any hierarchy, there are always a few dissenters. Henry took advantage of that. He told the most vocal of my less loyal guards of the alien presence on Triana. He spoke of you and how we worked together in such close association to find a cure for my father."

Thalia stopped where the stairwell turned sharply to the left. She peeked around the corner to insure they were alone before she continued upward. They had to travel single file due to the narrow passageway.

"Of course, I sought to reassure my people that beings from other planets were not necessarily dangerous to our kingdom. I brought them together and told them of our experiences and how we worked together toward a common goal."

"I gather that didn't go over so well."

"By and large, it did. The majority of Honui, and I believe the surrounding areas, were pleased to have friends among other planets. Others, however, believed that the crown had deceived them and could no longer be trusted."

"Sounds like an excuse to overthrow the government."

"Where there is dissatisfaction, it takes but a spark to stoke the fire of insurrection. We are approaching the kitchens. Watch yourself. Enemies may lurk nearby."

The passageway to the dungeons came out adjacent to the main kitchens. Thalia didn't see anyone as she glanced quickly about the open space, but she heard the nearby clash of battle. She sprinted toward the fracas, preparing her bow as she did. As soon as Thalia exited the living space and entered the open inner ward, she realized the battle did not go well.

Black skin suits mingled with the royal scarlet bands worn by Enforcer guards. Thalia had to look closely to note the armbands Kilik had ordered for their forces. Her people, however, did not seem to have the same trouble she did distinguishing friend from foe. The clang of steel rang out and echoed throughout the cavernous chamber. Guards fought high up on the narrow stairwells. Shouts of pain as well as victory

sounded from all around. Then Thalia spotted the one responsible for this entire horrifying affair.

“Hannah, stop!”

Her nursemaid of old either did not hear her command or chose not to heed her call. Hannah’s graying single braid of hair swung about as she drew back her hand to hurl a spell. Until all of this occurred, Hannah had concealed her monstrous abilities. The evil wave caught one of Thalia’s guards in the back and threw the man into the wall. He struck the stone so hard that Thalia could hear the impact over the clamor of the assault. Thalia understood war, even if she did not condone such action, but what she could not accept was attacking an opponent from behind. She found no honor in such behavior.

Incensed, Thalia darted across the courtyard in pursuit of her one-time friend. Thalia didn’t notice an attacking soldier until a stranger in a black suit suddenly rushed into her field of vision. She caught the image of swarthy skin and black eyes through the open visor. Then the off-worlder dropped to one knee and fired a ruby bolt of light from her left hand. The beam caught the previously unseen guard at mid-thigh. The soldier went down with a shriek of agony, and Thalia continued unimpeded.

Though intent on her quarry, Thalia did acknowledge that someone had apparently given orders not to kill unless necessary. She had an idea who that individual probably was and would thank R’cey later. At the moment, she had to stop this needless bloodshed.

Hannah turned her head, and her eyes met Thalia’s. She had the audacity to laugh and wave to Thalia as though sharing a cosmic joke. Then Hannah snapped her fingers, and the rug upon which she stood rose into the air. Hannah sailed high above the fracas, but Thalia wasn’t quite ready to let her go. She drew back her arrow and prepared to fire.

“Highness, look out!” Kahlan warned.

Thalia spun around and dodged into a roll at the sight of an oncoming sword. The blade’s swing displaced the air precisely where she’d stood moments ago. Henry’s face flushed red, but he hadn’t time for a repeated attack. Kahlan was on him before he could regroup. From her position on one knee, Thalia

witnessed the exact moment that Kahlan's sword slid through his mid-section.

Kahlan grabbed Henry by the collar and jerked him close. Confusion colored his expression, clearing slowly to knowledge of the inevitable. "For Commander Bergen."

Kahlan shoved Henry from her, and he dropped to the floor. Henry did not move again, though his eyes remained open. Thalia stared into the lifeless orbs for a split second before jumping out of the way of two embattled guards. Though instrumental in this uprising, Henry was only a pawn. There was one other that Thalia had to stop. She searched around, but Hannah had disappeared.

An invisible maelstrom struck Thalia from behind. The flurry knocked her feet from under her and threw her across the chamber. Thalia attempted to control her landing, twisting her body so that she landed upright.

Thalia twirled about to find her quarry closing the distance. "You are a coward, Hannah. You should attack me while I'm looking, witch."

Hannah grinned, and Thalia noticed signs of madness for the first time. How could she not have seen this? It was just like with Lotar all over again. She should have realized it would take insanity to instigate such an uprising and not consider the consequences in blood spilled.

"If you insist. Instead of slamming you against a wall, maybe I'll crush you like a bug."

Hannah glanced overhead, and Thalia followed her line of sight. Rough boulders made up the ceiling in the inner ward. Thalia's eyes fell instinctively upon one that stood out more sharply from the others. She estimated that it probably weighed over a ton. Hannah waved her hand, and the stone moved slightly before it suddenly toppled. Again, Thalia jumped out of the way. The boulder hit the ground with a mighty bang. Shrapnel flew away, and sharp bits of stone embedded in Thalia's arm and side. The entire structure shook from the impact, and several people fell to their knees.

Hannah staggered for a few seconds before falling to the floor. Before she could recover, Kilik vaulted down from high on the catwalk. He landed between them, prepared to run

Hannah through with his sword.

“No, don’t kill her!” Thalia didn’t want Kilik to turn Hannah into a martyr for her cause.

Kilik hesitated. In that instant, Hannah reacted before he could. She grappled for a spear that had fallen nearby. Thalia felt an impending sense of doom as Hannah grasped the halberd and thrust it toward her uncle. Unexpectedly, another black suit dodged between Kilik and his demise. The spear tip struck, and the hunter dropped. They did not move again.

Thalia had already started toward the encounter at a dead run. She had almost reached Hannah before the spear struck home. As the hunter fell, Thalia swung her bow. Created from the hardest wood known, the bow held strong as Thalia struck Hannah across the face.

“Guards, seize her! Immobilize her hands.”

Kilik, Kahlan, and a hunter grabbed Hannah and jerked her to her feet. Hannah hesitated for a moment before full consciousness returned. Kilik twisted Hannah’s hands up behind her and utilized a pair of manacles to pin them in place. All around, the battle still raged, though Thalia believed the fury had lessened in only a few seconds.

Since her people had Hannah under control, Thalia knelt to assist the fallen hunter. She helped the black suit turn over and suddenly found herself staring into familiar lavender on brown eyes.

“R’cey?”

“It’s okay. It’s only a scratch.”

Thalia noticed a slight tear in the skin suit, but the sword had failed to penetrate. She quickly concluded that R’cey must have simply been thrown off balance. Thalia helped R’cey to stand before turning back toward her captive.

“Cease this struggle, Hannah. Your son has fallen, and you are ensnared. Your rebellion has come to naught.”

Thalia noticed movement from the side as R’cey raised a hand to the controls on her left wrist. She wondered at the motion but focused instead upon Hannah’s response.

“Why should I stop this insurrection? You aren’t fit to rule this kingdom. Kilik should have the crown and my family after him. If the people weren’t so laughably dull, they would have

insisted upon it decades ago. Kilik was a fool to refuse the crown.”

“Why your family? What gives you the right to make a play for the throne?” R’cey asked the questions on Thalia’s tongue.

“You stupid off-worlder. Henry is Kilik’s son.”

“Henry is dead,” Thalia said. “You don’t seem very broken up about that.”

“Henry was a tool. Nothing more. First, Lotar had to go. By casting the dark curse upon him decades ago, I ensured his slow demise while ensuring no one would suspect me. Once we had taken control of Honui, both Henry and Kilik would have suffered grievous accidents. I would be queen of the Western Kingdom. You do not deserve to wear the crown.”

Thalia felt sick at all the lives lost to such avarice. “By the time you are released from the dungeons, you will be too old to worry about such things. Take her away.”

The last words resonated throughout the chamber, and Thalia realized what R’cey had done. She had used the suit’s capabilities to broadcast Hannah’s confession. Now the people truly knew of her motivations. Stunned silence greeted the pronouncement. Seconds later, steel weapons bounced off stone as the marauders surrendered without further resistance. A cheer echoed throughout the inner ward as the battle ended.

Camouflaged by the din, Thalia took control. “Captain Dumont, have a wizard use a binding spell on Hannah. Ensure full removal of her magic.”

Kilik saluted. He and another guard escorted Hannah from the hall. He appeared embarrassed by Hannah’s revelation, but now wasn’t the time to discuss it.

“Guards,” Thalia ordered, “take the insurrectionists into custody. Kahlan, take a contingent and ensure the people are freed from their incarceration. You may be required to alleviate Hannah’s magic if she has secured them by such means.”

“I’ll find a seer to assist us.”

Lieutenant Perry materialized at Thalia’s side. He bore a still bleeding cut upon one cheek but appeared otherwise unharmed. He gripped the hilt of a gore-covered sword. Perry dropped to one knee and saluted Thalia. “What is your command, my queen?”

“Tend to the wounded. Then gather the advisors in the meeting hall. We have taken the kingdom back this day and have much to rejoice.” Thalia raised her voice so that all could hear. “Tonight we gather in gratitude with new friends and feast in celebration.”

Another hunter approached them, and Thalia noticed the woman limped. R’cey made introductions.

“Queen Thalia Dumont, this is my second in command, Commander Yolie Martinez. She led one of the squads that helped retake the kingdom. If you’ll pardon me for a moment, I need to confer with her.”

“As you wish, Commander Hawke, but after that I insist on speaking with you in private.” Thalia offered Yolie a bow of thanks, but her thoughts had already turned to other considerations.

Chapter Twenty-Three

“Where are we going?”

Thalia’s heart beat too rapidly for her to respond to R’cey’s question. Her blood sang, and all her senses were heightened as she practically dragged R’cey into her private chambers. There was still much to do before tonight’s festivities, but Thalia couldn’t think about that right now. She shoved open her door and drew R’cey inside. Before R’cey could say anything else, Thalia pressed her against the wall and kissed her passionately.

Belatedly, Thalia remembered to kick the door closed. R’cey offered little resistance. Her breathing increased noticeably as she kissed Thalia back. Thalia felt hands at her waist and raised her arms before they encountered resistance. She’d forgotten about the bow.

Thalia threw the weapon aside and then stripped her shift over her head. R’cey took advantage of the opportunity to press the catch at her throat. The skin suit lost cohesion and drooped. R’cey tore it away, giving Thalia a view of perfect honey-colored breasts. Her mouth watered at the sight. Thalia took R’cey’s hand again and encouraged her to follow.

A large canopied bed stood in the center of the room. It was covered with heavy goose down quilts, soft sheets, and feather pillows. Candles had already been lit, and the door to the balcony was thrown open. The entryway was screened on both sides by ivy growing into the castle walls, framing a view of the countryside and the sun overhead.

Thalia worried that she was demanding more than R’cey could give, but her heart demanded that she try. They were here, together and alone. Nothing stood between them, not her throne or their fears. Only the two of them existed in this moment—two women who wanted nothing more than to be together in every way possible.

Sunlight touched R’cey’s face, and passion-filled eyes arrested Thalia’s attention. For a moment she froze, unsure and frightened by the magnitude of the moment. R’cey moved first,

assuring Thalia that she wanted this just as badly. She reached up to unbuckle Thalia's sword belt. When she did, Thalia could no longer hold back. The balance of their clothing dropped to the stone floor.

When R'cey leaned toward her, Thalia's eyes fluttered closed in anticipation. A butterfly touch ghosted against her lips; moist heat was barely felt and sweet breath hardly tasted before R'cey slipped away. Thalia thought to pursue, but before she could, the gossamer caress returned against the corner of her mouth—the hollow where neck met shoulder. Thalia's eyes refused to open. She felt lost in overwhelming sensations of heat and hunger and heart.

When R'cey's lips finally returned, Thalia moaned softly. Her lips parted and captured the invitation offered. Her gentle kiss completed Thalia—soothing an emptiness she hadn't even known existed. She took time to savor and enjoy the strength of their connection, exploring slowly and lovingly. The need to see finally asserted itself, and Thalia leaned away to look at R'cey.

Her eyes were lasers of desire in the sunlit room. Wordlessly, unexpectedly, R'cey leaned down and swept Thalia into her arms. Thalia laughed in delight as her arms wound around strong shoulders. R'cey smiled back at her before striding confidently toward the bed.

R'cey carefully placed Thalia on her feet beside the bed. Both hands reached for her, but it was only R'cey's fingertips that actually made contact. Starting just above Thalia's elbows, R'cey traced the line of her arms to her shoulders and finally to the soft skin of Thalia's throat. The caress felt as soft as a whisper, as though Thalia was made of fine porcelain that would shatter with too strong a touch. Though Thalia knew she would need more before it was over, R'cey's gentleness made her feel cherished.

R'cey's hands moved downward, slowly and with deliberate intent. Thalia had begun to think R'cey would touch her like this all night. Just when she thought so, R'cey surprised her yet again. In one fell swoop her hands dropped, and she ripped Thalia's fly apart. The trousers collapsed into a puddle at Thalia's feet. R'cey's eyes were a flame against her skin.

Thalia watched as R'cey's gaze trailed down her body, lingering over hills and valleys, slowly taking in every detail until reaching the floor. Then the burning gaze started upward again. The appreciation in her eyes was clear.

"Do you appreciate that which you see?"

"I love what I see."

R'cey's voice resonated, deep and husky, barely recognizable as belonging to Thalia's stoic hunter. Suddenly Thalia's need grew too strong to contain. She had to see R'cey. Her hands fumbled for the top of R'cey's suit, but the fever of passion dulled her coordination.

"Allow me."

When R'cey grasped the top of the suit and shoved it downward in one fell swoop, Thalia gasped. In a flash, she was naked. Thalia could only stare in wonder at the vision. Seconds later, their lips met again, just as softly but no less hungry. Thalia's hands touched R'cey's hips, fingers sliding against soft, supple flesh.

The mattress dipped slightly beneath their combined weight. The feel of R'cey in Thalia's arms was wondrous. Her skin was soft and warm, like velvet encasing steel. Loving R'cey again after so long felt so much more intense than Thalia remembered. Her touch burned, her kisses drove Thalia wild, and reason deserted her entirely as their cries mingled.

Sweat-slick flesh pressed and moved away, hands grasped eagerly and hot lips and tongues tasted freely. Thalia gave R'cey everything, holding nothing back and desperate in the giving. In return, R'cey took her to new heights, tearing down barriers long held and previously thought impenetrable.

When R'cey cried out her pleasure, Thalia wept in her arms from the beauty of it. Afterward, they held each other until their hearts finally began to slow. No words seemed necessary as Thalia listened to R'cey's heartbeat. Voices from below drifted through open balcony doors, and Thalia thought nothing could make her happier than she was at that moment.

"So what now?"

Thalia could have sworn she heard exhaustion in R'cey's question. She lifted her head to check R'cey's expression. She discovered contentment but also a touch of resignation.

“What do you mean, my love?”

Fingers toyed with her hair before R’cey planted a kiss upon her chin. “I’d love to stay in bed with you like this all night, but don’t you have advisors waiting for you?”

“Indeed. Part of me wishes you had not reminded me.”

Thalia sat up and shifted to the edge of the mattress. She gazed down at R’cey, wondering how long she could put off her royal council. A quick look out the window told her she had already done so far longer than she should have.

“Sorry about that.”

Thalia scowled at R’cey in mock consternation. “I believe you are a poor liar, Commander R’cey Hawke. Unfortunately, I must go.”

“Can you tell me what’s going to happen next? Should I pull my people back to our ships?”

“No, please do not do that. R’cey, I did not bring you here for a quick interlude before asking you to leave.” R’cey’s body relaxed, and Thalia realized that was exactly what she’d expected. “Your hunters are the reason my kingdom is once again safe. Considering all that has happened, I would be honored if you would join us this evening.”

“I thought that was what you meant when you announced the celebration, but I don’t like taking anything for granted. We’d be honored to join you.”

Thalia patted R’cey on the stomach. “It is decided then. I must meet with the advisors and then contact your superior.”

“Lusky? Whatever for?”

“I wish to present him with a request. No, do not ask. I cannot tell you until I discuss it with him first.” R’cey’s overt pouting reminded Thalia of a petulant child, but she would not give in. This was far too important.

“I hate politics, and I don’t much care for Lusky.”

“I too dislike political machinations, but they are sometimes necessary. I will send Kahlan along later with a change of attire fit for the ceremony.”

“Won’t I see you again before then?”

Thalia gently stroked R’cey’s cheek. She struggled with the urge to climb back into bed. “Nothing would please me more, but I cannot make that promise. There is much to do. Once I

leave here, I will send someone to extend lodgings to your people for the night. Would you mind seeing to the details?"

"Of course, your majesty. Consider it done."

"You are quite saucy when bedded, Commander."

Thalia pinched R'cey's cheek and reached for her clothing. She dressed quickly and then reached for a pitcher of water that rested on a nearby table. Thalia carefully rinsed the smell of sex from her face and hands as R'cey pulled on her skin suit. Both dressed, they headed for the door.

"Hey, I was wondering. Are you still planning to send a dragon egg to Feyoria? Now that all of this is over, you could pretend that you forgot all about it."

"I could, but where would be the honor in that? We struck the agreement fairly. I must abide by it."

R'cey frowned, and Thalia recognized the gesture as one adopted when she was deep in thought. "I just hope she doesn't come after you with those things once she's amassed an army of them."

"As do I. One final detail, R'cey. Please ensure that Commander Martinez is situated in the chambers adjacent to yours."

R'cey squinted her eyes in a playfully suspicious manner. "Any particular reason for that, Queenie?"

"Queenie? How atrocious. As for your question, I refuse to answer at this present time."

R'cey rewarded Thalia with a pinch on her butt.

R'cey adored the high gilded collar. The cloak covered a royal purple blouse and white silk trousers. Polished black boots hugged her calves and rose up to just below the knee. Her trousers tucked into the boots, and she thought the style impressive. Kahlan had insisted on jewelry to accompany her ensemble. R'cey glanced down at a diamond and ruby encrusted ring. She also wore a heavy gold bracelet.

"Are you sure all this is necessary? I'm not used to clothes like this."

"Oh, I'm sure," Kahlan said with a huge smile. "The people

will adore you. We must go. The ceremony will begin shortly.”

R’cey was more concerned with one particular woman’s response to her appearance. She swallowed hard. “Why do we have to do this in public? Queen Thalia could just thank the hunters in private and let that be the end of it. Did she make everyone else dress up like this?”

“Thalia does not wish to thank the hunters. This ceremony is for you. You led the forces that rescued the kingdom. The glory falls to you.”

R’cey hadn’t seen much of Thalia since they defeated the rival guards the previous day. She seemed awfully secretive about something. All R’cey knew for sure was that Thalia was quite delighted with her surprise and that she had gathered the entire kingdom for it.

“I assumed she just wanted a royal ball or something. You know, an excuse to have a party and to let the people get to know us better.”

“Not exactly. There will be dancing but so much more. Now come. We must not keep the queen waiting.”

R’cey strapped a thick black belt around her waist. She took the silver sword Kahlan passed her and slipped it through the frog. The sword came to the center of R’cey’s calf, completing the outfit. For some reason, this final act increased her nervousness tenfold.

“Why does everything look so fancy? I feel like I’m in a fairy tale.”

Kahlan grabbed R’cey by the arm and tugged her toward the door. She kept her hold on R’cey as they headed down the stairs toward the Grand Ballroom. Halfway down, Kahlan asked a question that explained everything.

“What is an accolade ceremony without the knight? Pray you are not rendered unconscious.”

R’cey wanted to run back to her room. The thought of being the center of such a ceremony made her want to bolt, especially when she spotted Yolie strolling around the courtyard below. The hunter wore a garment similar to her own. Discounting Kahlan’s statement, which could be a snow job, R’cey decided all her people were dressed in the Trianan style. Chances were that Thalia wanted her subjects to feel more comfortable around

the off-worlders. The best way to do that was to make them fit in and mingle.

In deference to the atmospheric effects on the hunters, Yolie wore a transparent breathing apparatus. Little more than a thin mask, the breather covered only her face. R'cey approved of the precaution. It allowed the locals to see their visitors while providing the hunters with necessary protection. R'cey wore no such apparatus.

Kahlan released her at the foot of the stairs and moved away to speak with a guard who R'cey didn't know. R'cey took advantage of the opportunity to close in on Yolie. At the moment, Yolie had an eye on a very young looking Trianan. From the other woman's response, the attraction seemed mutual.

"No fraternizing with the locals, Commander."

Yolie cocked an eyebrow. "You're one to talk. Now I know why you bolted out of the locker room."

"Whatever could you mean?"

"Uh huh."

"Nice threads, by the way. Are all of our people dressed like this?" R'cey didn't really have to ask the question. She just wanted reassurance that she wasn't being paranoid.

Yolie frowned slightly before taking a sip from her crystal goblet. "Thanks, but this damned sword is slapping me in the shin. In answer to your question, no. For some reason, everyone else is wearing skin suits. Seems no one thought to deliver clothing to them. I did ask the hunters to forego their helmets and wear the breathers for this little shindig."

"Good idea."

R'cey remembered something Thalia had once said about not appearing as an invading army while asking favors. The same applied when greeting inhabitants from another world. A tray-bearing waiter strolled by, and R'cey reached for a beverage. She didn't know what she'd find in the goblet but hoped for something stout and bitter. R'cey winced at the sweet wine but swallowed it anyway. A strong, slow burn rewarded her.

The sound of a trumpet prevented R'cey from draining her glass. Suddenly, Kahlan reappeared at her side and lifted the

goblet from her grasp. She offered only a grin as an explanation.

“Hey, I’m not done with that.”

“You are now.”

Kahlan also relieved Yolie of her drink. R’cey’s suspicious nature reasserted itself with a vengeance. Her fingers had that cold, numb sensation she usually got when she sensed an imminent assault. Of course, R’cey knew any kind of attack wasn’t likely, given the setting and their recent victory. Still, she couldn’t help feeling something was up. At that moment, she spotted High Marshal Lusky entering the courtyard from the conference hall.

“What in the name of Satan’s balls is he doing here?”

Yolie shrugged. “You’ve got me. More than that, why are there two Amalgam senators with him?”

R’cey recognized Valderan and Zolla. Just the sight of Zolla made her proverbial hackles rise. Zolla’s brother had insinuated the senator was a criminal, but R’cey had no proof. Even a thorough investigation upon her return to Celetron failed to uncover any wrongdoing. Still, she couldn’t get over a sense of guilt by association. She tried to put that out of her mind and focus on the fact that three high-ranking Amalgam officials had made an appearance.

Before R’cey could begin to fathom what was going on, Captain Dumont entered the room. Kilik wore the royal purple associated with the Western Kingdom. For the first time since meeting him, he also wore a thin silver crown. R’cey had to remind herself that even though he refused to be king, Kilik remained a prince.

Following Captain Dumont, five Trianans marched into the room. From their manner of dress as well as their bearing, R’cey figured these to be Thalia’s advisors. Four of them, a woman and three men, filed off almost immediately. Only then did R’cey notice the occupants had split the chamber right down the middle. Half stood on one side, and half had moved over to the other, leaving a long walkway up the center. The advisors took up position near the front of the room. They stopped in front of four small but ornate chairs. The final individual, a tall and somewhat imposing older woman, took up

center stage in front of the courtyard.

R'cey noticed the woman stood to the far side of a raised platform. Since R'cey hadn't noticed the dais during the earlier skirmish, she deduced someone had brought it in specifically for now. Two heavy brocade pillows rested on the floor in front of the single step leading up to the platform. Tapestries lined both sides of the huge chamber, and R'cey spotted Emerald resting along the top of one. The dragonlet had chosen a spot very near the front of the hall, but no one paid her much attention. R'cey thought it sweet how Emerald refused to be left out of anything that had to do with Thalia.

"That's Saraphax," Kahlan whispered in her ear. "She is the Seer of the Silver Valley. It is she that stated Queen Thalia would find you to assist in our quest."

"So she's the one to blame. Nice to know. Thanks."

"She is also the Grand Marshal in all things ceremonial."

Saraphax spoke, preventing R'cey from responding to Kahlan's last remark. "Monarch of the Western Kingdom, ruler of Honui and defender of the crown, Queen Thalia Dumont."

The acoustics in the stone room caused the words to echo throughout. As one, all in attendance dropped to one knee. R'cey, Yolie, and the other hunters responded slowly but copied the others. While some bowed their heads in respect, R'cey craned her neck to get a look at Thalia. The queen didn't disappoint.

Thalia stepped into the room, and R'cey forgot about everyone else. She felt breathless when she saw Thalia. Jewels encrusted the royal cloak, catching and reflecting the lighting like multiple prisms. Soft white fur caressed Thalia's neck before giving way to the purple that fell like a waterfall to the floor, sweeping behind her as she walked. Thalia wore the same type of white silk trousers as R'cey. She also carried a sword. Unlike R'cey, Thalia wore a pair of simple white gloves and a midnight blue, long-sleeved shirt. Her heavy gold crown stood at least ten inches in height, dwarfing Kilik's simple diadem.

Jewels also covered the crown. Small rubies and emeralds encircled the head covering and framed a single diamond the size of R'cey's fist. A silver sword hung at Thalia's side but failed to hinder her movements. Thalia stepped into the center

of the platform without hesitation.

“My friends and loyal subjects, please rise.” Thalia hesitated a moment to allow everyone to follow her command. “We are here today in celebration of renewed peace in our kingdom. I am pleased to announce that many of our countrymen, who once sought to displace us, have renewed their oaths of fealty to the crown. Sadly, there were some who chose voluntary exile as an alternative.”

R’cey wasn’t surprised. There were also those who would disapprove and create strife. Better to let them go than to hang around and become a cancer. Thalia’s show of strength impressed her.

“Tonight, we focus on the good fortune that has turned the tide of insurrection. Brave people from another planet risked their own lives to offer us assistance. Join with me as we recognize two of those brave souls. Commander R’cey Hawke and Commander Yolie Martinez, please come forward.”

R’cey swallowed hard. She and Yolie shared a look filled with confusion and trepidation. Someone shoved R’cey on the back, and she stumbled forward into the long clearing leading up to the dais. She stared hard at Yolie until she joined her. Together, they proceeded toward the queen. Despite all the hardships encountered during her career as a skip tracer, this minor action seemed the most difficult thing R’cey had ever done.

A kaleidoscope of butterflies took up residence in her stomach until she looked up and met Thalia’s eyes. Once their gazes locked, R’cey focused solely upon her love. She soaked up Thalia’s appearance and the pride she found in her eyes. She took comfort from her remembered touch and allowed her love to give her strength. The butterflies disappeared as she halted a foot away.

“Please kneel.”

R’cey felt the weight of Saraphax’s words as an order. She knelt without hesitation upon the provided pillow, wondering if the woman had used magic upon her. A quick glance to her right told her Yolie felt something as well. R’cey intended to maintain Thalia’s gaze throughout this rite but found herself powerless to do so. She bowed her head and fixed her gaze upon the wooden floor.

Thalia stepped in front of R'cey, half a foot away. When she drew her sword, R'cey heard the steel scrape against the frog. For an insane moment, she wondered if Thalia meant to decapitate her.

The queen took over for Saraphax, speaking to the crowd. "Your bravery is an example to us all—monarch, citizen, warrior, and servant. We are proud to call you friend. We are proud to make you family. Commander R'cey Hawke, by the right of the monarch, by the right of the council, I dub thee Knight of Honui."

The flat of Thalia's sword struck R'cey upon the right shoulder. Judging by the strength of the blow, Thalia intended it to be one R'cey never forgot. The blade left her shoulder, and a second later, R'cey felt the weight of another slap to her left shoulder. She barely stopped herself from flinching. Beside her, she heard Yolie chuckle. Then Thalia stepped over to Yolie, and R'cey found herself stifling a snicker.

Thalia repeated the words and struck Yolie in a similar manner. R'cey had the satisfaction of seeing Yolie flinch. Once finished, Thalia stepped back, and Saraphax bid them to rise. R'cey stood with Yolie beside her. Thalia surprised them by offering each a hand. She pulled gently, and R'cey found herself standing on the platform. Thalia released hands and stepped toward Yolie. Apparently, this ceremony wasn't quite over.

R'cey frowned a bit as Thalia cupped Yolie's face between her hands. Thalia stepped in and kissed Yolie on each cheek before releasing her. Then Thalia stepped to R'cey. This close, she soaked up Thalia's scent and the warmth of her hands upon her cheeks. Thalia eliminated the slight distance and kissed R'cey briefly upon each cheek. R'cey expected it to end there, but Thalia surprised her again by pressing their lips together.

R'cey heard a slight collective gasp behind her but was too amazed to react. By the time her brain started working again, the brief caress had ended. Thalia released her and addressed her subjects.

"I ask all of you now to join us in the Grand Ballroom."

Chapter Twenty-Four

Thalia followed the simple dance steps, caught up in R'cey's loving gaze. She had taken a massive risk by kissing R'cey in front of her subjects but couldn't regret her impetuous actions. At the moment, R'cey probably didn't fully understand the implications, but all of that would soon change. Thalia wondered how to broach the topic without sounding too abrupt.

"Oh, I meant to tell you something," R'cey said, effectively side tracking Thalia's thought process. "While I was back on Celetron, I did some research on Triana."

"And what did you find, my love?" Thalia was more interested in hearing R'cey's voice than the actual answer. She would never tire of hearing R'cey speak in her rough, gravelly tones.

"That we're related."

"You mean like in the way Henry and I were related?" The news was most distressing. Thalia couldn't imagine having a physical relationship with a cousin, even a distant one. To her relief, R'cey laughed.

"No, not like that. I mean that eons ago, when Earthlings moved into the sector, not everyone was happy with technological advancement. Some of them preferred a simpler life. Those people left Celetron, searching for a planet where they could live in harmony with nature."

"Triana?"

"Yes, so you see, that explains why all of this seems so familiar to me. Triana is like an old-Earth fairy tale. The best part is that I get to be the knight in shining armor, literally, and you are the damsel in distress."

"I am hardly in distress, and may I remind you that I am your queen?" Thalia bit off her squeal of delight as R'cey squeezed her close.

R'cey laughed, and Thalia joined her, relieved at avoiding an awkward situation. Now seemed the perfect time for Thalia to speak her mind. She stepped away slightly and grasped R'cey's hand. "Come with me."

R'cey looked confused but followed readily enough. Thalia led her past the partygoers and out onto a high, narrow balcony. A couple had already taken up residence but vacated quickly upon spying Honui's monarch.

"By the way, before we headed here from Celetron, Lusky said something about you offering access to silver mines on the Southern Isles. Did I miss something while we were there?"

Thalia shook her head. "You missed nothing. It wasn't until after our return that Maya sent word of discovery. Apparently, she dispatched a contingent of warriors to scout the isles after we left with Zolla. I believe she is interested in relocating her people to those shores."

"It'll be a long time before anyone can live there. Zolla really did a number on the place."

"True, yet Maya remains hopeful. In any case, she felt honor bound to report her findings. Since you and I removed Zolla and the damaging effects of his weather device, Maya pledged the silver to the Western Kingdom."

"Good thing for you. I can't imagine Lusky getting involved in something without making a profit. If you hadn't offered him an incentive, he probably would have left Triana to Hannah's mercy."

R'cey allowed the subject to drop, and Thalia refocused on setting the stage for what came next. The sight of both moons riding high overhead drew her toward the edge. She leaned one arm upon the ledge and turned to face R'cey.

"Can you feel it? The magic between us? I wish this night would never end."

Thalia hoped to convey her feelings with gentle words. She slipped a hand around R'cey's neck and tugged slightly, hoping to eradicate the slight distance between them. To her surprise, tears flooded R'cey's eyes.

"Why do I get the feeling our time is coming to an end?"

The words tore at Thalia's heart. "How could you say such a thing?"

R'cey sniffled and looked away. She blinked back her tears. "Maybe because I know how Trianan law works. You kissed me in front of your people, and I appreciate the gesture, but I know your kingdom comes first. I love you, Thalia, but the

truth is that I can't keep saying goodbye to you. It hurts too much."

A single tear escaped R'cey's iron control. It slipped down her cheek, and Thalia caught it on her fingertip. "My darling, I did not bring you here to bid farewell. In fact, I believe I have some news that will gladden your heart."

"What is it?"

"I have been speaking with your High Marshal. The Lusky has agreed to create an ambassadorial posting here on Triana, specifically in the capitol city of Honui."

"Just Lusky, not *the* Lusky." R'cey shook her head slightly as though to clear her thinking. "I take it you want me to fill this position. As great as that sounds, I don't know anything but being a hunter. Also, there's still the matter of your laws. Thalia, I can't stay here...seeing you every day but not being able to touch you or tell you how I feel. It would be like suffering the tortures of the damned."

R'cey's voice broke, and Thalia acted on instinct. She rushed forward and pulled R'cey into her arms. Thalia wanted only to comfort R'cey, to promise her anything that would ease the hurt. In this case, she could offer solace.

"You do not understand. R'cey, you are now a knight of the realm and no longer considered a commoner or an outsider."

R'cey pulled away, her attention fully focused on Thalia. "That's why you had the ceremony?"

"In truth, the idea belongs to Saraphax. The prophet saw my distress and understood my plight. She suggested the liturgy to remedy our dilemma."

"What...exactly...does that mean?"

Thalia heard the desperation in R'cey's voice, the hope she dared not voice. "A knight is considered on par with royalty. There would be no need for distance between us or any secrecy."

"We can be together?"

R'cey pulled Thalia back into her embrace and held her tightly. Her heart pounded under Thalia's ear, and her body trembled in reaction. Joy surged through Thalia from breaking such wonderful news, but she wasn't finished.

"There is more."

“Am I going to like this?”

Thalia smiled. “I believe so. Now that my people know about yours, the posting would allow you the use of the gadgets of which you are so fond.”

“Now that is good news. I adore you, but I don’t know if I could take bathing in the creek every day.”

“Tease, you are very aware that we possess indoor plumbing.”

R’cey silenced Thalia with a kiss. The caress quickly grew out of hand, the passion rising swift and strong. Thalia reveled in the sensations as well as the right to kiss this woman openly on her own world. When they parted moments later, Thalia decided the time was right.

“R’cey, this posting is yours by right of champion of the realm; however, I have one final query. This one is of a personal nature.”

“You look so serious. What is it?” Trepidation had seeped back into R’cey’s voice.

Thalia mourned the life’s experiences that had given her love such bleak expectations. Regardless of what good happened around her, R’cey still seemed to always expect the unthinkable to reappear. Thalia desired to spend the balance of existence changing that outlook. To that end, Thalia grasped R’cey’s hand and dropped to one knee. The look of astonishment on R’cey’s face made that simple gesture priceless.

“I would have you not only as my Ambassador but my spouse as well. Will you have me, R’cey?”

“You...” R’cey swallowed and cleared her throat. “You’re asking me to marry you?”

Thalia could only nod. Her heart felt as though it skipped a beat as she awaited R’cey’s response.

“Yes. On any world, magical or technological. Yes.”

Thalia rewarded her response by drawing R’cey into her arms and kissing her softly.

About the Author

Born in California but raised in Texas, Susan joined the United States Marine Corps straight out of High School. After ten years and a lot of travel, she left the military and became a San Diego Deputy Sheriff. Retired from an on the job injury, Susan returned to Texas and began writing Star Trek Voyager fan fiction in 2002, but her imagination insisted on creating scenarios outside that genre. Today she still resides in North Texas with her two dogs and the five stray cats that adopted her.

Her previous works, all seventy-two stories, can be found on her website.

Email: sytcreations@yahoo.com

Web site: SYThompson.com

Books by S.Y. Thompson

Under the Midnight Cloak

Lee Grayson is a nature photographer whose father is a senator in New York. She's never felt close to him and her faith in people as a whole is lacking. She moves to the town of Harmon deep in the Adirondack Mountains after inheriting her great aunt's estate, but the local townspeople seem a little...off. Then she meets Ranger Jamison Kessler and learns there's a killer running rampant around the area. Jamison seems to be hiding things from her and Lee is starting to become suspicious.

Lee discovers that her aunt was a central part of this community and that she possesses the woman's unique abilities. She and Jamison are falling for each other, but things take a turn for the worse when the murderer sets his sights on Lee and a cure for his condition which he believes her to be harboring. Their situation is further complicated by the fact that the killer isn't even human. Neither is Jamison

Now You See Me

Corporate attorney Erin Donovan has nothing on her mind except representing her clients to the best of her abilities. One fateful day, she shows an irritating new client, Carson Tierney, around the tenth floor space of her own building and her life takes an unforeseen direction.

Carson is an awe-inspiring woman by anyone's standards. Possessing genius-level intelligence that has allowed her to become a self-made millionaire of a computer software company, Carson still has a dark secret that could be her undoing.

When the two are thrust together to escape a deadly killer in a high-rise office building while a blizzard rages outside, they have no one to count on but each other. So begins an unexpected yet tender romance. However, unchecked love and desire isn't in their future. The murderer is still out there and he's coming for them. Will Carson's street-wise skills protect them both as Erin attempts to discover the killer's identity just as relentlessly as he is seeking their demise?

Fractured Futures

Detective Ronan Lee has just solved the crime of the century, or has she? The case of the copycat killer plunges her into an ancient mystery, but solving the murders raises questions about the world government's true objectives. An unexpected invention gives her the chance to travel to the past. Her target is the 21st century and her mission is to save the woman at the heart of issue. This same woman, Sidney Weaver, is a warm, personable and accomplished actress that Ronan would give her life to protect.

Unaware of what fate has in store, Sidney's life is boringly predictable until a mysterious stranger comes out of the darkness of night to protect her. She knows there's something unusual about Ronan, but despite her misgivings, she can't deny the mutual attraction. All of this takes a backseat when she's plunged into a harrowing game of cat and mouse that could destroy everything she holds dear.

Destination Alara

In the 24th Century technology has evolved but greed and war are constant. A rookie starship captain but a veteran of the recent Gothoan War, Vanessa Swann searches the outer rim of the galaxy for any sign of rebel activity. Her favorite pastimes are kicking enemy butt and making time with the ladies. The last thing Van

wants is to team up with the Andromeda System's heir apparent and leader of the Coalition flagship, Princess/Admiral Cade Meryan.

Coal black hair, piercing grey eyes and skin the color of fresh cream threaten Vanessa's professional boundaries, but focus she must when faced with repeated attempts on Cade's life. The fate of millions and the threat of galactic war rest on Van's shoulders. Whatever the outcome, their lives will never be the same.

Under Devil's Snare

Jamison Kessler and Lee Grayson are back in book two of the "Under" Series. Set one year after *Under the Midnight Cloak*, their adversary is very human. Someone has a fixation on Lee that manifests itself in a series of grisly murders rapidly approaching serial status and child abductions. These crimes are merely warnings, but what happens if Lee fails to interpret their meaning?

Jamison, Lee, and the Panthera rush to save the lives of the innocent while they struggle to identify the instrument of so much suffering. Strains in relationships cloud their ability to see the whole picture. At the same time, U. S. Park Police Detective Patricia Hex shows up to help out but may soon become a threat to the Panthera community. Jamison's concentration splits between Lee, a mysterious killer and trying to keep Hex out of the Council's crosshairs. Her lack of focus may be all the stalker needs to get to Lee.

Woeful Pines

While undercover agent Emily Baptiste is investigating a rash of disappearances in rural Kentucky, she discovers something that strains the limits of credulity. The kidnapped are being hunted for sport. When she is also captured, Emily discovers an insane truth. The missing are taken through an inter-dimensional portal to a place where fantastic creatures reside, predominant among them are a

race of vampires. The vampires use other species to hunt as well as for sex and slave labor.

Now Emily is among the hunted. Her only hope is Sheriff Jenna Yang from Woeful Pines, Kentucky. Unfortunately, Emily and Jenna hardly know each other. Will Jenna even realize Emily is missing? If she does, will Jenna be willing to risk everything to cross into an unknown land and face enduring hardship to rescue a virtual stranger?

Illusive Witness

Who can you turn to when everyone betrays your trust? This is an especially important question for Ruth Gallagher. Severely injured at the same time that her best friend is killed in a mountain climbing incident, she later learns it was no accident. Repeated attempts on her life are made when a mobster believes she knows more about his criminal enterprises than she does.

Riding to the rescue is U.S. Marshal Emma Blake, but after all the perfidy can Ruth trust Emma? Barely healed from her previous encounters, she may not have a choice.



Bringing LGBTQAI+ Stories to Life

Visit us at our website: www.flashpointpublications.com